

'No formula for success of a film'

Chandi Mukherjee is the doyen of Bengali film journalism and film studies. Having a career in writing on films for more than four decades for a leading Bengali newspaper, Mukherjee is also a film historian with more than 40 books to his credit. He edits several books and periodicals on films and contributes articles to leading newspapers. He is the President of Bengal Film Journalist Association and a member of the jury in National Film Award Committee and Censor Board. Mukherjee spoke candidly to Somen Sengupta.

Q. Is your engrossment with the world of cinema accidental or does it have a history of systematic formation?

A. It is destiny, I must say. I was born and bred in central Calcutta very near to Elite cinema in early 1950s. Calcutta was still a vibrant cosmopolitan city, and my zone was dotted with cinema halls showing English movies and blockbuster Hindi movies as well. Though watching cinema in theatre was not allowed for us frequently, but I had the visual delight of big hoardings and posters in central Calcutta and that created an interest to explore the world.

In my teens we shifted to the Shyambazar area which was then buzzing with a plethora of cinema and theatre halls. My world of watching cinema actually started from Talkie Show House, Minar, Mitra,

Darpana, Roopbani and many other showhouses of that locality. I remember I was in my half pants when I watched Satyajit Ray's *Abhijaan* in Sree cinema hall by bunking class.

Q. Were you fascinated only by that genre?

A. Absolutely not. I used to watch all films, specially Hindi movies starring Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor. Uttam Kumar, then the titan of Bengali movies, was my top hero. I indulged in watching movies without making any discrimination and it slowly invaded my thought process when I was admitted in Scottish Church college in the late 1960s.

Q. So, unlike others you never divided film into art and commercial?

A. I hate to do so. There is only one classification of cinema - that is good and bad. Ray showed us that even very good cinema can become a huge commercial hit.

Q. But how did the doors of world cinema open to you?

A. In the early 1970s I became a member of the Calcutta Film Club, an organisation that used to exist at Bharati Parishad Library near RG Kar Medical college. They initially refused membership because of my youth but seeing my profound interest in cinema I was finally admitted. There I got to read magazines like *Sight & Sound*, *Screen*, *Ultorath*, *Jalsa* etc. and writing on films started attracting me. Meanwhile, I got to meet Father Gaston Roberge, a Jesuit priest of St. Xavier's college, who was leading a

film study club named Chitrabani near Wellington square. About 10 of us started following him. Apart from me young Ruchir Joshi, Sunetra Ghatak, Sashi Anand, Sekhar Das and many more brilliant people joined him. There we not only got to see some of the finest movies of the world on 16 mm projectors but also started reading magazines like *Film Bulletin*, *Film Comments*, *Chitrabhash*, *Movie Montage* etc.

It was here I obtained an academic diploma on film. However, I never wanted to become a director. My desire was always to become a writer and reviewer on cinema - I was very focused from the beginning.

Q. Was your outlook on popular cinema changing at that time?

A. Yes. I realised that those superhit Uttam Kumar movies about which I was once crazy were no longer appealing to me. I was slowly understanding the difference between the real India and the India that popular Hindi cinema shows us. It was an awakening.

Q. Was that experience enough to become a film critic?

A. No. I was sent to Pune Film Institute in 1974 for another course and there I really understood how India of my generation thinks about cinema. My days in Pune were unforgettable. There I not only found a galaxy of bright teachers and friends but also a library that remains open all night for its readers. The Pune experience enhanced my wisdom.

Q. But still you were not writing or researching on cinema if you became a film correspondent.

A. An offer landed on my lap in 1981 when a new Bengali daily *Aajkal* commenced from Calcutta. It was a new age newspaper, and it was the first Bengali

newspaper to introduce regular Page 3 type of content. I got the job and settled in life, but it took me a few years to establish myself as a film journalist. In 1986, when Mithun Chakraborty organised the *Hope86* extravaganza in Calcutta I did daily updates. My personal proximity to Mithun gave me access to every single titbit of the event.

I was promoted as the cinema page head and sent to Bombay, where I got several assignments with personalities ranging from BR Chopra to Rekha to Amitabh Bachchan to Om Puri and others.

Q. How would you compare Hindi cinema of the 1980s to today's cinema?

A. After the 1991 economic liberalisation, India has transformed into a very different country. You cannot expect to see a "boy coming from a village to a big city and falling in love with a rich girl" kind of story because that is no more the aspiration of a common Indian. As aspirations have changed, so have the subjects and acting styles of Hindi cinema. Till the mid-1990s, a multi-starrer movie with six songs and three dances was an established formula. Now success does not follow a formula, it follows the right application of thoughts with the moviegoers.

Q. Is that same for Bengali cinema as well?

A. Bengali cinema after the death of Uttam Kumar in 1980 went into a bad patch. From 1985 with the release of a movie named *Shatru* I saw commercial success, but it killed cinema as a visual delight. Rather it became a medium of sound, where dialogue started dominating the subject. However things changed from mid-1995 with the arrival of Rituparno Ghosh, Koushik Ganguly, etc.

Q. How would you place Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak in the history of Indian cinema?

A. They all are great. Both Ray and Sen changed themselves with the times. My own interactions with both for many years made me realise that they tried their best with changing times. However, in the last stages, both were at their saturation point of excellence.

This is natural and I do not blame them for this. Ray, because of his illness, was forced to do indoor-centric movies from 1988 and that caused his magic to fade. Mrinalda was no more at his best from the late 1980s.

Q. Do you rate Ghatak as one of the best filmmakers to capture the partition of Bengal?

A. That is a myth. Ritwik's movies known as partition movies do not actually reflect the political side of partition. He very tactfully avoided that disturbing subject thanks to his political affiliation to CPI. His films are all on the personal pains and pangs of people who were victims of partition.

Q. You seriously started film research a little later and mostly concentrated on world films.

A. I started authoring books from 2012 and have authored 43 books, all in Bengali. My first book was on Uttam Kumar whom I met and interviewed in 1978. It was a huge experience.

However, I later authored books on Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, Jean Luc Godard, Alfred Hitchcock, Greta Garbo, Ingmar Berman, Brigitte Bardot and many more.

All of them were popular among Bengali cine-goers but there were no serious books on them in Bengali.

I also worked on Tagore and Cine-ma, Hiralal Sen, the real pioneer of Indi-

an cinema, Ritwik Ghatak and even on Ray, Shahrukh Khan, Amitabh Bachchan and Mrinal Sen.

Q. What is the real challenge in film research in India?

A. Very pathetic archival material. Neither the film nor any important documents are properly preserved and with time many matchless documents and photographs are lost for ever. Can you imagine that we do not have any good photograph of Hiralal Sen and not even a single still of his so many works? Our film libraries are unorganised and most of the books written on cinema are very poorly researched. I have visited big Hollywood studios like Paramount, Sony, Warner Brothers etc. in US with special approval from Hollywood Cine Guild and was floored to see the way they have preserved every single document of their film in their archive. We cannot even think of doing that in India. However, nowadays National Film Archive is doing some serious work but in Bengal things are still at a precarious stage.

Q. You have held many top positions in film organisations. Which ones did you really enjoy?

A. I was a member of the jury for President's National Award for three years and was also a member of the Censor board for a long time. Both positions gave me ample scope to learn Indian cinema across provinces and I am grateful as a student of cinema for that opportunity. Thanks to these positions, I got to know how fast cinema making is changing in India. I am also the president of Bengal Film Journalist Association, but I feel BFJA has not performed its proper role in promoting the right kind of Bengali cinema. This is no doubt a regret.

