



The Ideology of Bengaliness and Its Impact on the Bengali Film Directors in Bombay: Towards a Cultural History

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ABSTRACT

The colonialist discourse in India in a way deformed the cultural atmosphere; and Indian cinema is not an exception to this process. Hindi cinema has taken over the place of colonial dominant culture in the field of independent India. In the decade of 1950s, Hindi cinema took a decisively new turn. The new colonial values and ideology became foundational to this genre. In brief, there had been spectacle of unreal utopia instead of fantasy, melodrama and bowdy dance and songs in the name of entertainment. In stark contrast with the action-dominated films in Bombay, the Bengali directors of the time brought in and presented a “purely Bengali world” pervaded by serenity, calmness and a moderate life-style. This style of presentation inaugurated the Bengaliness in Hindi films. Nitin Basu was the source of the “Bengali film culture” that was created in Bombay. Later, Bimal Roy, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Bhattacharya, Basu Chatterjee and Shakti Samanta further advanced this trend. But young Bengali directors who are currently working in Bollywood do not want their images to be represented in so-called Bengaliness- they prefer to leave the “regional identity” quickly.

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Introduction: With the advent of the (so called) renaissance of Bengal, the Bengalis had geared towards the world to education, arts, literature, reformation of the society, generous view of religion and political feeling. This renaissance of Bengal showed in a way, is the moment of enlightenment. In the



cinema industry, however, the recognition came much later. But, since the appearance of the cinema in India, the Bengali films stood in the front position in selecting the subject of a movie, in acting, in popularity and above all in direction of movies. The Bengali directors while directing movies put up the Bengal culture, that is, the Bengalines in their movies. Just as films in different Indian languages were made from the Bengali film-sphere, so did many of the directors come out of this sphere who kept the trend in their works on in different places even today. In consequence, the impact of the Bengalines is evident in various regional movies, including Hindi movies. In this essay, it has been tried to investigate how the directors in Bengal have put up the Bengalines in Bollywood's Hindi movies. At the same time, it has also been tried to put thorough studies how today's Bengali directors of Bollywood view the Bengalines (in the Bollywood movies).

Although the cinema is the result of combined efforts, still our discussion will be limited in the works of the movie directors, because it is the director that decides everything while making a movie.

Now there may be questions raised: what is meant by the Bengalines? In the earlier era the language of the Bengali movie could not be understood distinctly but the directors were not solely with the objective of earning money or giving cheap entertainment to the spectators. The directors were able to invest in the cinema the renaissance-obtained feeling, generousness, religious feeling, acts against sectarianism, social feeling and other humane feelings. And what assisted in this effort was the Bengali literature. Along with this was added up the concentration of the directors, their earnestness, creating something new, and a strong intention to create art-works. Above all there would be the reflections of the workings of the Bengali society in these films. That is how the Bengali culture, that is the Bengaliness was introduced in the cinema.

The wide and strong presence of the colonialism in colonial India deformed and almost destroyed the cultural environment. Because the so-called 'modern or developed culture' risen from the places of megalomaniacs had been in a constant clash with the local conventional 'Sanatan' or 'backward culture'. The first one, in fact, wants to overshadow the second one, sometimes, more rudely to eradicate its whole culture. And from these clashes, however, a 'mixed cultural trend comes into existence in many places. In the undeveloped world the experts in this sphere call the third trend a "generous culture". And in the whirling confusion of these three trends of culture there comes an unprecedented social and cultural agitation. That's when the fighting for the existence of cultures became so acute which in the dominated regions spoiled up the environment of the possibility of a well-organized culture. In spite of being the inhabitants of the same geographic sphere, all of them cannot become a part of the tradition of the common culture. It gave birth to a cultural division in the society.¹



The Indian movies are not free from this impact either. And right from the beginning its reflection has been noticed in our movies. People of this country did not have a chance to have direct contact with the grand observational examples, of the contemporary world-movies which were applied in various complex systems in the supremacy-intended capitalist theory. Not just the unacceptable things, some average samples of the foreign movies had just come into this country during the colonial era. Those formats of foreign films have either been imitated or been left out. This was the self-tact of the dominated culture to cope up with unwelcome supremacy.²

Surprisingly, in the cultural field, especially, in the cinema industry the colonial culture of supremacy was occupied by the Hindi films in colonial India. With the privilege of new colonial system, the state had been mostly ruled over by the Hindi-speaking leaders. And with their encouragement and support the Hindi cinema has developed widely in this country, however, there is a great difference between the films of pre-independent India and the films of post independent India. What has been noticed widely is the trend of advancing supremacy of the Hindi movies of the post-independent-India era. In the 1950s, there had been a transformation or a new form of the Hindi cinema. This cinema became the source of new colonial appraisal and ideological view. In this structure there stuck up the loads of unreality in guise of fantasy, over dramatics with melodrama and plenty of dramatics and too much songs and dances in pretext of entertainment. This method of exaggerated representation was given a big name—‘Formula of popular cinema.’³

Right on the land of Bombay the Bengali directors brought in the Hindi films the healthy choice and refreshing simplicity of Bengali movie tradition against Bombay films of late which were based on dancing-singing, exaltation, fighting and fiction. Along with offering entertainment in their movies, they wanted to instill the sense of the social into the spectators. The reflection of behavior, costumes and thoughts of Bengali society became special characteristics of their movies. And the main source of these things were the Bengali literature.⁴

The Hindi movies won the heart of the spectators with happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain, expectation and attainment, hope and despair, love and anger, conjugal life, various tracts of relationship, and the complexity of civil life.

It was when the importance of Calcutta as a movie-manufacturing centre began to get down, many of the directors started out for Bombay. But it was only Nitin Bose who was successful in his works there in Bombay. That trend of film culture which was created in Bombay may be called the source of it. He made the double version ‘Noukadubi’, and ‘Rajani’ into the cinema along with making Hindi films. Both the movies were made under the banner of Bombay Talkies whose director was



Ahoke Kumar. It was him that gave the first chance to Dilip Kumar in the Hindi version of ‘Noukadubi’ which was entitled as ‘Milan’. He directed a number of Hindi films in Bombay. And suffice it to say, he represented the characteristics of New Theatres in these films.⁵

Bimal Roy gave depth and intensity to the trends of Bengali culture whose chief leader in Bombay was Nitin Bose. And right in Bombay Nitin Bose was the pioneer of the trend of Bengali film culture, and Bimal Roy took up this trend even deeper. The leader of Bombay talkies Mr. Ashoke Kumar had requested him to quit the New Theatres and began directing films in Bombay. Bimal Roy in the history of Indian cinema was different from all others. He brought about the healthy choice, simple calmness of the New Theatre’s tradition in the field of action-romance-dance-chasing-fighting formula on the stage of hilarity. He wanted to make spectators think instead of tying them charmed with different furs from noon to night; he wanted to make them responsible to the society.

Actually, Bimal Roy came over to Bombay in a very significant time when there was a turn towards the society in the culture of India. The Communist Party of India has, then, challenged and hit the streets hollering “This independence is fake” and with the line of Ranadivey they carried out an agitation trying to drive it into an armed rebellion and as a result, they have been isolated from people. Many of the top workers of the Communist Party of India Cultural Front moved away from active politics and over to Bombay Film Industry to settle up there. With this background Bimal Roy made the film of “Do Bigha Jamin” out of Salil Chowdhury’s story. Also in the female-centered films ‘Sujata’ and ‘Bandini’, we can see the contemporary time and the social consciousness. Both the heroines –Sujata and Bandini, were as if the dreamt direction of Himanshu Roy which was the civil sequel of two untouchable girls. It was another story of love of untouchable girl and the acceptability in the society. And in Bandini a woman’s past story of her unjustly imprisoned life on a frame-up murder has been well screened. Bimal Roy mingled the heritage of Bengali renaissance with the Bollywood cinema along with the progressive mind and sharp social consciousness which was turned into the cinema on Bengali literature. He screened two novels, especially, Sarat Chandra’s ‘Devdas’ and ‘Parineeta’ with such a direction of maturity that they had flooded the whole of Hindi movie-spectators of India with great enjoyment. There was so much making and breaking of love in life, ups and downs, so many unexpected turns and adventures in life, so deeply touching hurts from emotion that they were completely new experiences to the spectators of the Hindi movies. Dilip Kumar became ‘Tragedy King’ of all time by acting in ‘Devdas’ which was directed by Bimal Roy. And Devdas Mukherjee, a drunkard landlord boy, dioana (unwelcome person) out of permanent Settlement in a far off village in the colonial era turned out to be a failed lover, who was the everlasting brand icon for Indian men.⁶



On the other hand, the famous movie maker Shyam Benegal considers that Bimal Roy's artful works in movies are the best. One after the other these movies in an overall view make the brand of Bimal Roy in Bollywood. That band never thinks of making of the movies of Bengali type. Rather, Bengali culture sort of brought about a counter rebellion or occupy the territory of Bollywood by making a silent sabotage. But these character makings are not limited in using Bengali-type Dhoti-panjabi shirts or Bengali proverbs in Hindi conversations. The thoughts of Bollywood territory stirred a renaissance for the Bengalis. It was as if Bimal Roy was the leader of that movement of his works-- a new Derozio—whose heritage does not just flow into his direct disciples like Hrishikesh Mukherjee or Basu Bhattacharya. Non-Benglis, like Guru Dutta or Guljar also became a part of the Bollywood's Bengaliness.

Those who came to Mumbai considering Bimal Roy as the poll star in their life, fought on with uncertainty, and succeeded in the ruthless tough competition in Bollywood, right, but Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Bhattacharya's job may have been even tougher somewhere than Bimal Roy's. Hrishi-Basu-Bimal-babus still were Bangali-babus of Kolkata till death, although, they had so long lived out there in Mumbai. But Hrishikesh Mukherjee, and the like, had to keep their own distinctness on while adapting with the strong local professional environment of Mumbai so perfectly. This distinctness was their distinctness of their cultural heritage; their identity even in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai was their racial distinctness.⁷

In the cinema industry Hrishikesh Mukherjee's career started as a cameraman, later on he stepped into movie direction. He was the assistant director for Bimal Roy's 'Jamin' and 'Devdas'. His first film under his independent direction was 'Musafir'. The movie performed by Dilipkumar, Kishorekumar, and Suchitra Sen did not achieve much of success in the box office, but still it proved that he did not come just to take up the familiar, safe and conventional path of Bollywood formula. In his first film Hrishikesh was able to make people understand well enough that the Classical structure of Bimal Roy's films was not his school. He will tell tales of the educated middle class people which were growing fast and spreading across the metro cities of independent India.⁸

Hrishikesh has searched through his life for humour and anguish, pleasure and pain, love and tears which were hidden behind the individual life. The movie 'Musafir' did not bring him the box office success, but 'Anadi' did. In his four-decade long life in the cinema industry, he had actors and actresses of a few generations, namely, from Raj Kapur to Anil Kapur of Bollywood to act in his movies. But none of them worked as a 'larger-than-life' glamour in his movies. They do not live in a great big house like a palace, nor do they ride eight or ten costly foreign cars, nor do they break into the villain's



stronghold vaulting three times in the air and smashing window panes. They live in a rented house or in a small flat. They go to office by bus or by train or by Auto. They go to enjoy a hockey match skipping off office behind the boss's back. They do not punish the villain by blowing him with the fist hard. But they can relieve the torment of *lucomia* with comedy and pleasure.⁹

The movies—Anand, Abhiman, Chupke Chupke, Meeli, Khub Surat, Jhooti, and so on were full of comedy, pleasure and pain,. There were not many films done out of Bengali literature, right, but those that were done by him had humors and sympathy through all the movies. It was the seraphic smiles, humor and various phases of relationship that enchanted the spectators of his movies over and over again were the real heritage of his Bengaliness.¹⁰

Another assistant of Bimal Roy was Basu Bhattacharya. He manufactured 'Tisri Kasam' based on a nice story out of Hindi literature by Fanishwarnath Renu. In this film there was the full impact of Bimal Roy's classic tradition. He made a typical story out of a wonderful love affair between a dancer girl of a mobile dance group and an innocent, simple, country coachman of a cart, who had a great love, passion and veiled sexuality. But the typical environment was absent in his next films.

In his famous trilogy 'Anubhab', 'Abiskar' and 'Grihaprobesh' having a hopeful premonition of the beginning of a new life after coming across the complexity of a civil life has been reflected. The 'Asta' released in 1997 had conjugal love and sexuality as its main topic. The movie 'Adventure' was another movie where an unfaithful middle-aged housewife's love affair with another man was the main subject matter of it. In 1960s, another migrant director--Basu Chatterjee, raised an agitation in the world of Hindi movies. The heritage in the Hindi cinema also goes to him too. 'Sara Akash' was his first film. He manufactured the films of Rajanigandh, Chhoto Si Baas, Chitchor, Khattamitta, Saokin based on Hrishikesh Mukherjee's Model. The middle class people's love, sorrow from love, playful teasing, laughter, weeping offered an opportunity of immense transient entertainment to the civil society. His production, especially, Chitchor offered a special degree to the middle-class-type romance.

After Himanshu Roy and Shashadhar Mukherjee there appeared another Bengali producer-director in the Bollywood world; he was Shakti Samanta. He had no less contribution in establishing Bengali-impact in Bollywood. The 'Bahoo' was the first production under his direction. His second picture 'Howrah Bridge' made in 1959 under the banner of 'Shakti Filmer's Studio' which was established in 1957 really produced an agitation in the box office. In the movie 'An Evening in Paris' directed and produced by him; a controversial and dashing scene of Sharmila Thakur in a bikini walking down the sea beach was screened. At the same time, Bengali literature and culture has been reflected deeply in his pictures, such as, Aradhana, Kati Patang, Amor Prem, etc. In Amor Prem Rajesh



wearing dhoti and Panjabi costumes charmed the spectators with sweet romantic conversation which had been written by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay.

His idea about Hindi-Bengali bi-language movie was a masterstroke in the cinema industry. He did his first experiment with the Tollygunge superstar—Uttamkumar in his film ‘Amanush’ in the year 1975. He applied the same format reversely with Amitava Bachchan in the film ‘Anusandhan’ in 1981. However, while making this sort of permutation-combination films inclined to the Box office, Shakti Film got gradually away from making films based on Bengali literature and it was appreciated too.

Those who led in establishing the Bengaliness in Bollywood for decades had suffered many a time from the pain of isolation in the deep of their heart. The nostalgia of Bengali literature, culture, Bengali songs, Bengali’s Rabindranath, Benglai costumes, thinking and liking used to work somewhere subtly in their mind. In Bimal Roy’s pictures many of the film researchers have felt the unuttered voice out of conversation that subtly indicated Bimal Roy’s anguish for his being uprooted from his Bengali roots. But the young directors working now in Bollywood do not suffer from this kind of sentiment from isolation.

For example, Dibaker Banerjee, who made a film ‘Khosla Ka Ghosla’ in which many people found the impact of Hrishikesh tradition. But Dibakar himself consciously refuses to carry the heritage of Hrishikesh in his works. He is a migrant in Delhi. Although, he is closely in touch with Kolkata, Bengali literature, and satyajit-Mrinal-Rittik’s films but still he does not want any part any part of his movies be overwhelmed with the so-called Bengaliness. He wants to make his films with the views of the new, global and sensitive Indian youths. Looking back to the Bengaliness is an unnecessary thing to him.

Presently there are a few more Bengali directors working in in Bollywood, though. But they are not as genius as Dibakar. They are Pradip Sarkar, Partha Ghosh, Sujoy

Ghosh and Gourab Pandey, They too, more or less convey the same thought as Dibakar does, and perhaps, they do it right. In Bollywood, the Bengali producer-director, song director experts have not the privileges of being united, nor do they have the quorum like those of them had in the 1940s-1950s-1960s-or1970s. That’s why the north-Indian, especially, the Hindu-Panjabi culture can be represented and spread out as the all-India culture in Bollywood pictures one after another. But the Bengali directors of Bollywood prefer to quit the ‘regional identity’ fast. However, the time is not ripe yet to evaluate the Bengali directors who have been directing films in Bollywood

Conclusion: In conclusion we may say that the Bengali directors settled in Bombay have taught how to protect the cultural characteristics of their own place and have built up the parallel trends of India right



along with Bombay film culture. The markets for these films have to be expanded to protect the parallel modes of timing India from the pressing impact of largely capitalized Bombay film culture. It is possible only if we can represent the regional movies across India, and if we can habituate ourselves to watch those movies.

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