

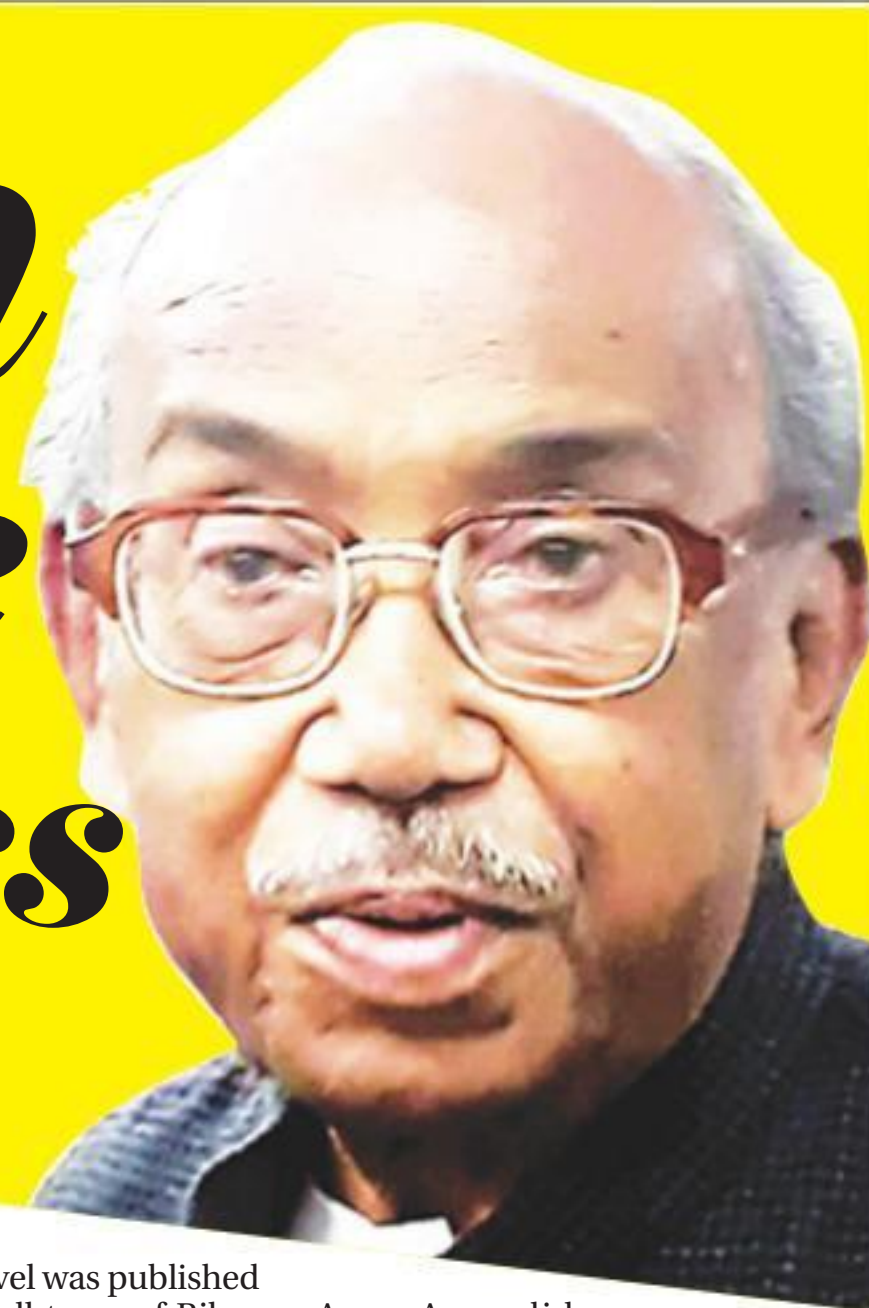
The Tarun Majumdar school inspired many film-makers.

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July seems the most ruthless month for the Bengali film industry. Forty-two years ago, July saw the sudden demise of Uttam Kumar. In 2003, July claimed Samit Bhanja. Now, it has taken away Tarun Majumdar.

Posters are from the collection of Debasis Mukhopadhyay

Titan who made art a success



The end came at the ripe age of 91. Although he had been inactive in the last few years of his life, his passing creates a void that the next generation of film makers in Bengal will find difficult to fill. In his 59-year-long career, with more than 30 movies under his belt, Tarun Majumdar crafted the art of making Bengali cinema talk like a human but most importantly he satisfied the fundamental conditions of movie making by blending science, arts and commerce in a balanced ratio in every single reel of his movies. The spark of Tarun's talent was palpable in his second movie "Kacher Swarga" (The world of illusion) which he directed by teaming up with Dilip Mukherjee and Sachin Mukherjee in the Jatrik. The extraordinary story of a failed medical student who served as a doctor with a fake certificate was a breath of fresh air at a time when Bengali commercial cinema was riding the romantic wave of Uttam-Suchitra.

It was also the time when Ray was already done with his legendary film Aparajita (The Unvanquished) and Bengali intellectuals were clearly defining a so-called narrative of meaningful cinema. In such a challenging atmosphere, Majumdar emerged as a new victor of commercial cinema.

He started making film under his own credit from 1963 and soon made his name a brand brightly distinctive from other icons of Bengali cinema who are projected as titans.

Over three decades Majumdar's unforgettable films like Palatak, Nimantran, Kuheli, Sriman Prwithraj, Amargeeti, Alor Pipasha, Thagini and Dadar Kirti scripted new history in Bengali popular cinema without sacrificing core Bengali values in any manner. He picked every story from a typical Bengali set up, made characters look simple yet extraordinary in their perspective and decorated every single movie with excellent application of songs, both Rabindrasangeet and contemporary.

He used music directors from Hemanta Mukherjee to RD Burman in his various films adding a peerless value to their artistic and commercial marketability. No wonder that some of his weak movies also did impressive business only for their songs. Apan Amar Apan (1990) tuned by RD Burman and Bhalobasha Bhalobasha (1985) tuned by Hemanta Mukherjee rocked the box office only because of their songs.

Rabindrasangeet used in Majumdar's movies can be a subject of study in every film school.

Right from "Dinguli more sonar khachai" in Kacher Swarga to "Charon o Dhoritey Diyo Go" in Dadar Kirti (1980) Majumdar touched the pulse of Bengalis. It was his 1971 thriller movie "Kulehi" in which both Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle rendered two Rabindrasangeet numbers. It happened only once in the history of Bengali cinema.

Rabindrasangeet was used so widely in his films that once The Gramophone Company came out with a double cassette album that had a title "Rabindrasangeet in Tarun Majumdar's Film".

The power of Majumdar's storytelling, imagination and script-writing can be best seen in Dadar Kirti, a film considered one of the finest and biggest commercial hits in Bengali cinema. Written by a teenager, Sharadin-

du Bandopadhyay, in 1915 this short novel was published in 1976. Set in a small town of Bihar where few Bengali families cohabit with their own culture, this average novel was brilliantly converted into a mind-blowing romantic comedy in which Tapas Pal made his debut. One who read the novel and watched the movie could understand how Majumdar's script lifted up the story to a different level on screen.

Majumdar's power of script writing was also seen beyond cinema when in the late 1970s, he wrote the script for a comic strip named "Sadashiver Kahini" for a Bengali magazine, Anandamela. This was also a story by Sharadindu and illustration was done by Anup Roy. The strip was once extremely popular among readers. Having many offers to move to Bombay to make Hindi films, Majumdar preferred to stay back in Bengal. However he made two Hindi movies, both remakes of his Bengali films. Rahgeer and Balika Badhu did moderate business but got high praise. Balika Badhu was tuned by RD Burman and it gave Amit Kumar his maiden Film Fare award for the song "Bade Ache Lagte Hain".

V Shantaram produced two of Tarun's movies. One was Palatak (The runaway) and the other was Path O Prasad (The road and the palace).

The Tarun Majumdar school of film inspired many in India, specially film makers like Gulzar, Basu Chatterjee, Sai Paranjape, Shyam Benegal and many more to do experiments of mass entertainment under a clean and meaningful script far different from the formula-based Hindi blockbusters of the 1960s and 1970s. It will not be an exaggeration to say that in that school of cinema, he was a pioneer.

"Much before Bombay, it was Tarunda in Bengal who introduced the cult of middle road cinema", says film historian and former president of BFJA Chandi Mukherjee. "Knowing him since 1982 I have realized one thing - that Tarunda used to know how to entertain people both urban mass and in rural market. His understanding of commercial success of a movie was just outstanding."

Was his magic touch somehow failing in his last few movies?

Except Alo (2003) none of the films he made in the last 10 years of his career was a block buster. Apan

Amar Apan did good business mainly for its music. Bhalobasha Onek Naam made in 2005 was pushed by printing photos of Uttam Kumar and Hemanta Mukherjee in posters because their grandchildren were in the movies.

Yet, "Tarun Majumdar is one of the finest film maker who knew how to make commercially successful movies without discounting good taste and cultural roots," thinks Debasis Mukhopadhyay, the historian and Satyajit Ray scholar. However, he says Majumdar failed to get success whenever he tried to come out of his typical style. It is very unfortunate that his excellent films like Ganadevta (1979) and Amargeeti (1984) which were different from his known style and story could not do that big business in box office."

To understand Majumdar, Debasis tells the story that he directly got from the late director.

In 1955, when Ray's Pather Panchali was released, young Tarun and his friends from Scottish Church College were so mesmerized that they organized a small, silent rally from Deshbandhu Park with posters in hand that read "Pather Panchali Dekhun" (Watch Pather Panchali). "Tarun babu told me that soon common people joined in the walk without any vocal provocation and at one point of time they only carried the posters in (their) hands. Such was his grooming as a film maker."

A decade ago, in a television show, when it was suggested by noted writer Narayan Sanyal that a writer and a film maker both have the onus to protect the sanity of common people's cultural tastes, Majumdar calmly replied that after writing a story a writer like him can destroy it if he feels that does no good for society, but a film maker cannot this because cinema is the most expensive form of art and it is in most cases not made with the director's money. Cinema's social responsibility is mingled with both art and commerce.

Majumdar took Bengali cinema to heights of glory different from the school of Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. But by no means was it less important. Rather, the huge success of most of his cinema ensured the industry survived.