

I don't like artists being used as baits'

Over a cup of tea, Buddhadeb Dasgupta talks about his insightful poetry on celluloid

ANUJ KUMAR

"You come and see, sometimes, I cook three things at a time," exults Buddhadeb Dasgupta in the midst of a meandering conversation on food and films at The All American Diner in Habitat Centre where his latest film *Tope (The Bait)* was screened recently. He doesn't have a name for his recipes. He can't share his ingredients either. "I can make dishes from whatever is available in the kitchen. When a person comes, and you could read from his face that he is hungry, do you pick a bag and go shopping?" he asks. "I cook from whatever is available. It has to be simple, tasty, wholesome and yes, no masalas!" Very much like the poet's cinema, where multiple strands blend seamlessly to create magic realism on screen. "Yes, if your core is good, you don't need oil or spices to supplement it. All creative people appreciate good food and I am no exception. The form keeps changing but I don't believe in polish as it wears off in some time. I don't like such shine."

Over a cup of black tea and a plate of cookies, the maestro opens up on the layers that decorate his latest work. Based on Narayan Ganguly's short story about a zamindar who uses a young boy as a bait to shoot a tiger, Dasgupta says, "I read the story long time back but at that time I felt that it could not be adapted into a film. At least not my kind of film for it is real and gruesome, something my cinema is not. Of course, I deal with reality but it is presented as unreal or magical up to a point where the audience starts believing it to be real. That's why I was hesitant..." However, recent events helped Dasgupta change his mind.



Wholesome experience: Buddhadeb Dasgupta in conversation at The All American Diner in New Delhi's India Habitat Centre. ♦♦ SUDERSHAN

"Lately, I have been watching and experiencing the political scenario in India, particularly in Bengal, where the powerful people are using the less privileged as baits for their goals. It is a vicious cycle as some, including the creative artists, don't mind being used. It is a vicious cycle, and something that disturbs me."

Set in rural Bengal, here an eccentric feudal lord who is trying to salvage his relationship with his equally whimsy mistress, is requested by a documentary team to track down a tiger for

them. Meanwhile, we have a postman, who has become a soothsayer now and then there is a third strand where a nomad girl is trying to make ends meet by tight rope walking. All these narrative threads initially unfold separately, then cross to form the crux. As always, backed by poetic imagery and hallucinating background score, Dasgupta first keeps these strands separate but when they come together they leave you dazed.

Of text and context
From *Charachar and Lal*

Darja to Janala, magic realism has been a constant in his narratives. "It is not there in the text. I don't even expect it to be there in the text. When I start making a film, I don't follow the story. I follow the scenario that emerges out of it after all of contemplation." However, some feel his films are not accessible. "Accessibility is a relative term. There were poets who were not accessible before but have become accessible now. Same for great painters. What I am trying to say is that you cannot do any creative endeavour without

having a point behind it. I have a point to make. Here my images make a point about the politics of this country. However, I cannot start with thinking how many people it will reach."

Remembering his friends, G. Aravindan and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Dasgupta says none of them believed in the finality of the image. "You can't think just in terms of the present. We worked without thinking about what this film would achieve. That is how works last beyond one's lifetime. When I making a film, I am like the Arjun

of Mahabharat." It is when the film travels that he gives in to his other tastes.

Film festivals introduced him to different cuisines. "I always try the local food. It was a film festival in Tokyo that introduced me to Japanese food 40 years back. Till then I didn't know that such simple and tasty food existed. Similarly, my friend John Abraham introduced me to Malayali food when we toured extensively through Kerala. When you open yourself to different foods, you embrace different cuisines and that reflect in your

work."

Though it is the little girl Kajal who stands out as the named, postman, played by Chandan Roy Sanyal, enough space to indulge in his antics. "When I was young, I wanted to be a postman," reveals Dasgupta. "As my father was a government doctor, I travelled with him into the hinterland. At that time, a postman had a special place in society." As for Kajal, Dasgupta found her on the streets of Kolkata. "It was a task to make her understand the cinematic language. I wanted to present her during the Kolkata première but somehow we lost her. I don't know where she is now," says Gupta wistfully.

A young mind

Known for feeding his actors home-cooked food, Dasgupta says he expects discipline from his actors. "Not of what time do they take their meals but the discipline of soul." At times he becomes their father, at others their friend. No wonder, Tannishtha Chatterjee remembers his hospitality and Nawazuddin Siddiqui describes Dasgupta as the youngest filmmaker he has worked with. Their collaboration, *Amwar Ke Ajab Kissa*, is yet to be released. "I find Nawaz to one of the most powerful actors of his generation but one

can't say about his box office appeal in front of Bollywood masala." Dasgupta feels mediocrity has crept into both Bengali and Hindi cinemas. "It is not that my films haven't been commercially successful. Otherwise, I would not have been sitting here. But I have never allowed myself to be used. When I worked with Rappi Lahiri, I told him you can come come for three days during the shoot, and he kept his promise," grins Dasgupta.

Now, he is losing faith in the process of selection for Indian Panoramas and National Awards as well. "I didn't send my film this time." Some might feel that he is not taking the change in dispensation seriously. "I have never taken any political side but I don't like artists being used as baits." The good thing, he adds, is there has been a democratisation of film festivals. "We no longer depend on one government run film festival."

At 73, he might have lost some pace in his walk but his mind is still brimming with ideas. He is now working on a Bengali film which deals with a "mystical relationship between a lady who is almost getting old and a young person." Does it reflect his recent real experiences in life? Dasgupta smiles and taps his temple. "It is all here!"

