Let’s talk about films – again!

In 1947, a group of cinephiles started a film society that revolutionised Bengali cinema and brought it into the forefront of world cinema. The group of cinephiles in question? Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Dasgupta, Bansi Chandragupta, Harisadhan Dasgupta… The society was the Calcutta Film Society (CFS). The first film screened there was Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*.

Regular screenings of world cinema gave access to the best of cinema across the globe. There were regular adas on films and eminent people delivered lectures at the society, film-makers of the stature of Jean Renoir and John Huston. By now it is part of folklore the influence that Renoir had on the young Ray and how *Pather Panchali* was made a few years down the line.

There was a bulletin that was published where the contributors were the likes of Chidananda Dasgupta, Satyajit Ray and Harisadhan Dasgupta and those are some of the best pieces of film-writing to come out from Bengal. Ray’s *Our Films, Their Films* was written in that period of his life.

The Calcutta Film Society has dwindled ever since, more so in the last few decades. Concomitantly, the culture of discussing and debating films, or a film culture as started by the CFS, has faded into oblivion in the current Bengali film industry.

Now what do I mean by film culture? The term has a plural connotation. It is the exchange of views and analysis amongst a group of similarly-inclined cineastes. I don’t think that the views have to be similar but that diversity of viewpoints gives nourishment to the mind, which ultimately leads to a movement both amongst the film-makers and the audiences.

The popular media has a huge role to propagate this. Unfortunately, there is very little serious writing on cinema that appears in the popular press. To make matters worse, as my friend and one of the best film critics in the country, Pratim D. Gupta’s Facebook post a few months ago said: “If you are well-read you are derided as an aantel and truly good cinema is labelled as high-brow”.

This is the current culture. As the film-maker Suman Mukhopadhyay has to say: “There are indeed get-togethers even now, but those are mostly about a music release or premiere parties and then after-parties. There is no serious exchange on films anymore.”
The same sentiment was voiced by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. “Though foreign films are more readily available these days, we hardly ever meet as a group and discuss and argue about such films. I definitely miss that very much in Tollywood.”

This is an important point.

Previously, the need for such a film society was even more relevant since foreign films were not accessible to interested film lovers but now given the advent of the Internet and DVDs this is no more true. But Suman Mukhopadhyay insists that it is the “collective viewing experience” and post-screening discussion, which is most important for one’s development. Otherwise he claims that film-makers will be “breeding in isolation”, as is the state now.

Film-maker Goutam Ghose feels that the CFS was very active during the 80s when he started his career. “Not only foreign films, but regional films were shown and discussed. We got to see a lot of films by the likes of Kumar Shahani and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Nowadays film-makers are unaware of regional films from other parts of the country,” Ghose feels.

The sense of loss of the CFS was palpable in Ghose. “My work was seen and criticised by Manikda, Tapanda, Mrinalda… and interestingly we got to do the same for their films. Where do you see such a forum for today’s film-makers? Debates and arguments are so healthy.”

I personally believe that this leads to a lack of true appreciation of a film. One can watch a Kiarostami or a Dardenne Brothers film but unless one has a wholesome perspective, one just picks up the cosmetic elements without organically imbibing the true essence of a film. Hence there remains a tendency to ‘cut-and-paste’ from foreign films without knowing what exactly one needs to take in.

If one resides in a proper film culture then that process becomes more seamless and fruitful. It is very much like the culture a family sets up for the proper development of a child. The external influences will be there which help create a unique individual but the base is created within the family. The culture gives ultimate shape to an individual.

Similarly in films, the film culture is so important. I am not a person who relishes laments over a bygone era. I can boast of the fact that Bengali cinema now has talents as diverse as Anik Dutta, Srijit Mukherji, Q, Suman Mukhopadhyay or Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury — to name a few. One might have subjective differences of opinion about any individual director but if one looks at their films it is remarkable how different each one is — both in content and treatment.

Along with them there are the stalwarts such as Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen, Anjan Dutt and Rituparno Ghosh. There is immense gain from a fruitful conglomeration amongst these virtuosos. Apart from that, not only aspiring film-makers but film aficionados will also benefit if they get to know the viewpoints of say Goutam Ghose or Aparna Sen on contemporary film classics. Such master classes after screenings would be very helpful in nurturing an enlightened audience for quality films.

The Calcutta Film Society can provide exactly such a meeting place.

The good news is that sometime last year many of those above-mentioned names got together and decided to revive the CSF. It was decided that there would be two annual lectures — the Satyajit Ray Memorial Lecture and the Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture.

There would be regular screenings, addas and there was even talk of hosting a film festival. Somehow things didn’t shape up as intended.

But on Friday (September 5) the first proper event from the Calcutta Film Society is taking place. The Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture to be delivered by Ashok Mitra at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute at 4pm.

Hopefully this will mark the beginning of an active forum which will carry Bengali cinema to the pinnacle, not only in terms of the quality of films produced but in developing a proper film culture — again.

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