Article

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Magician Behind the Screen: Apurba Kishore Bir

A K Bir

As the train pulls into Victoria Terminus, dozens of Mumbaikars begin to spill out from its doors, like seeds bursting from a pod. They are followed by more people – and more – and still more — till they flood the entire frame, a sea of bodies pulsing in the same direction. Beautiful in their togetherness, rendered both anonymous and archetypal by the black-and-white image, they remind the viewer of the massed audience in a movie theatre. Except that here they face not the screen, but the camera, in a shot that runs for 55 seconds.

And that camera, watching them through a broken windowpane in VT station, was held by Apurba Kishore ("AK") Bir, the cinematographer of Awtar Krishna Kaul's iconic black and white film 27 Down (1973). Backed by a sitar that runs ever faster as though keeping pace with a thousand footfalls, that unforgettable shot still brings tears to the eyes, capturing as it does the rhythm and speed of Bombay, the romance of train travel, and the unconscious urges seeded in the human body by modernity. And it immediately marked out Bir, a debutant cinematographer fresh from FTII, as a true artist of cinema.

Apurba Kishore Bir (born 1948), also known as A. K. Bir, was born in Balikuti village of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. Bir

had a great passion for painting. At his father's insistence, he joined the Film and Television Institute of India, specializing in motion picture cinematography. He worked on various Ad Films and documentaries before making his feature film debut.

Mr. Bir has traversed an incredible path to become one of the most revered cinematographers in the country. In the 1970s, he challenged the established norms of cinematography and emerged victorious. As a result, the film *27 Down* carved out a niche for itself in Indian cinema. Nearly 70 percent of the film was shot with a hand-held camera to deliver a subliminal experience to the viewer. He has also played a conspicuous part as an operative cameraman for Sir Richard Attenborough's magnum opus, *Gandhi* (1982). He was honored with the Padma Shri in 2013.

His directional debut Odia film, *Adi Mimansa* (1991), based on the short story 'Parajaya' penned by Eminent writer Mohapatra Nilamani Sahoo, is a masterstroke for its visual beauty, its colors, and the virtuosity of Bir's photography. Throwing light on the issues of poverty and survival of a middle-class family, the film is set at the edge of an Odia village, where in the countryside of breathtaking beauty, two middle-class families - one Brahmin and the other of a lower caste, share the same dilapidated house divided into two. The serenity of their life is on the verge of being destroyed one day when an old Brahmin woman, whom they know, instills discord by whispering to the Brahmin's wife that she should not be clearing the common waste pipe because it belonged to the non-Brahmins.

Adi Mimansa. A film revolving around two families headed by Arakshit and Kshetrapal deals with social themes at a more metaphysical level. Once staying contented in a common, withering, neglected rented place, divided only by a thin wall demarcation and sharing their sorrows, the two families break apart. If the economic factors had bound them together, the new social division, once brought to the fore by an outsider, would crumble the friendship.

A motivated outsider sows the seeds of caste's realization following a small tiff over the drainage system, and Arakshit, head of a Brahmin family hailing from outside and settled in Orissa, turns more conservative, whereas Kshetrapal, heading a non-Brahmin Oriya family, turns more intolerant. The problem, which could have been solved with little patience, takes little pretexts of caste, hatred, and envy to result in utter chaos. And the conflict turns insurmountable. The task of settling a trivial issue becomes formidable. With neither family trying to pacify, what results is a Gordian knot. The onus lies on both the families, once friends, to own up to the responsibility for the cause. But neither moves an inch forward, and Kshetrapal declares to leave the place. Arakshit accedes even as their family members are unable to digest the reality and mutely witness the

decadence of a long-standing friendship in a short flicker, owing to a misperceived social notion.

The scene depicting the preparation of Arakshit leaving the place has lingered with the director on purpose to make it moving, as well as one from which lessons can be learned by fellow humans: that misunderstandings of social nature have the most undesirable endings. The pacification, not the divorce from the loved ones, is key to a misunderstanding. It would have taken a genius of a child to realize the blunder where the aged flounder with their wisdom. Time for introspection. Is it apt to escape from a tethering situation irrationally?

Bir intends to anchor the film with established national talent for broader appeal. Mohan Gokhale and Neena Gupta were selected for pivotal feuding characterizations, drawing on Gokhale's background in Marathi theater and parallel cinema—highlighted by his acclaimed stage work in adaptations like *Natsamrat*—and Gupta's prominence in arthouse features such as *Mirch Masala* (1987) and *Drishti* (1990), where she excelled in introspective, conflict-driven parts. Their pairing reflected Bir's strategy to infuse regional authenticity and emotional depth, blending Gokhale's method-acting precision with Gupta's naturalistic intensity honed through collaborations with directors like Ketan Mehta. Gloria Mahanty, Lalatendu Rath, and Bijayini Mishra have also given due life to the characters. rounded out key supporting elements with their experience in Odia cinema, ensuring cultural resonance in scenes requiring local flavor.

Few scenes are touching indeed, and Bir’s remarkable skill as a cinematographer elicits apt reactions. In a particular scene, Kshetrapal realizes that he is in want of 50 paise to purchase an item. The restlessness he enacts is worth noting. And when in his pursuit to rush for the 50 paisa, he loses his bicycle, more than human, there is the prevalent middle-class irony. Carefully crafted, filmmaking has been subtle here. *Adi Mimansha* voices how even children can solve the irrelevant problems elders indulge in most often. Dilip Panda’s editing skills, coupled with contextual dialogues inserted by Bir himself, have also been acclaimed. *Adi Mimansa* (A rare solution) is an exquisitely languid, seemingly inconsequential study of the friendship between two neighboring families who fall out with one another over petty issues and stubborn pride. While it is a particularly fine film, it does bear a close resemblance to the work of Manmohan Mahapatra.

The musical score for *Aadi Mimansa* was composed by Bhavdeep Jaipurwale, who handled the auditory elements in post-production to support the film's dramatic narrative. As credited in archival records, Jaipurwale's contributions formed the original background music, aligning with the independent production style of director Apurba Kishore Bir's 1991 project. This instrumental focus, without documented vocal songs, underscores the film's emphasis on subtle emotional layering in its depiction of rural Odia family conflicts, distinguishing it from commercial cinema reliant on song sequences

Bir's second Film, *Lavanya Preeti* (1993), which was an adaptation of Mohapatra Nilamani Sahoo's short story ‘Pratham pranaya”, is a traditional tale.

Produced by the National Centre of Films for Children and Young People.

The legendary story haunts the two adolescent lovers of the present time, Gopal and Vidyulata, as well as Gopal's friend, Mayadhar. They all study in the same class. Gopal is talented, imaginative, and even poetic. Mayadhar is his confidante and mentor. Vidyulata is the local compounder's daughter, who, after meeting Gopal and Mayadhar, finds a new world revealed to her by two classmates. They all grow up, separately and together, but always interacting. Incidents, big and small, happen, including one in which a temple with a wish-granting God (according to the priest), a well, and a man who desires a golden ring are all involved.

To save the priest from public humiliation, Gopal "steals" a ring from home and enables the priest to save his face. But the missing ring creates problems in Gopal's family. All these lead to the separation of the two lovers. Gopal tries to run away from home, but his father thwarts him by catching him in the night. The next day, Vidyulata disappears. When Gopal goes to her mother, he is given a letter. Vidyulata's letter tells Gopal that she is going back to her native home as her pet cat is sick! Gopal reads and runs. A boy of fantasies and whims, he is lost. But Vidyulata is no Gouri, and Gopal is no Kedar.

It is a `film within a film`, following the footsteps of the`play within a play.` The film illustrates the tale of adolescent love between Gauri and Kedar. The story ends in tragedy due to a misunderstanding concerning the death of a young girl. *Lavanya Preeti* (Loving Hearts) is a work firmly rooted in the regional culture, yet with an easy international appeal. Although some of the narrative elements might be a little hackneyed, the film is truly delightful in its appeal to the young imagination.

Apurba Kishore Bir`s third film was in Hindi, *Aranyaka* (1994). Based on a short story by eminent writer Padma Bhushan Manoj Das, the suspense is gripping from the very beginning in a powerful and disconcerting film. Living in his ancestral mansion in a jungle, Raja Saheb, a widower, passes his time hunting. Once, with a tribal boy and with his guests—two couples—he goes on a hunting spree. On the way, some strange things happen, which push everyone into deep introspection.

The Raja Saheb, played by the noted Oriya actor Pujari, embarks on a hunting expedition in cannibal country accompanied by an anglophile businessman (Mohan Gokhale, his hysterical wife (Navni Parihar), an Army Major (Sunil Sing), and his English wife (Sanjana Kapoor). The two males are attracted to each other’s wives. The only outsider to the culture of feudal-upper-class hedonism is the Raja’s adopted tribal son, who represents the land that the cultural elite set out to conquer and who is regarded by them variously as a wild sex object, hunter, and slave. The hysterical wife seduces and then claims to have been raped by the tribal, who is chained and tortured. An orgiastic feast follows as the group eats what they imagine to be the wild boar shot during the hunt. They discover the next day that the meat was the tribe’s body. This discovery is left deliberately ambiguous (unlike in the novel), allowing for several interpretations. The film is noted mainly for Bir’s stunning

camerawork, enhancing the elements of fable and allegory.

AK Bir was back with an Oriya film in 1997, *Shesha Drushti.* Based on the well-known odia writer Ramachandra Behera's short story, the film depicts freedom fighter Kedarbabu on his deathbed and his son Sangram, albeit late, realizing the great sacrifices his father had made for the freedom of the country.

Shesha Drushti is a psychological family drama about the relationship between a father and a son who hold different perspectives about life. Kedar Babu, a freedom fighter since the days of Gandhi's call for the Civil Disobedience Movement, has now, in 1970, settled down in his native village, still carrying the pain from a wound he received during the freedom struggle. His son, Sangram, has completed his post-graduate studies, but the only way he can get a job is through his father's influence, which is a blow to his self-respect. The father, who symbolizes the past, denotes the nature of freedom through introspection. The son represents the present and views the prevailing atmosphere based on some practical observations. When the experiences of the old and the young meet and interact, they converge on a point of doubt, dream, and suspense to envisage a new vision, which only appears when the elder is on his deathbed.

This Odia film is considered to be his most accomplished film. Through this film, Apurba Kishore Bir realized his ambition of finding specific images for an audiovisual project. It is a spellbinding film of great sensitivity and aesthetically accomplished, whose slow pace does not make it dull, for words appear exactly when they are necessary to clarify the action. Set in the luxuriant countryside of Odisha is a narration of the discovery of the world and its realities by the young Sangram. Guileless and still childlike, he is attached to his old widower father Kedar Babu.

Even in the movie. Bir examines the bond between a father and his son. One of the trickiest and most difficult of relationships, these two men get alienated at some point in time in their lives. The father looks at life from an authoritative pedestal, and the son gets rebellious. The human tie between them is severed. The relationship then becomes theoretical. One begins to talk of duty, rather than feel love for the other. There is no warmth, and their dealings with each other take on a note of artificiality.

Why the father-son conflict? Bir says that it is the most dominating, most worrying of the lot in our society. At one level, it may appear very simple, but its importance is universal, and its appeal is far-reaching. What seems ostensibly minor has. In reality, major Ramifications.

"I also believe that the family in India is under tremendous strain, largely because of the superficial conditions in society and economics. Both are in a chaotic situation now. How does one exist in this situation?

How is one going to lead a decent life despite the major hassle of trying to be ethically sensible and morally correct? We are in a deep crisis. We have been in it for a long time. But we have been wishing it away, even hiding it. We have cursed our luck, we have questioned our fate." (*Sesha Drusti-the Last Vision-An integrated Approach*: A.K.Bir IFFI 98 Book late).

Continuing his engagement with childhood narratives, Bir's Hindi film *Baaja (2002)* examines innocence within economically and socially constrained environments. *Baaja* is a story of an eleven-year-old boy, Shibu, honest, sincere, mischievous, but always in touch with the inner needs and compulsions, and willing to flow with the stream of life with enthusiasm and intelligence. When his widowed mother can not cope with his endless mischief, she hands him over to her brother, who is a cobbler in Mumbai, hoping Sibu's restlessness will get somewhat channelized in to school education.

With his uncle and aunt, both of whom treat him like their own children, he even as they cope with everything reasonably well. he does so on his own terms. He is fascinated by a certain mouth organ, which a neighborhood boy of better social standing plays. He is also part of the same gang of children who play together in the locality.

The film is marked by an observational realism that avoids didacticism, allowing character and milieu to speak through image and sound. It received the National Film Award for Best Children's Film, reaffirming Bir's distinctive contribution to this genre.

In 1998, Bir came again with a film produced by the National Centre of Films for Children and Young People, *Nandan.*

Nandan is a spirited, energetic, and active boy of twelve. He has a fascination with cars. He becomes over-enthusiastic whenever he sees an automobile. He has his mother, father, grandmother, and a younger sister. They belong to a lower-middle-class family and stay in a small town. His mother and father scoff at him because of his mischievous tendencies. Sometimes the conflict between the trapped but rebellious spirit of the young mind, Nandan. A bit whimsical and adventurous. On one such occasion.

His yearning for a fascinating, important toy car in a toy shop leads him to a series of thematic events that make him realize the sense of futility of his motive, under the spell of fancy, fantasy, and fascination. But in the end, he finds a new strength by realizing the truth,h which comes in the form of love, affection, and concern for his parents.

A simple incident in life does have a profound impact on one's realisation. Every incident is guided by the character of the human psyche, which lies in socio-economic impulses as its driving force. Regarding the preset. Condition. It starts with fascination, then slowly it develops into an attraction, and

consequently it grows into a possessive character. Then the child, under its blinding influence, leads the self through an adventure and subsequently to a realization of commercialization, and market forces have a striking impact on every sphere of life. Accordingly, it has a profound influence on the mind of a child.

In the 2006 Hindi film *Hamari Beti, Apurba Kishore Bir* served as the screenwriter, cinematographer, and director, and was produced by D. Rama Naidu. It is an inspiring biographical drama. It tells the true story of Shakti Swarupa Bir, an Odia girl from Bhubaneswar who overcame being deaf and mute to become an accomplished Odissi dancer. *Hamari Beti* starred Sakti Swarupa Bir (aka Shakti Swaroop) and portrayed her real-life story as a girl in Bhubaneshwar, Odisha, who was deaf and speech impaired but triumphantly rose above her challenges and became an Odissi dancer.

The film's cast features actors Anooradha Patel, Govind Namdeo, and Shakti Swarupa Bir herself. Chittaranjan Acharya (aka Prachee Chitta Ranjan Acharya or C.R. Acharyya), Sakti's real-life Odissi guru and inspiration, plays himself in the film and is credited for the film's choreography. Chittaranjan is "an engineer by profession and an Odissi dance exponent by passion" who learned Odissi from Pankaj Charan Das.

Apruba Kishore Bir's directed Hindi film *Antardhwani (2019)* revolves around the journey of a protagonist going deep within his mind. It's a young mind's response to a particular situation in his life. There is a lot of introspection involved when a young college psychology student named Shantanu finds himself in a difficult situation. Crime takes over his mind, and he finds a way out of the situation that he is in. As the name '*Antardhwani*' suggests, it's listening to your inner voice and doing what feels right eventually.

Antardhwani stars Gaurav Paswala, Swapna Pati, and Talwinder Singh in pivotal roles. *Antardhwani*'s story revolves around close friends Shantanu and Shalini. While Shalini disappears suddenly, Shantanu's mind wanders in desperation as he sets out on a

struggling journey, which questions the moral and ethical aspects of his intention to find Shalini. Nihar Ranjan Samal designed the music of this movie, whereas the editing was done by Aseem Sinha.

Across his filmography, Apurba Kishore Bir emerges as a filmmaker for whom visual ethics are inseparable from narrative ethics. Whether behind the camera or in the director's chair, his work resists spectacle in favour of attentiveness—privileging marginal voices, interior states, and the moral textures of everyday life. His sustained engagement with children's perspectives is not incidental but central to his cinematic philosophy, positioning childhood as a critical vantage point from which social contradictions are rendered visible.

The legacy of Apurba Kishore Bir lies not only in the accolades he has accumulated but in the enduring influence of his artistic commitments. With nine National Film Awards across categories, including cinematography, direction, and children's cinema, Bir has shaped both the aesthetic and ethical contours of Indian filmmaking. Bir's films continue to be studied for their integration of visual form and social engagement, offering critical insights into the possibilities of cinema as a medium for cultural reflection and transformation. His work—rooted in regional contexts yet resonant beyond them—affirms a cinema that is both formally rigorous and profoundly humane.

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