



1st M.K. Binodini Devi Memorial Lecture

CINEMA ACROSS CULTURES

A Lecture By Samik Bandyopadhyay

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I consider it a very special honour and privilege to be asked to deliver the first Maharajkumari Binodini Memorial Lecture in Imphal.

Because all my feeling of Manipur and whatever little understanding I have of Manipur, I owe to Maharajkumari Binodini Devi, who took me under her gracious and generous tutelage back in 1973 when I first visited Imphal and from then on, almost till the time of her death, she remained my mentor. And for somebody who comes from outside Manipur, the rich cultural history of Manipur, and not just the cultural history of its past but its evolving cultural history whatever was being created. All these were revealed to me, explained to me by Binodini Di as I came to address her through the years.

So when I speak on this very special occasion, I feel charged with memories, emotions and all that I had shared with her over all these years. The moment of jubilation when “Imagi Ningthem” created history in 1982, the moments of deep anguish and suffering when violence, barbarities, horrors came on the scene and it was a great experience to share in all these through the perceptions of this great lady.

And when I speak of “Cinema Across Cultures”, by culture I mean these perceptions, self perceptions. Self perceptions which have to be artistically re-created to bare them out, carried them out to other cultures and this becomes a historical role of Cinema. Cinema if you really remember, came into being in 1895.

And in 1914 the world had its first great shock in a world scale, the first of its kind for this was the first war in the history of the world. But it was not a war, not a battle being fought in a single small space. If you really come to think of the old wars of the world, whether in history or in mythology, they are all histories which relate to small places, place names, whether it's *Panipat* or *Palashi*, whether it's

Kangla or *The Great Kurukshetra*, whether it's *Lanka* or *Lahore*, these were battles, wars, fights, contests, which took place in a small place and you can indicate it by the place name.

But this was a world war for the first time ever, a war which spread fast throughout the world and this was the war which was not just the world's First World War, it was also a war which changed the very meaning, the very nature, the very identification of war. In the sense that all the wars in the past had been fought with weapons, weapons that brought man and man together in a confrontation, with the killer and the killed shared the same space, a space defined by sight, hearing, smell, the closeness of the victim and the killer. They shared a common space, the space defined by their senses, by their *indriyas*.

The First World War was the first war in which there were bombs they dropped from flying aeroplanes. This was the first war in which shells from the cannons could go to a space, a length of 100 miles and this was considered to be a great achievement of civilization, the spread, the reach of its destructive power and now it was no longer the victim and the killer sharing a space. The machine, the weapon had intervened in that space.

At the same time, this was also the time that broadcasting and Cinema had started spreading throughout the world. In fact, people were glued to their Radio Sets in the years of the First World War and people were glued to the Cinema Screens, watching, recording, and experiencing the progress of the war. The war was no longer the distant reality, something taking place somewhere else far away from your safe space in home. The war could come into your home and hut anytime the way the war was spread, you had to keep informed, you had to be aware of the danger, the risk, the closeness of the risk and therefore the Radio became a tool on which you depended, depended for your survival, depended for your safety.

And the Cinema gave you images, images of the war. The wars were reality which could not be captured in words alone, they had to be captured in the enormity in their images and the Cinema gave you the images. The Cinema gave you the images of countries and peoples and cultures about which you were not aware till then. Distant places where the war was taking place, distant people, distant nations, distant races involved in the war, whom you didn't know and you would like to recognize because they were becoming real in the process of history.

So, the time of the origin of Cinema, the time Cinema came into being and achieved its international spread was also the time when cultures came into conflict, into confrontation and opened up areas of curiosity, interest, trying to understand other cultures. Just as cultures, fought cultures, so cultures aligned with new cultures to form their defenses, to come to terms to resist some other marauding culture.

The whole pattern of civilization was changing as Cinema evolved. And this has given Cinema, a special character and a special role and that is the theme on which I would like to touch.

Cinema is primarily, essentially first and foremost a pictorial media, a medium of images, things that you see as pictures, recorded by the camera. And the camera is trusted to be the most authentic recording media, something that captures all the external details, all the contours, everything in the shape of an object, whether it's a tree or a machine, whether it's a human face or a human body, anything. The most authentic, the most trustworthy recording of an object is offered by Photography and when these photographs move, when these images move, you get into Cinematography, into Cinema and that is your most authentic feel of reality, you record reality.

And that remained Cinema's primary concern: to capture the real and the more authentic, the more trustworthy; the more credible you can make your reality, the more rich in its space and in its time, in its history, in its cultural location. The more real you can make it, the more you can extant the real into a supra real, into a reality beyond the immediate reality, something which is so basic to the human imagination.

Human imagination is never satisfied, never contented with what it has, what it can see, it always dreams beyond, it always reaches beyond. And that's the area where life turns into poetry, where life turns into music, where life turns into dance, which is not life as it is: life as it is practiced every day but life with its possibilities. Human beings walk on the ground, the ground is so solid but the dancer hopes to leap, leap beyond the ground into a different space, a space beyond the earth. When we talk, we share ideas, we share concepts but when we break into songs, these are no longer words of concepts; these are feels of feelings, emotions that grow beyond the words, things that you can't put into words, things that you can only sing.

All the possibilities of going beyond the real, not our given human conditions but different conditions, changed conditions, conditions at another level of civilization, these aspirations and these yearnings, these also Cinema captures but captures only out of reality, the feel of the reality. The earthiness of the reality has to be there before you can go into a flight of imagination.

So it becomes so imperative for Cinema to come back to its moorings in a particular culture and this is something that Cinema grew out of. And more and more in the history of Cinema, Cinema is over a hundred years old already, hundred years old even in India, in these hundred years there came a time when that magic potential of Cinema, the capacity of Cinema to touch reality, to understand reality, to embed itself in reality and then break beyond reality into the flight of imagination and to the future.

That turned into a commodity that was snatched to be from human imagination into the code of business and profit and the massive mechanism of capitalism, making money out of it and to make money, to make larger profits, you don't have to stick to cultures, real cultures. You create a false, unreal universal culture, a culture of consumers, a culture of buyers and then the more ruthless you can turn Cinema, the more you tear Cinema away from its cultural roots and by cultural roots I don't just mean cultural performances or practices, I also mean the flowers, the birds, the bees, the insects in a particular culture. I think of the magic of the *Ingelei* flower in my friend Syam Sharma's "Ishanou" which you will be watching a few minutes later. How the flower stirs something in the woman's heart, changes her totally, something which is part of the culture, part of the imagination, part of the history, the practice, even in that very very special flower.

In a piece, Satyajit Ray speaks of his encounter with this great French director Jean Renoir, who came down to India to shoot a film and he was charmed by a flower and he told Ray "*look at that flower, it's so beautiful* but there are flowers all over the world but this particular flower, this blooms only here so that flower marks this place for me, identifies this place for me", that flower and side by side he could also identify a city far away from France, the country where he came by the hanging clothes set out for drying under the sun, it's a different sun in India not the sun that shines in France, the sky is different, the temperature is different, the sun is different, and the sun and the drying clothes, they have a different contact, they have a different dynamism and that is also part of a culture.

All these things go into the making of culture and Cinema is so potentially capable of capturing these science and trades of the culture. But in the capitalist standardization, in the capitalist pursuit of a large large large market, Cinema becomes something standardized and Cinema loses its cultural bearings and its cultural identity. It becomes a sellable commodity everywhere and as you go out of the everywhere, you would just trample on these separate identities or the separate cultures. There is a capitalist aggression against the different voices, the different sensitivities that have been cultivated and nurtured with such great care over generations.

For us, in 1982 when outside Manipur we had a first exposure to Syam's "Imagi Ningthem", it was a moment of history. For us in Bengal for example, Manipur for years was Manipuri Dance and not even the entire rich repertoire of the Manipuri Dance, it was basically only the *Rasa* and the variations of the *Rasa*, an extremely limited repertoire and Manipur was identified with that. But the living practices of this place what so charmingly, what so magically came through in "Imagi Ningthem". That decision of a woman to adopt a child, a child whose mother had been betrayed by her husband, a strange power lay in that spirit of responsibility of taking responsibility of assuming responsibility and that was a revelation.

And through that cultural treat, through that decision, a cultural sign which was unique, which was special, we found an entry point into the rich history of Manipur's women's wars, women's battles and women's culture, their battles for their identity, their battles for their rights, their battles for larger human rights even.

So it opens up Manipur, it opens up the place, its people, its culture to another culture and the more Cinema can work at that level, at the level of these intersections where one culture is set against another, the more understanding roles. And Cinema because of its capacity to capture the real and then rise above the real to the imaginary super real that range the trajectory that Cinema alone can cover with that power, a power which also risks in the hypnosis that you have in the Cinema Auditorium, an auditorium like this for example.

I am so happy; I am so excited to be speaking at this new auditorium. I visited it in 2010, which was a time when it was being setting up, the construction was going on, and now the construction is complete. Even this occasion of a collective, of a community, of a whole mass of people sitting together, sharing something for a given period of time in all the rush and bustle of life all around, you are cut off from that to concentrate on a work of creation, a cinematic creation and as a hall goes dark and the light rests on the screen alone, a rectangular frame and things happen there and so many eyes, eyes with different kinds of minds and memories and imaginations behind them concentrate on the same images and see the same movements of the images and read different meanings, different histories, different emotions and experience that Cinema of us.

This collectivity, this collective space, this has also to be reclaimed at a point of time when the Television Set in your home has taken this space away from us. More and more have taken the space away so that you are no longer a part of the community, you are stuck in your home in your insularity not with the collective, not with massive people with whom you can share something and share its joy and jubilations and pains. So as we stand at this point of crisis may be, it is also a point where there is a challenge to creativity, a challenge to re-create and re-capture the cultural nuances, the cultural specialities of Cinema and to reclaim the cultural space where a community, where a collective watches and shares the cinematic experience.

And that is what brings me to this point where we talk of Cinema across cultures, Cinema offering cultures, Cinema receiving cultures so that a culture does not get subsumed by a larger culture. A culture which is hegemonic, which imposes its power on a smaller culture through political power, through powers of technology and in the process standardizes humanity, standardizes the very subtle feelings, the caring feelings, the concerned feelings, the people share in a community, in a closer

community. The larger community always becomes a sort of a monster, too large for human beings to deal with, too overpowering to have our voices heard and communicated.

The need for Cinema to re-discover these smaller Cinemas, the regional Cinemas; It may say in utopian with the power of money, with the power that goes into the commercial Cinema and its large expansive forays. Even in the context of the lies, the blatant lies that are circulated by the media all the time, the lies about the successes of the big Cinemas or the commercial Cinemas, most of the time these are false statements. When you hear of big hits, you don't really get to know the truth of the things, of the money invested and the money that is returned. The conspiracy is a black money, the secret deals where it is not Cinema reaching and pleasing a large enough audience, it's a business conspiracy, it's a business machination which the media presents to you as success story and as the model as something that over-awes you to the point where you can't create your own works.

And yet we have models, we have experiences of great filmmakers who have created their audiences, not in enormous audiences, not large audiences. I'll read out some excerpts from a very dear favourite filmmaker of mine, a filmmaker on whose films I grew up in a sense, Satyajit Ray, and when he talks about his film about 25 years after he had made his first film, after 25 feared years of filmmaking, international recognition, awards and everything, he says "*The need incentive for me was provided by the insipid, high bound, hybrid nature of Bengali Films which I discovered early on what the audience wanted and stayed resolutely on the safe path*". There were no great hopes of success for these films but he was a sensitive man deeply rooted in its culture, deeply rooted in its literature who discovered the power of images, images that could translate and transmute and transform the words of a literally text and it's the fascination of that power and his sense of the frustration at how a Cinema commercially minded just feeding what the audience wanted, what the audience demanded and never challenging the taste of the audience, the power of the medium. That is something that angered him, created the rage of passion and inspiration in him to go for Cinema.

And even after these 25 years of filmmaking and great recognition, he says in the rest of India, "*where even in the major cities my films are either never shown or shown surreptitiously on Sunday mornings. Generally without sub-titles I am only a name and have been one for all of these 25 years*". It certainly gives one an odd feeling. He doesn't become popular in India automatically, it gives an odd feeling to feel all these but still he goes on till the 1990s, the early 1990s till he dies, making films with the same passion, with the same commitment. And there is always this hope and something another contemporary of his, Mrinal Sen once said so wonderfully when he was asked, *Well you make films for the minority, you make films for people only in your culture. What do you make of that? How can you*

really reach out? You'll never become a big star as a filmmaker, you played to the minorities. And Mrinal Sen said very sensitively, if you add up all these minorities, they make a considerable majority, throughout the world, throughout the country itself and after all, the minority has a right to be heard and seen.

So if we are talking of a Cinema that can capture a culture, reflect a culture, resonate with its own culture and take the culture beyond to other cultures, we are talking also of the voice of the minority, the right of the minority to be heard, the right of a culture to be heard across cultures rather than become decimated by some strong industrial apparatus which denies you your culture.

So it is your love for your culture, it is your commitment to your culture that should bring you back to a Cinema that upholds your culture. Cinema has to be taken out of the basket of industry alone and give a relocation at the heart of culture because *their* Cinema allows for a kind of sharing that no other media, no other art form even can give to that extent in its whole over the real and the supra real.

Thank you!



Samik Bandyopadhyay is a film and theatre critic was a long-time friend and associate of M. K. Binodini Devi. Perhaps the most eminent critic of Manipur's arts and culture Samik has been at the forefront of bringing an understanding and appreciation of the work of artists like Aribam Syam Sharma and Ratan Thiyam to the world outside Manipur. He is a Visiting Fellow (Professor) at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. He received an M.A. in English Literature from Calcutta University and served as a Lecturer in Departments of English Literature and Drama at Rabindra Bharati University. He was Regional Editor for Oxford University Press in Calcutta and later, Editor for Seagull Books.

Samik was Producer Emeritus for All India Radio and Doordarshan and a Research Professor at Asiatic Society in Calcutta in the 1990s. He has been a panelist at seminars on Indian Theatre as part of Festivals of India in USSR and Germany and Vice-Chairman for the National School of Drama (2006-2010) and member of the National School of Drama Society.

He has lectured extensively in the USA, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and England and gave a series of lectures on Indian cinema at Pittsburgh University in 1988; a seminar on Indian Culture for Brown University in 1990; and the Donald Charlton lecture, organized by the Humanities Research Centre at Warwick University in November 2010.

Samik has translated plays and fiction by Badal Sircar and Mahasweta Devi; contributed introductions to plays by Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, G. P. Deshpande, Satish Alekar; and reconstructed for publication film scripts for films made by Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen and Aribam Syam Sharma. Samik is the Founder-Editor of Thema, a small publisher based in Calcutta. He is also visiting faculty at an annual film appreciation course organized by the National Film Archives of India and the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune.

He has contributed several essays in numerous film and theatre periodicals in English and Bengali. He has interviewed Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Mahasweta Devi, Richard Attenborough, Natalie Sarraute, Salman Rushdie, Derek Malcolm, Reinhard Hauff, Aribam Syam Sharma and Ratan Thiyam.etc. for *Film Society* periodicals and *All India Radio* and *Doordarshan*; several of these later included in books.

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