



## Incomplete Testimonies : Tapan Sinha

*H*ansulibanker *upakatha* (1962) was among his most cherished creations to Tapan Sinha. Indeed among his best, the film begins the most productive phase in his career, followed by *Nirjan Saikate* (1963) and *Jatugriha* (1964). He remembers it fondly in all his written memoirs – the experience of shooting in the original location of Labhpur, exploring the region with the author of the novel Tarashankar Banerjee as his guide, his kinship with the place and its people during the long production camping. But probably the most remarkable incident in Labhpur was discovering one of the characters of the novel in living form. One day an old woman came to see Tarashankar. She touched his feet and said she had come to take a look at her ‘babu’. It took Sinha a while to realize it was a man clad in a sari. It was the real Nasubala, the transvestite in the novel. All the accounts that Sinha has left end with a deeply remorseful admission of his failure to portray the character. In his film, Nasubala became a woman<sup>1</sup>.

It indeed took away something from the content. But what does Sinha’s widely recorded sense of regret tell us about the specific loss that might have occurred to his work? Adapting a novel to the screen one is likely to change

things in any case. But the film in question draws its richness from the specific apprehension of reality, the living archive created by the novel. The paradoxical double register that we, spectators of the present, encounter in these adaptation films comes from the co-existence of an exploration of life in all its reality and a vindication of that reality rendered through novelistic discourse. This is the archival second life of the novel – it becomes more than representation at a lapse of time, lends reality to the world to which it once owed its origin. Taking away Nasubala's in-between identity is a denial of perspective, a betrayal of the realist ethic. But it is also the elimination of a specific human instance – a valuable datum in the storehouse Tarashankar's novel has become. On the count of faithfulness to the place and its people, Sinha has not erred much perhaps; but the more important issue could be faithfulness to the archive, to a telling of the story that one has nurtured for long, and that the director had carried with him to the place.

Also, in a film where Banamali (Kali Banerjee), Karali (Dilip Roy), Kalo Bou (Anubha Gupta) or Panu (Rabi Ghosh) come across as such convincing characters, where the rough lay of the land, the hamlets, forests and fallow tracts create an inclusive yet integrated topography, the piquant ambiguity of Nasubala could have added a powerful mark for recall. It could have completed, as it does in the novel, the circle of the community by underlining its ancient dynamism, its other morality. All this comes to mind as one feels that strange ambivalence towards Sinha's films in general. They are immersed in literature, their strength lying mostly in the novelistic portrayal of individuals; but they often falter on the same ground. The literary content gets refracted into statements; character tends to become identified with opinion. This tendency is strong in the late films. But even in the films of the early sixties, remarkable in their variety of subject matter and milieu, one occasionally sees an attempt to extract the character from the space, to make it compliant to ideas and formulations, and a concern with moral elevation that impedes the work of exploration. In what follows, I take a look at the way the world of Sinha's films get peopled, the way his characters take on reality.

The experience of contemporary Bengali cinema throws into sharp relief the kind of world that Sinha and his contemporaries created on the screen. That film after film in Tollygunge mainstream is shot in places like Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad is an indication of the fact that an evacuation of space had already set in since the late seventies. The often talked about 'crisis of the industry' was manifest in an emptying of the frame: not only did location begin to lose all definition, a typical human evacuation began with the decline

of co-actors. The malaise is evident in the middle-class cinema re-invented for the nineties. The signs are clear: a shrinking of space into the middle class interiors, the use of north Calcutta old houses as a highly predictable recourse to authenticity, and a remarkable shrinking of the co-actor gallery. The crisis is therefore institutional, not only of taste and skill, as we often think. A school of serious narrative cinema has never developed in a situation where the industry lacks a cadre of skilled technicians large enough to motivate innovation, and a crop of talented co-actors big enough to make the frame breathe. It would be impossible to repeat in the mid-eighties a *Goopy Gyne* or *Aranyer Dinratri* - films from barely a decade and a half earlier – not only because of lack of talent but also because the co-actors were gone; a certain institutional competence in production was more or less gone too.

That it was possible for Tapan Sinha to conceive films keeping actors rather than stars at the centre – from his debut *Ankush* (1954) through landmarks such as *Kabuliwala* (1957), *Hansulibanker Upakatha*, *Nirjan Saikate*, *Galpa Holeo Satyi* (1966), *Hate Bajare* (1967) and *Apanjan* (1968) – is itself a testimony to the remarkable resources of the institution. Who can even think of embarking on such a cinematic journey without Chhaya Devi, Chhabi Biswas, Kali Banerjee, Anubha Gupta, Nripati Chatterjee, Anil Chatterjee, Bhanu Bandyopadhyay, Jahar Roy, Rabi Ghosh, Renuka Roy, Lili Chakrabarty, Radhamohan Bhattacharjee, Bankim Ghosh, Prasad Mukhopadhyay or Jogesh Chattopadhyay – to name only a few of the actors from the films mentioned above? The deep debt Sinha felt he should acknowledge to literature and writers could not have a cinematic purchase without this repertory of highly gifted performers, some of whom often appeared for no more than a few minutes in most Tollygunge films. Sinha's cinematic vision underlines another aspect of the recent history of Bengali cinema. That a de-peopling of Bengali cinema became evident around the same time as the latter began to lose its connection with literature has more than coincidence to it. These processes owe their origins to what we are calling an institutional crisis.

The standard discussion on the relationship between literature and cinema often obscures the function of these forms as archives, and the peculiar debt cinema owes to literary fiction in creating 'reality effects' – perceptions of reality that circulate independently of the particular stories being told, strike roots into a common stratum of recognition. Sinha said in an interview that he disliked films with political analysis because they fail to capture the creative life of common people, the fact that no community can live purely in suffering, and not create art, not have fun<sup>2</sup>. The counter-example he cites is, again,

*Hasulibanker Upakatha*, the novel. The comment reveals a principle of approaching the reality of common lives – something with which every Indian filmmaker has to come to grips. It tells us how a certain tradition of fiction would oversee that work for Sinha. And it also points to the problem of Sinha's reception among the Bengali intelligentsia. Along with Tarun Majumdar and Rajen Tarafdar, he was for long counted among directors worth critical attention, but like them was not accorded a place in the pantheon created by Intellectual discourse on cinema. The reason was not only aesthetic. Sinha by and large failed to satisfy the political demands made on the serious film in the sixties and seventies. It would be instructive to investigate what that has to do with the kind of literature he drew upon, and, on the other hand, the vision of common humanity and the 'ethic of the individual' his films seek to present.

Whatever the limits of the political/art cinema criticism as we have known it, it is impossible not to notice the analytical compromises in Sinha's understanding of social conflicts. The wider perception of common lives to which he points in the same interview helped him in characterization and detailing, motivated the exploration of landscapes and communities. But what was passed over politically might stage a return in the shape of moral propositions. His reformism, for instance, is the weakness that should bother the viewer of the present most as Indian cinema becomes intoxicated with reform, with social problem-solving of every possible variety. It is not possible to ignore the fact that this new turn to moralism and reform in Indian cinema came to fill the vacuum left by the demise of political cinema in the 1980s. It is a typical sign of the post-ideological regime of consensus.

We should not equate the work of a director with an ideology. It would be useful, however, to see what connection exists between Sinha's relationship with literature, his humanist view of individual and society, and the political character of his cinema. I would like to believe his was a kind of cinema that has handed us valuable documents, bare imprints rather than finished discourses. But this is a quality that cinema takes on retrospectively. It would be useful to see what facilitates or impedes this archival life of cinema.

*Hasulibanker Upakatha* and *Nirajin Saikate* draw their power largely from novelistic conventions of representing the collective. Sinha's avowed project of privileging individual morality and action over the collective does not sustain itself well in such cases, to the benefit of the films. But the liberal humanist has had to make such concessions to realism in Indian literature and art. The greatest debt Sinha mentions is to Tagore, an all-embracing horizon, which for him extends beyond art to a larger realm of being. For our purposes,

however, it is important to look for the post-Tagore literary affinities that the director had. We know from his writings he felt close to authors like Banaphool, Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopdhyay and Subodh Ghosh, who were all important post-Tagore writers, and belonged to the 'non-left' literati (Banaphool, Tarashankar and Ghosh avowedly so). This distinction, a surprising one to make today, was not without aesthetic consequences in the phase of modern Bengali literature that began in the 1930s. The Progressive Writers' Association was formed in 1936, the first such initiative in India, characterized by a commitment to social realism and conversation with international movements in progressive arts. An anti-fascist alliance of left-liberal forces provided the new ideological premise for the social realism to flourish in the 1930s, adding its own rationale to the other, more conventional premise of nationalism. The realist energies developing in fiction from the 1920s, self-consciously marking a break with Tagore, were harnessed in the portrayal of labouring lives and criticism of social structures. The left-wing mobilization of the arts evolved into a major cultural movement with the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1943, which drew into its fold most of the major figures in modern poetry and performing arts. This impetus continued to be productive after independence. It is possible to show that it fed directly into the post-independence cinema. A major source of reformulation of the cinematic practices in the early 1950s, when Tapan Sinha and his colleagues were making their first films, was the influx of themes, styles and personnel from the progressive arts movement into the film industry.

It was hard to avoid being a 'progressive' at that moment. His commitment to the portrayal of common life, however, owed its inspiration mostly to a tradition within our modern literature that shared the social realism of the progressive writers' movement, but only to a limited extent – to the extent where social reform could be made a common cause, and the fundamental social hierarchies were left unquestioned. If one is to make shaper distinctions one could say the ideological roots of realism here lay in nationalism. Sinha was among those artists who shared with authors like Tarashankar and Banaphool a resistance to the politicization of representation. His writings speak of his distaste for leftist politics (probably most clearly in a newspaper feature he wrote in 2007 in the wake of the Nandigram firing). The authors with whom he formed a deep friendship in his own times were Gour Kishore Ghosh and Santosh Kumar Ghosh. One cannot but note that both of these authors were among those who marked their distance, albeit in different ways, from the left political currents of the 1960s and 70s, when the question of

committed art occupied the centre of debates once more. It is significant that Sinha chose to adapt Gour Kishore Ghosh's *Sagina Mahato*, the story of communist betrayal of a working class hero, in 1970.

What we refer to as the limits of representation, the critical point at which Sinha's canvas of lives encounters an internal barrier, became obvious precisely at the moment when a dissociation of the nationalist resources of politics became apparent, in the late 1960s. As the Indian National Congress began to face its first defeats and break-ups, as wide-scale disaffection produced a new breed of angry youth, and the Naxalbari movement took off, Sinha was one of the first to respond cinematically with a series of films featuring the youth. The first of these, *Apanjan* (1968), was soon to take on a cult status, and was to be followed by *Ekhoni* (1971) and *Raja* (1975). They gave rise to a generic cycle along with films like *Tin Bhubaner Pare* (1969), *Aranyer Dinratri* (1969), *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Ajker Nayak* (1972), *Jadubangsha* (1974), *Chhenra Tamsuk* (1974), *Chander Kachhakachi* (1976) and the Mrinal Sen films – *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (1973). The emergence of a collective protagonist - the unemployed, angry youth, roaming the urban landscape, temporarily displacing and probably permanently changing the nature of the individual male hero and the romantic couple, signaled a major shift in the practice of cinema across the art-popular divide.

The character galleries that Sinha creates in *Apanjan*, and in some ways more poignantly in *Ekhoni* and *Raja*, are memorable archives of the times. One has to remember that it is not necessarily through its stories and statements that cinema records an era. Faces, gestures, voices often leave deeper marks on memory because they become more than means to an end, more than vehicles of action and speech, causality and resolution. To the extent that they are pure impressions, unencumbered by the rationalizing narrative processes, they turn into lasting inscriptions of realities surrounding the text. As Sinha felt the urge to go beyond the standard models of representation that cinema shared with literature, i.e., the more or less hardened conventions of portraying the peasant, the middle-class or the remnants of aristocracy, he was already open to a politicization of the frame. One cannot but see the difference between the slightly condescending and sometimes naïve representation of common lives in *Hate Bajare* and the harsher, truer and relatively unstable images of *Apanjan*. Obviously disturbed by the explosion of youthful disenchantment, Sinha, like many others of his times, was trying to comprehend a transformation of the social fabric, the emergence of new faces and bodies on the stage of an unfolding history, the new texture that familiar streets and alleys of the city

took on. Politicization in his case had to be different from Mrinal Sen's cinema. The honest apprehension that he voiced, the curiousness that he showed towards the changing reality, and the pains he took to create bodies (think of the caricature of political leaders and the gangs of *Apanjan* and *Ekhoni*) as witnesses to a time, are signs of the politicization we have in mind. He had to find modifications and new utilities for the skills of portrayal and depiction that he had learned from the classics. Even the apparently non-political tale of a family heirloom harmonium changing hands in *Harmonium* (1976, Sinha's original story) shows a delightful shift in tone – inclusive, yet critical of social hierarchies.

But it was an incomplete engagement with the political reality itself that created an internal barrier to the politicization in question. The belief that all that was changing, failing, was individual morality, that the problem was one of restoring a lost order, showed the limits of the record he wanted to keep of the times so earnestly. It was the compulsion to pronounce judgements, rather than explore the troubling shifts, that pulled his cinema back from what it was poised to become – a receptacle of changing appearances. That crucial moment of transition in Indian society demanded an overstepping of the humanist conventions, a demand to which cinema could respond in significant ways. It was a certain humanism, used as shield against a fundamental critique of the order, that ended up in the sentimentality and naivete of scenes such as the one where, in *Apanjan*, the street gang sings a Tagore song in chorus. Soon after, Sinha would give up observation in favour of allegory, make statements on social problems, start teaching through his films. That was how many of his great contemporaries, including Satyajit Ray, ended their careers. And sadly, the legacy of their late art now flourishes everywhere in Indian cinema.

## References:

<sup>1</sup> Most of Tapan Sinha's autobiographical writings are collected in Sinha, *Chalachchitra Ajiban*, ed. Samik Bandyopadhyay, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Tapan Sinher sange tinti sakal', *Prasanga Chalachchitra*, Issue 15, March, 2004.