Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

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The Face of Uttam Kumar: Echoes of Bengali History

Between 1948 and 1971, Bengali history passed through many changes, moments of hope, and periods of deep distress. The wounds of Partition, the uncertainty of refugee life, social change, and the joys and sorrows of ordinary people came together to shape a troubled age. The echoes of this history could be heard in the face of Uttam Kumar. They lived in the delicate lines of his face, in the changing light of his eyes, and in expressions that could hold happiness one moment and sorrow the next.

The moment a sensitive writer and director chose Uttam Kumar for the leading role, they could recognise a rare artistic possibility. Through his face and his performance, the history of Bengal after Independence could find its own echo. There would be no need to place every historical event directly before the camera. Nor would it always be necessary to follow the Italian Neorealist tradition of documenting the visible details of everyday life with close attention to the facts. Sometimes, an actor's face can become an artistic medium through which the weight of history is felt, even when its individual details remain unseen.

For representation and echo are not the same. Representation seeks clarity. It brings facts and events into direct view. A newspaper report tells us what happened. A lyric poem, however, may awaken something more intimate: the feelings an event left behind in the human heart. The report gives

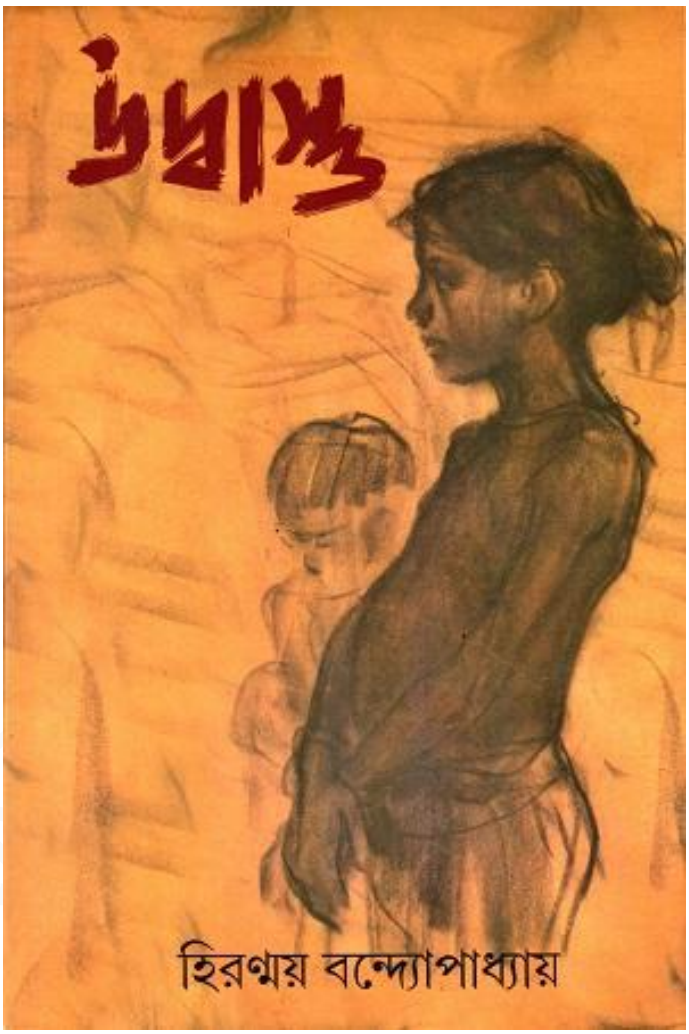
us the account. The poem allows us to feel its lingering sorrow, its quiet uncertainty, and its unspoken human cost.

Artistic echoes belong to this second world. They do not always reveal every detail of reality. Instead, they allow reality to resonate within us long after the immediate event has passed from view.

In this sense, the face of Uttam Kumar becomes a lyrical expression of harsh reality. It is not an exact reproduction of history, but an emotional echo of it. In his eyes and expressions, personal joy could mingle with sorrow, hope with doubt, and the private experience of an individual with the wider experience of a society. A reality that might have remained a record of a particular event, had it been shown directly, could acquire a richer, more symbolic life through his performance.

But how does such an echo come into being? By what process does an actor's personal expression become connected with the social and historical experiences of his time? How can a glance, a moment of silence, or the slightest movement of the face awaken a reality that the film has never directly shown? These questions lie at the heart of this study.

Our analysis focuses on *Indrani*. The film was directed by Niren Lahiri, whose deep engagement with both Eastern and Western music and literature informed his artistic sensibility. Through a close reading of Uttam Kumar's performance in this film, we seek to understand how an actor's face can carry the echoes of a wider social reality, reaching beyond the visible events of the story. *Indrani* is therefore more than a film chosen for analysis. It becomes a space in which we can observe how history, performance, and the viewer's memory enter into a quiet conversation.



Cover of the book Udbastu

An important historical guide to this inquiry is Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, ICS. As Commissioner in charge of health and rehabilitation for refugees arriving from East Pakistan, he was directly connected with the realities of refugee life. His remarkable book *Udbastu* (Refugees) remains an important historical account of that experience. Reading his historical work alongside the artistic language of *Indrani* allows us to approach the reality that may remain hidden beyond the visible world of a film.

History does not always tell its story fully through dates, statistics, or recorded

events. Sometimes, it remains in a human face, in a silence, or in the sorrow concealed beneath an expression of happiness. When this unspoken history finds an echo in the face of an actor, reality becomes something more than a record of events. It becomes art.

This book explores how the harsh realities of a historical age acquired such a lyrical form through Uttam Kumar's performance in *Indrani*. It seeks to understand not merely what his face showed, but what it allowed us to feel, remember, and imagine.

For sometimes, the deepest truths of history do not arrive as clear statements. They come to us as echoes, tender and uncertain, carrying the weight of a world that the screen may never fully reveal.

I. *Indrani* — A Mind at Work in Silence

In *Indrani*, Uttam Kumar is shown deeply engaged in writing an extensive research paper. He has no regular income because he devotes almost all his time to thinking and research.

Leaving behind the bustle of Calcutta, he moves to a small, quiet town where the surrounding silence allows him to concentrate, reflect, and develop new ideas. His newly married wife bears the expenses of the household and takes care of their food and accommodation. Gradually, ensuring that her husband can complete his research becomes one of the central purposes of her life.

Uttam Kumar is not working in a laboratory. It is therefore reasonable to assume that his subject of research is sociology.

After Partition, a new kind of society was taking shape in India. The social conditions that emerged were unlike anything the people of Calcutta had previously experienced. Within a very short period—let us imagine, within only seven days—thousands of people were compelled to live in extremely confined spaces. Women, men, children, and adolescents found themselves living together in circumstances of unusual proximity.

Such close physical coexistence was bound to alter relationships among people. At first, these changes might not have been immediately visible, but they could not be avoided. A research paper examining such transformations could therefore quite plausibly have been written in a small room in a small town.

Uttam Kumar is a direct witness to this quiet social transformation. He observes it and feels its implications, and the experience keeps him awake at night.

After 1947, he notices that the character of Calcutta is gradually changing. The city had long been accustomed to receiving people from outside. Now, however, another identity was becoming attached to it: Calcutta was becoming a city of refugees.

This was not because refugees had become more numerous than the local population. Rather, their presence altered the

rhythm of urban life. Streets, railway stations, and everyday habits began to change.

Partition refugees in Calcutta

One aspect troubles Uttam Kumar in particular. Delhi and Karachi had undertaken planned measures for the rehabilitation of refugees, whereas Calcutta was crowded and largely unprepared. Available space was quickly exhausted, and no large-scale plan seemed to be taking shape. As a result, anxiety among the people continued to grow.

Night after night, he reflects on why large-scale housing projects were not developed for the city. There had been many promises, but adequate accommodation had not been provided. He also observes how difficult circumstances compel people to develop new forms of courage. Many refugees began occupying land because they had little alternative. They did so not in order to rebel, but in order to survive.

Along railway lines, in wetlands, and in abandoned wartime barracks, one after another, squatter colonies emerged. These colonies were often named after figures such as Netaji, Gandhiji, and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, as though the memory of these figures could provide the settlers with a source of moral strength.

The colonies, however, lacked proper roads, sanitation, hospitals, and adequate medical facilities. Yet schools gradually appeared. Markets developed, and small medical centres began to function.

Uttam Kumar comes to understand that, under such conditions, the effort simply to remain alive had itself become a form of creation. He observes that many of the refugees came from educated, middle-class families. Many belonged to the upper-caste Hindu social order. They left behind written accounts of their experiences, composing autobiographies and memoirs in an attempt to preserve the memory of what they had lived through. He also observes that the government had, quietly, divided refugees into three broad categories. The first consisted of those who could manage their own affairs. The second comprised those who were entirely dependent upon government assistance. The third consisted of those for whom the government was, in practice, unable or unwilling to assume responsibility for rehabilitation.

Uttam Kumar comes to understand that it was largely this third group that later established the squatter colonies. He becomes increasingly concerned with the question of human dignity. People wanted to live close to their workplaces and near the city, while retaining some measure of control over their

private lives. Yet many refugees were asked to leave Calcutta and move to distant areas where the climate was unfamiliar and the environment difficult.
Some went.
Many others returned.
The cycle of departure and return seemed to reopen the same wound each time.

II. Uttam Kumar also reflects on the refugee movements of 1948 and 1949.

He watches one refugee organisation after another take shape. The number of meetings and associations increases, and leadership begins to change. Many Congress leaders withdraw from the movement, while the influence of left-wing leaders begins to grow. In the face of hunger and homelessness, fear of political ideology begins to lose much of its force.

Uttam Kumar comes to understand that a point has been reached when, for many refugees, occupying land is no longer regarded as a crime. It has become a way of asserting a right to survive. Before his eyes appear the early refugee colonies.
Deshbandhunagar in Sodepur.
Then Naihati.
Then Kanchrapara.

North Calcutta and its surrounding areas gradually become filled with numerous small settlements. South Calcutta initially offers some resistance to this development. In time, however, new colonies emerge there as well.
Poddarnagar is established in 1950.

New relationships begin to develop among people. Politics enters the lanes and neighbourhoods of everyday life, while collective solidarity becomes, for many, a new form of shelter.

As Uttam Kumar reflects on the government's rehabilitation policy, he becomes increasingly troubled. Many families are sent to distant areas such as Jirat. Attempts are made to establish settlements by clearing forests. Some people receive a daily wage of one rupee. Small loans are provided. With little more than a modest hope to sustain them, people try to begin their lives again.

In most cases, however, agricultural settlement does not succeed. Employment opportunities are also scarce. As a result, only a small number of families are able to remain. Government officials often hold the refugees responsible for these failures. The shortcomings of the rehabilitation plans, themselves, however, receive far less attention.

Uttam Kumar gradually understands that even after building their own homes with their own hands, many refugees remain at the margins of society. They receive no compensation. They have no assurance of citizenship. Their greatest resources are patience and endurance. For a moment, he puts down his pen and realises that, before Partition, no one could have imagined the emergence of this new society.

It has been born out of overcrowding, loss, uncertainty, and a quiet determination to resist displacement. He begins to feel that the research paper he is writing in his small room is more than an academic exercise.
It is also a form of testimony.

In *Indrani*, Uttam Kumar's character carries another significant distinction. He had stood first in the First Class in his M.A. examination. In the 1950s and 1960s, for a

young Bengali man, there were few distinctions that could carry greater prestige. These three words—"First Class First"—were associated with intellectual ability. They signified social respect and, to many, seemed to promise a secure future. Yet at precisely this time, the significance of such an achievement was beginning to diminish.

Why?

Indrani

From the beginning of the 1950s, the arrival of refugees from East Pakistan steadily increased. By 1956–57, the number of displaced people seeking shelter in West Bengal had reached approximately six million. The pressure on government finances became severe. Gradually, both the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal began to show reluctance to assume responsibility for the newly arriving refugees.

Why were the governments compelled to take such a difficult position?

At first, both India and Pakistan had believed that the disorder created by Partition would return to normal within a few years. They expected that many people on both sides would eventually return to their former homes and that circumstances would once again resemble what they had been before.

But events unfolded differently.

For most of the six million people who had come to West Bengal, there was no longer any realistic hope of returning to East Pakistan. Going back was no longer a practical possibility. Meanwhile, approximately seven hundred thousand people left West Bengal for East Pakistan in the hope of beginning new lives there. But after reaching East Pakistan, they found that the Pakistan government was unable to provide adequate food and accommodation.

Nearly five hundred thousand of them eventually returned to West Bengal. Their return carried a particular kind of sorrow. They had crossed the border once more with the hope that the second journey might finally lead them towards stability. Instead, the place to which they had gone in search of a new beginning could not sustain them. They returned not to the certainty of a home, but to a landscape already struggling to absorb those who had arrived before them.

The movement between the two sides of the border had thus become more than a matter of migration. For many, it was a repeated experience of leaving, hoping, and returning without finding a place in which the uncertainty could finally come to an end.

It was a severe blow.

The government's Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (R.R.R.) Department was, in effect, left without a clear direction. Yet it would be too simple to describe this merely as a failure of government. Events were unfolding so rapidly that there was scarcely any time to prepare. The machinery of relief and rehabilitation was confronted by demands that continued to expand while its resources were steadily diminishing.

There was something deeply constrained in its position. The department was expected to respond to an immense human crisis, even as the means available to it were becoming increasingly inadequate. Decisions had to be made, but the space for effective choices was narrowing. The situation was as though darkness had descended without warning.

As government resources began to approach exhaustion, even providing employment to students who had secured a First Class in their examinations became increasingly difficult. The highly educated, too, were forced to wait.

This is why, even after leaving his place of employment in Indrani and returning to Calcutta, Uttam Kumar's character does not regain his sense of security or self-respect. His unemployment does not end.

Gradually, he sees that the social value attached to his M.A. degree is no longer what it once was.

The degree itself had not become smaller.

The world around it had changed.

In 1958, the government made an important announcement.

It stated that it was no longer possible for the state to assume responsibility for refugees newly arriving from East Pakistan.

There was no assurance in this declaration.

There was no new promise.

There was only the admission that the state could no longer carry the additional burden.

From then on, those who came to West Bengal would have to depend upon their own resources to begin their lives anew.

They would have to build their own homes.

They would have to establish schools.

They would have to create medical centres.

By then, the resources of the R.R.R. Department were almost exhausted. Yet, despite knowing all this, many people continued to leave East Pakistan and make their way to West Bengal. Their suffering and uncertainty had become so deep that even the risks of an uncertain future could not stop them. When the government could no longer provide assistance, some compassionate individuals began, through private initiative, to establish small rehabilitation centres.

Here the mood changes.

These efforts were sustained by a quiet confidence in what a small community could accomplish. There was hope in the idea that rebuilding did not always have to begin with large institutions or extensive resources. It could begin with a few people, a shared purpose, and the decision to build something together. They drew inspiration from the idea of the ashram associated with Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. They believed that even a small ashram could gradually grow and make a constructive contribution to society.

It was from this ideal that, in the film, the character played by Chhabi Biswas wishes to establish a small idealistic ashram with ten or fifteen refugees.

The vision is simple but expansive: a few families living and working together, creating the basic institutions of a community and gradually giving shape to a new social world.

At one point, he tells Uttam Kumar:

“One day, these ten people will become equal to ten lakh people.”

The statement is not merely about numbers. It expresses a belief in the capacity of a small beginning to grow beyond its

original limits. And now we return once again to those two mysterious incidents.

III

Chhabi Biswas withdrew the money from his provident fund to arrange food for a group of people. This money had been his security for old age. It was the modest savings he had kept aside for the final years of his life, and he chose to spend it instead on others.

He knew that if these people could be given an opportunity to live with some stability for two or three years, they might gradually learn to stand on their own feet.

Those for whom he made these arrangements were extremely poor and vulnerable. Their lives were so uncertain that they often did not know what they would eat at night. Hunger had become a permanent reality of their existence.

Yet one thing is striking.

Even after being invited to share a meal, there is no real happiness on their faces.

Why?

Many people who had come from East Pakistan did not like the word "refugee." They felt that they were in no way responsible for losing their homes. They had not brought this poverty upon themselves.

They had been caught, without preparation, in a situation of immense upheaval. Where exactly the events had originated, or how they had unfolded, was beyond their control. They therefore did not consider themselves responsible for the suffering that had come upon them.

They had crossed a border, but they had not crossed it after surrendering their dignity.

They had lost their homes, but their sense of self-respect remained.

Where, then, was that dignity wounded?

At one point, Uttam Kumar speaks to them somewhat firmly and asks them to sit down and eat.

His words hurt them.

A question begins to form in their minds: had they come to this country merely to be reprimanded?

When Bengal was divided into two parts, had anyone asked for their opinion?

Had anyone told them beforehand that, in the new country where they would seek shelter, they would also have to accept humiliation?

In the end, they eat rice, lentils, and vegetables.

They eat because their hunger is severe.

But afterwards, they leave the shelter provided by Chhabi Biswas.

Before leaving, they say quietly but firmly:

"We will not eat here anymore. The government relief kitchen is better."

Perhaps this was the central reason behind their decision.

The sensitive mind of Uttam Kumar understands what has happened.

His face becomes grave.

He realises that, unwillingly, he has wounded the dignity of people who were not yet formally recognised as citizens of this country.

In a sense, they were still guests.

Their Indian citizenship had not yet been confirmed.

Nor was it certain whether they would receive it in the future.

For generations, a familiar idea has existed in Indian culture: a guest should be treated with the respect due to the divine.

Yet there are moments when even those who offer shelter forget this.

They find themselves standing before people who have lost everything. The marks of poverty are visible upon their bodies and in their lives.

And sometimes these people are spoken to harshly.

But that is not what a homeless person deserves.

We now come to the second mysterious incident.

One group of refugees felt that the government relief kitchen offered greater dignity than shelter created through private initiative. To them, the government arrangement carried a sense of recognition and security.

Another group thought quite differently.

They felt that the ashram established by Chhabi Biswas outside the city was more dignified. Indeed, its distance from the city seemed to increase its value in their eyes.

There is a striking contrast here.

Yet this second group did not merely accept the ashram.

They embraced it with enthusiasm and made it part of their lives.

Why?

Because, through the work of the ashram, their creativity began to awaken.

They found a new meaning in building the ashram with their own hands.

Through work, they were rebuilding themselves.

The construction of the ashram therefore became, in itself, an image of a new life taking shape.

Why did they accept this way of living?

Because they too had come from East Pakistan, but their outlook was somewhat different.

Most of them came from educated and relatively prosperous Hindu families.

They had brought with them not only memories, but also certain beliefs.

They believed that, among the three states or political territories that had emerged through the Partition of India, East and West Pakistan had been created to allow the independent development of Islamic culture.

The reality, however, was more complicated.

Deeper political considerations were also involved.

The creation of West Pakistan produced a geographical situation that made the overland movement of communist ideas from the Soviet Union into India more difficult.

The new state also functioned, in a political sense, as a kind of barrier between India and the Soviet Union.

Yet even after the creation of their own state, the poverty of ordinary Muslim peasants did not disappear.

In many cases, it became more severe.

Hardship deepened in rural life.

As a result, the natural development of folk culture was also obstructed.

The problem continued for a long time.

Yet between 1947 and 1957, neither affluent Hindus nor affluent Muslims could fully imagine the complexities that the future would bring.

History does not always reveal the full consequences of its great changes at once. Sometimes their meaning emerges slowly, through years of lived experience. For this reason, many relatively prosperous Hindus who came from East Pakistan felt that they had consciously chosen to leave behind their lands and large homes. They believed that

they had made this sacrifice so that Hindu society could develop freely.

What did this belief mean in everyday life, beyond the language of religious doctrine?

It meant, for them, that Bengali Hindu women would be able to wear their shankha-pola bangles and vermilion in peace.

They would be able to perform Lakshmi Puja every Thursday.

Bengali Hindu men would be able to participate without fear in Harinam Sankirtan. During Durga Puja, women would be able to go out at night and spend the night visiting images of the goddess.

They would be able to practise their familiar culture and social life freely, without having to explain or defend the ordinary rituals through which that life had always expressed itself.

This way of living seemed to them peaceful, familiar, and beautiful.

They believed that they carried a responsibility to preserve this cultural inheritance.

And so, from the moment they crossed the border and set foot in West Bengal, they regarded themselves as citizens of India.
They were not deeply anxious about when the official papers of citizenship would arrive.
In their own understanding, citizenship had already begun.

They had already become, in their own words, “new citizens.”

IV

The shirt therefore becomes a small but revealing detail. Even amid hardship, there is a concern with how one appears in the world. Tarun Kumar’s face reinforces this impression. There is concentration, responsibility and a sense of purpose in his expression. He seems absorbed in the work before him.

The people at the ashram believed that providing drinking water by breaking the stones of the hills was their own responsibility. No one had forced them to do it. No reward had been promised. Yet they worked because they believed that building a new life in a new country could not be left entirely to others.

This gives the song a meaning beyond that of a simple work song. Its repeated rhythm expresses a collective determination. These people had lost much, but they did not accept helplessness as the only possible response to their circumstances.

For them, work was not merely a means of earning a livelihood. It was also part of establishing themselves in an unfamiliar social and physical environment. The task was practical and immediate. Drinking water had to be secured, surroundings had to be made habitable, and everyday life had to be organised.

Seen in this context, Chhabi Biswas’s ashram was more than a place of shelter. It was a space where displaced people could organise themselves and participate in rebuilding the conditions of ordinary life. It stood somewhere between refuge and settlement.

The circumstances surrounding this effort were difficult. Hunger, uncertainty, homelessness and humiliation were part of the experience of displacement. Yet alongside them were cooperation, creativity, self-reliance and the desire to create a future.

The people had been uprooted from one place, but they did not wish to remain permanently displaced. They wanted to become part of the society in which they had arrived. The work they undertook was therefore connected not only with survival, but also with the attempt to establish a place for themselves in their new surroundings.

The breaking of stones acquires a larger significance within this context. Something had already been disrupted in their lives. Now the physical landscape itself had to be altered to make everyday existence possible. The act was modest, but the historical circumstances behind it were not.

This complexity is central to Indrani's representation of post-Partition society. The film does not present refugees only as recipients of relief. Their suffering remains visible, but so does their effort to respond to it through collective action.

The character played by Uttam Kumar registers both sides of this historical experience. His research paper consequently becomes more than an academic exercise. It becomes a quiet record of people living through displacement, uncertainty and the difficult process of establishing themselves again.

Perhaps this is why the detail of Tarun Kumar's shirt matters. It resists the expectation that people living through hardship must necessarily appear broken. The shirt is intact. The man wearing it is at work. Around him, others are singing and breaking stones.

The song continues:

"Break, break, break, break the stones."

And in that simple rhythm, a small scene of physical work becomes a record of people trying to make an unfamiliar place livable, and to begin again without waiting for someone else to begin for them.

V. The Stones Beneath the Song

There is something unusual about the song in Indrani.

A group of displaced people are seen breaking stones while singing:

"Break, break, break, break the stones."

At first, the scene seems simple. People need drinking water. The stones have to be broken. The work has to be done. The song gives the labour a rhythm.

But why stones?

The question becomes more interesting when we remember that breaking large pieces of rock with pickaxes was not part of the ordinary working life of educated, urban middle-class Bengalis. Yet it has a much older connection with the agricultural experience of the Santal community. Santals had long experience of working difficult land and transforming apparently poor land through knowledge, physical effort and agricultural skill.

This gives the song another possible meaning. Could the very idea of breaking stones be quietly suggesting the presence of Santals among the displaced people?

The film does not show them directly. But perhaps it does not have to. A song can sometimes say what an image cannot.

The repeated words—

"Break, break, break, break the stones"

—may therefore be heard not only as the voice of people trying to obtain drinking water, but also as a distant echo of a community whose relationship with hard

land, agriculture and physical labour was deeply rooted in its history.

The People Behind the Stones

Several thousand Santals came to West Bengal from East Pakistan after the violent suppression of the peasant movement in Nachole, in the Rajshahi region.

Before this happened, many Santals of Nachole were established agricultural communities. Their growing political awareness became closely connected with the struggle over the crops they produced and the land on which they worked. The movement was influenced by Communist organisers, and Ila Mitra emerged as one of its principal leaders. She became closely associated with the Santal peasants of the region.

The response of the Pakistan authorities was severe.

What followed was not a single act of repression. It unfolded through a series of violent measures that destroyed the physical and social world of the villages.

First came the armed operation.

After the confrontation of 5 January 1950, about 2,000 soldiers, supported by armed police and Ansars, entered the Nachole area. Villages were searched, houses were ransacked, and people were killed. Contemporary accounts describe the burning of twelve villages. In Chandipur and surrounding areas, men were beaten and tortured, women were subjected to sexual violence, and many villagers were killed.

Then came the destruction of the homes themselves.

The roofs and houses of the villages were set on fire. A place that had been a home, a field and a community was turned into ashes. The purpose of such destruction was not simply to arrest a few political activists. It also broke the physical foundation from which the movement could continue.

And then came the flight.

People began leaving their villages and moving towards India. They left behind houses, fields, stored grain and the land on which generations had lived. An Indian parliamentary record from February 1950 noted that, by 3 February, 700 Santal families had already crossed into West Bengal after villages in Nachole had been ravaged.

Even the border did not always offer immediate safety.

On 17 March 1950, Pakistan police and Ansars opened fire on Santal refugees crossing towards India near Balurghat. The recorded figure was 17 killed and 14 injured.

The meaning of this last act is especially painful.

People who had already lost their homes were trying to leave. They were carrying the remains of their lives across a border. Yet violence followed them towards that border.

The historical record does not support turning this into a single, precisely numbered death toll. But it does establish a pattern of armed repression, village burning, killings, torture, forced displacement and firing upon refugees.

That pattern is important.

It shows what “strong measures” could mean on the ground.

Ila Mitra

At the centre of that history stood Ila Mitra.

After her arrest, she was subjected to severe physical abuse in police custody. She was detained at Nachole police station and tortured for several days before being

transferred to Rajshahi Central Jail on 21 January 1950. Her own testimony and later accounts of the case record the violence inflicted upon her.

Ila Mitra

There is something deeply painful in placing this history beside the song in Indrani.

On one side, there is a woman in custody, her body bearing the marks of political repression.

On the other side, there are displaced people in West Bengal, breaking stones and singing.

The two images are separated by geography, but not entirely by history.

The stones may therefore be read as a kind of silent bridge between the two.

From Nachole to Washington

The chronology becomes still more striking when we place the dates beside one another.

On 9 February 1951, only about a year after the repression at Nachole, the United States and Pakistan brought into force a bilateral Point Four Agreement for Technical Cooperation. The programme included American technical assistance in several fields, among them agriculture and geological surveys.

The timing deserves attention.

The agreement itself does not say that it was a reward for the repression of the Santals. Nor does the available American document establish that the United States supported the Nachole violence. Such a conclusion would go beyond the evidence.

But the wider American policy towards Pakistan at the time is unmistakable.

A United States policy statement of 1 July 1951 described one of its objectives as strengthening Pakistan as a non-Communist government. It also discussed American and Western access to Pakistan's facilities, resources and markets. The same document noted that the Pakistan government had used “strong measures” to repress Communist activities.

This is the larger geopolitical landscape in which the tragedy of Nachole has to be placed.

For the people of Nachole, the immediate reality was very different.

There were villages burning in the winter night.

There were families running from their homes.

There were people being shot.

There were houses reduced to ashes.

There were refugees moving towards the border.

And there was Ila Mitra, imprisoned and subjected to brutal physical torture.

For Washington, however, Pakistan was increasingly valuable as a non-Communist state in a region where Communist influence was seen as a strategic threat.

The same historical moment therefore carried two profoundly different meanings.

For those who suffered it, it was a human catastrophe.

For American strategic policy, Pakistan was becoming an important part of the anti-Communist structure of South Asia.

The Chronological Proximity

Date
Event
5 January 1950
The Nachole peasant uprising reached a critical stage.
7 January 1950
About 2,000 soldiers, supported by police and Ansars, entered the Nachole area. Twelve villages were burned and many villagers were killed.
January 1950
Ila Mitra was arrested and subjected to severe physical torture in custody.
21 January 1950
Ila Mitra was transferred to Rajshahi Central Jail.
3 February 1950
An Indian parliamentary record reported that 700 Santal families had already crossed into West Bengal from the Nachole area.
17 March 1950
Pakistan police and Ansars fired on Santal refugees crossing towards India near Balurghat. 17 were killed and 14 injured.
9 February 1951
The US-Pakistan Point Four bilateral Technical Cooperation Agreement came into force. Its programme included agriculture and geological surveys.
1 July 1951

A US policy statement described Pakistan as a non-Communist government to be strengthened and referred to its "strong measures" against Communist activities.

The chronology does not by itself prove a single chain of command or a single cause.

But chronology can reveal the historical atmosphere in which individual events acquire meaning.

And here the proximity is difficult to ignore.

And the Song Remains

This brings us back to the song.

"Break, break, break, break the stones."

Perhaps the stones are simply stones.

Perhaps they are the physical obstacles that stand between displaced people and drinking water.

But perhaps, beneath that immediate meaning, the song also carries the presence of people whose history is not shown on the screen.

The Santals had worked difficult land. They had cultivated it. They had lived upon it. They had fought over the right to the harvest produced by their own hands.

Then their villages were attacked.

Their houses were burned.

Their people were killed.

Their leader was tortured.

And many of those who survived were forced to leave the land behind.

And now, in Indrani, people who have lost their homes are once again breaking stones.

There is a quiet sadness in that repetition.

The land has changed.

The country has changed.

The people have crossed a border.

But the work remains.

And perhaps that is why the song is more powerful than it first appears.

It does not name Nachole.

It does not name Ila Mitra.

It does not speak of Pakistan, Communism or the emerging Cold War.

It simply says:

Break the stones.

Yet behind those words may stand the memory of thousands who had already broken

the soil, shaped the land and built their lives upon it before history forced them to leave.

For the American policy-maker, Pakistan could increasingly appear as a useful non-Communist partner.

For the people who had lived through Nachole, the same period carried another memory.

It was the memory of villages burning in the winter darkness, families fleeing, refugees being fired upon near the border, a leader being tortured in prison, and a homeland disappearing behind them.

And perhaps, hidden inside the rhythm of Indrani's song, that memory continues to breathe.

VI. The Echo of History: Official Denial and Artistic Omission

Governments speak with authority, but authority does not always guarantee truth. When a government is accused of wrongdoing, its official statements may conceal as much as they reveal. Historical truth, therefore, cannot depend entirely on government records or on the willingness of those in power to acknowledge their own actions. Sometimes, we must look beyond official words to discover the human consequences they leave unexplained.

The events of 1971 in East Pakistan offer a striking example. Following the Pakistani military crackdown, millions of people fled across the international border into India. Yet President Yahya Khan, responding to a European journalist who questioned him about reports of military persecution, reportedly declared: “Army has persecuted nobody. It’s nothing but exaggerated lies.” He added, “The people you saw are not refugees from East Pakistan.”

The contradiction was difficult to ignore. If the Pakistan Army had persecuted nobody, what had driven millions of people to abandon their homes and seek shelter in another country? By the end of 1971, approximately ten million people had crossed into India. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees documented more than 6.8 million refugees by July, including over 5.2 million in West Bengal alone. These figures were not merely competing political claims. They were connected to a humanitarian emergency that demanded shelter, food and medical assistance.

India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, drew international attention to the crisis. In her diplomatic communication to US President Richard Nixon on 13 May 1971, she described the systematic pressure forcing millions of people to seek refuge in India. She insisted that Pakistan's military actions in East Bengal and their consequences for India could not be separated.

The contrast between Yahya Khan's denial and the continuing arrival of refugees raises a fundamental question: can a state's official statement be accepted as a reliable account of events when evidence from outside its control points in another direction?

The interview's visual record adds another dimension. Yahya Khan reportedly appeared uncomfortable during the exchange. He seemed to pause, release a long sigh, reach repeatedly for cigarettes and look away from the journalist. Such gestures cannot establish what he believed privately. Yet they remind us that the words spoken before a camera and

the behaviour accompanying them are two different forms of evidence. Neither should be interpreted carelessly.

The refugee movement offers a further insight. The exact number of people killed in a conflict may remain disputed, especially when records are incomplete or politically contested. But the continuing movement of displaced people leaves traces across borders—in relief camps, medical services, contemporary journalism and international records. We may understand this movement as an echo of violence occurring beyond the immediate reach of outside observers. The echo cannot establish every detail of the original event, but its frequency, scale and persistence help us understand the magnitude of the crisis.

This idea brings us to Niren Lahiri's Bengali film *Indrani* (1958), particularly the song "Bhang Re Bhang Re Bhang, Pathar Bhang" ("Break the stones"). The film does not explicitly reconstruct the suffering of Santal refugees displaced from Nachol. Could their absence nevertheless carry an echo of that historical wound?

Perhaps the song's rhythm, physical labour and repeated words allow suffering to be suggested without directly displaying its victims. In a society vulnerable to renewed communal tension, such indirect expression may be considered a form of artistic restraint. We cannot establish Lahiri's intention from the film alone, but the historical circumstances invite us to investigate this possibility.

History teaches us to look beyond official denials. Art invites us to look beyond visible images.

In both, The Echo of History: Official Denial and Artistic Omission, Governments speak with authority, but authority does not always guarantee truth. When a government is accused of wrongdoing, its official statements may conceal as much as they reveal. Historical truth, therefore, cannot depend entirely on government records or on the willingness of those in power to acknowledge their own actions. Sometimes, we must look beyond official words to discover the human consequences they leave unexplained.

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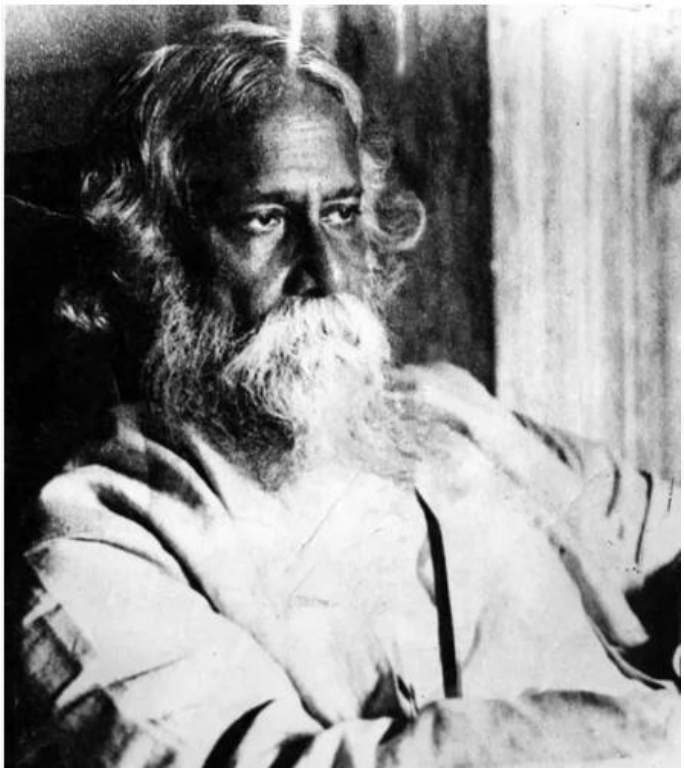
History teaches us to look beyond official denials. Art invites us to look beyond visible images. In both, what is absent from the surface may still leave traces of a deeper reality. Sometimes, the most revealing question is not simply what has been said or shown, but what remains unacknowledged—and why.what is absent from the surface may still leave traces of a deeper reality. Sometimes, the most revealing question is not simply what has been said or shown, but what remains unacknowledged—and why.



VII. The Art of Omission: From Rabindranath Tagore to Jamini Roy, and Then to Niren Lahiri

What Is Left Unsaid Has a Language of Its Own

The history of art is not merely the history of what artists reveal. What they choose not to reveal can be equally important. Sometimes an artist gives force to an idea through direct description. At other times, the visible signs of suffering are removed, yet the artist creates a form in which that suffering can still be felt.

We may call this second approach omission, or the art of conscious silence. It is not simply a matter of leaving something out. Rather, it is the act of allowing an idea to find expression in another form instead of presenting it directly. Certain significant examples in Bengali drama, poetry, and painting offer us a way to understand this artistic practice. To explore the meaning of omission in Niren Lahiri's Indrani, we must first look towards this wider cultural tradition.

Tagore's Tasher Desh: The Prison of Rules Instead of Visible Torture

Rabindranath Tagore's Tasher Desh (The Land of Cards) was first written and performed in 1933. At that time, fascist politics was rising in Europe. Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany in the same year marked an important turning point in European history. It is possible to explore the relationship between Tasher Desh and this contemporary political climate. Yet before identifying the play exclusively as a work written against Nazism, we must examine Tagore's own statements and the history of the work with due care.

The play's particular significance lies elsewhere as well. The inhabitants of the Land of Cards live under a rigid system of rules. Their movements, behaviour, and relationships are confined within predetermined patterns. There is little room left for individual freedom or spontaneity.

To convey this condition, Tagore does not offer a prolonged account of persecution, nor does he fill the stage with images of battered and wounded bodies. Instead, he creates a world in which rules themselves become

obstacles to human freedom. When life is governed by mechanical instructions, even the absurdity of those rules can produce a profound sense of unease.

Here, the art of omission becomes especially meaningful. Although scenes of physical torture are absent, the feeling of being deprived of freedom is not. The irrationality of the rules gives that feeling another way to speak.

Yet to limit Tasher Desh to political protest alone would be to narrow its meaning. The play is also a broader dramatic vision of mechanical existence, rigid social behaviour, and the human longing for liberation. Its political significance lies within this larger human question.

Jamini Roy: Human Dignity Beyond the Signs of Poverty

Jamini Roy's artistic language offers another important field of enquiry in the history of Bengali painting. In his works, the human body, the face, the eyes, the lines, and the arrangement of colours come together to create a distinctive visual language. Its strength does not lie in imitating every physical detail of the world. Through carefully chosen lines and restrained forms, Roy gives human presence an aesthetic identity of its own. One familiar way of representing poverty in art is to display its visible physical signs: skeletal bodies, protruding ribs, and exhausted faces. Jamini Roy's artistic language does not depend on such realistic details. The people in his paintings are not defined solely by the physical marks of deprivation.

An important distinction must be made here. The absence of protruding ribs in his paintings does not, by itself, establish that Roy consciously intended to conceal poverty in every instance. His artistic style, the influence of folk art, and his selective simplification of form may also explain this absence. Nevertheless, the larger question of art remains significant. When an artist does not define human suffering solely through the physical deterioration of the body, human identity becomes larger than suffering itself. Viewed from this perspective, Jamini Roy's art allows us to understand omission not merely as an act of exclusion, but as a way of choosing how human beings are made visible.

Niren Lahiri: The Missing Faces of History

Against this cultural background, we may return to Niren Lahiri's 1958 film Indrani and look at it afresh.

Our enquiry centres on the experiences of people displaced from East Pakistan, particularly the suffering of Santal refugees. Our initial observation is that their history is not directly and fully represented on the screen. But when an event is absent from a film, its meaning does not necessarily disappear with it.

The song "Bhang Re Bhang Re Bhang, Pathor Bhang" — "Break, break, break the stone" — offers a possible way of understanding this absence. The labour is visible. The act of breaking stones is visible. The rhythm of the song makes the repetition of physical labour audible. Yet the full history

behind that labour — displacement, wounds, and social devastation — is not directly explained.

A gap therefore opens before the viewer. One may begin to feel that something lies beyond what is being shown. The song ceases to be merely a description of labour. It becomes a possible passage towards a larger historical sorrow.

This interpretation must, of course, be grounded in the film's particular scenes, dialogue, song, and narrative context. Identifying an instance of omission and establishing why a director deliberately chose it are two separate research questions.

Social Responsibility and Caution Behind the Omission

In exploring the possible reasons behind Lahiri's decision, we are considering two factors. The first is a sense of social responsibility. When presenting a historical catastrophe on screen, a director may ask how human suffering can be conveyed to an audience without turning the experience of devastated people into an object of spectacle. An indirect approach, using suggestion, rhythm, or the symbolic representation of labour instead of explicit depiction, may sometimes be consistent with such a sense of responsibility.

The second factor is caution in anticipation of censorship. Drawing on your experience of a long career in government service, you have raised the possibility that filmmakers may sometimes become aware of potential restrictions even before formal regulations are announced. Such an awareness may influence their choices of subject matter or the way they construct particular scenes.

These two possibilities do not contradict each other. The same artist may choose to leave something unsaid out of social responsibility while remaining cautious about possible administrative obstacles. However, the extent to which either consideration influenced Lahiri's specific decision must, for the present, remain within the realm of an informed, experience-based hypothesis rather than established fact.

Can Tradition Help Us Understand the Decision?

We may now return to the central question. Can we identify a continuing tradition of omission across the drama of Rabindranath Tagore, the paintings of Jamini Roy, and the cinema of Niren Lahiri?

Without evidence of direct influence, we cannot claim that Tasher Desh or any particular artistic method employed by Jamini Roy directly shaped Lahiri's decisions while making Indrani. Yet all three belonged to a Bengali cultural environment with a long history of suggestion, symbolism, restraint, and indirect expression. This environment may be considered a possible cultural background to Lahiri's artistic imagination.

Bengali poetry, songs, folktales, patachitra painting, and drama have often conveyed meaning through more than direct description. Sometimes a symbol carries the meaning. Sometimes it is a repeated word, an unfinished sentence, or an event that remains outside the frame. Such choices invite the imagination of the reader or viewer to become an active participant in the work.

This tradition cannot serve as proof of the reasoning behind Lahiri's decision. It can, however, offer a meaningful cultural

framework through which to understand the omissions in his film.

The Aesthetics of Omission

Omission becomes an artistic force when what is absent creates a meaningful presence in the mind of the viewer. Not every act of leaving something out constitutes art. Sometimes an omission is simply a lack of information. Sometimes it arises from limitation. At other times, a conscious choice can deepen the meaning of what remains visible.

In Tasher Desh, the mechanical nature of rules allows us to feel the absence of freedom. In Jamini Roy's artistic language, selected forms and lines release human identity from the multitude of details found in the visible world and give it a distinctive shape. In Indrani, the song of labour and its accompanying images may suggest a wider social sorrow without fully describing it.

These three examples do not represent identical applications of a single artistic method. Their historical circumstances, urposes, and media are different. Yet when we place them alongside one another, an important question emerges: Is the meaning of an artwork confined to what is present within it? Or does the artist also make room for what remains absent?

The second question holds particular value for our research.

When a director presents only part of a historical event rather than its complete account, the way viewers imagine the world beyond that fragment may itself become part of the artistic experience. To acknowledge this possibility, however, does not mean declaring every omission noble or resistant by nature. We must ask what the omission protects, what it conceals, and what it invites the viewer to think about.

Our enquiry into Niren Lahiri's *Indrani* is therefore not merely an investigation into scenes missing from a film. It is an exploration of a question whose answers may also be found, in different forms, throughout the wider tradition of Bengali art.

Sometimes what matters most is not only what an artist chooses to show, but what the artist leaves unsaid, allowing us to feel for ourselves.

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