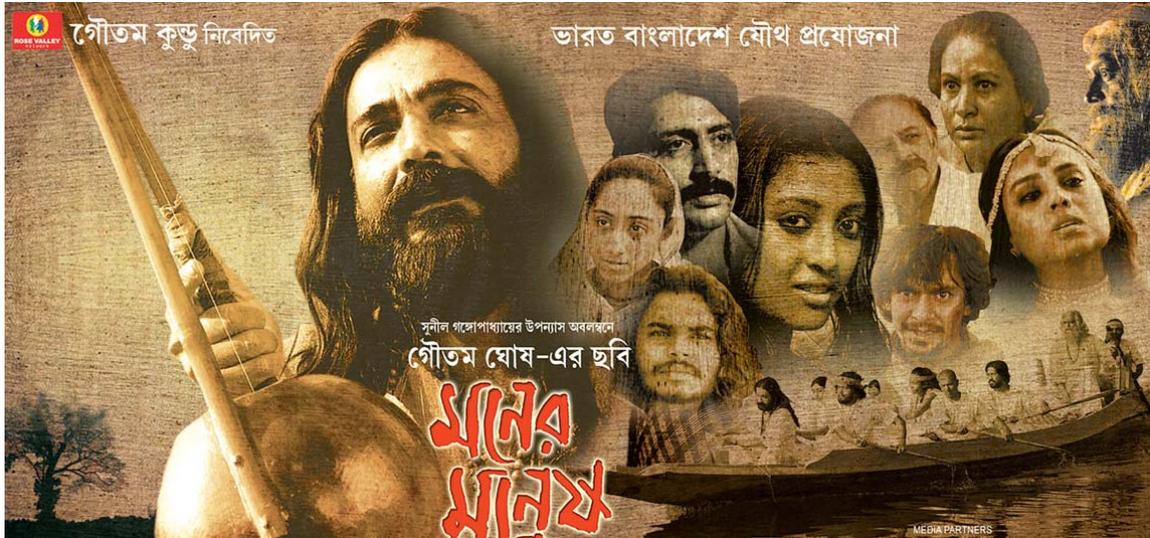


cinema



* A promotional still from *Moner Manush*, a film by Goutam Ghose on the life and times of Fakir Lalan Shah, a noted spiritual leader, poet and folk singer.

Bengali films adapt to changing tastes

New styles sans melodrama are making waves, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Few will dispute that one of India's best known icons is Satyajit Ray. That is of course if we discount the Taj Mahal. Although dead for almost two decades, most people in India and elsewhere will have little difficulty in either recalling Ray's name or his cinema. They may not have seen his entire repertoire of work, but certainly some of his films.

The man who virtually carried the name of Indian cinema in his cans to Cannes in 1956 to get his country thereafter firmly etched on the global cinema map, Ray was not a star in the sense we understand the term today. He would answer the telephone himself, open the door for you and he could be seen walking into a theatre in Kolkata to watch a movie — like you and me.

I remember knocking on his flat door to meet his son, Sandip, while I was in college. Later, as a journalist with *The Statesman*, I would go to Ray's place to meet the man himself. Often, he would answer the door.

It is this Ray that gave Bengal a magnificent kind of cinema — real and rooted, nuanced by the region's artistic culture and deeply moving literary tradition shaped and enriched by Ganesh Pyne, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to name just a few.

Along with Ray, we had filmmakers like Ritwick Ghatak and Mrinal Sen who made fantastically memorable cinema — intimately sensitive, highly original and artistically brilliant. Who can forget *Subarnarekha* or *Bhuvan Shome*? And who can stop thinking about Ray's *Charulata* or *Apu* trilogy?

With Ray and Ghatak dead and Sen too old and infirm to hold the megaphone, Bengali cinema, that gave me hours of sheer watching delight, found itself in a distressing vacuum.

Yes, we have had Buddhadeb Dasgupta, who is not only a director, but also a poet and novelist, Goutam

Ghose, Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh.

But somehow they have not been able to create the kind of magic that Ray-Ghatak-Sen did. While Dasgupta's early movies, such as *Bagh Bahadur*, *Charachar* and *Tahder Katha*, impressed critics and the masses, his later efforts lacked that something to make memories. The other helmers have elated us with great works, but also disappointed us with poor offerings — a feature hardly ever seen in Ray or Ghatak.

Bengali cinema went into a tailspin, and in its desperation to draw audiences into the halls, began to shamelessly copy Bollywood. In a culture permeated by Rabindra Sangeet, Baul and fine artistry that were sober, sedate and deep, Bollywoodish melodramatic spectacle hardly jelled with the Bengalis. The films there began to totter, and a time came when production fell alarmingly and theatres had to draw their curtains forever. In 2001, trade analysts say only two Bengali movies were produced.

It is in a scenario such as this that the resurgence of Bengali cinema in recent years is being seen as renaissance. Last year, 96 films were made in the language. Big corporates are now playing there and they include Reliance Entertainment, Mukta Arts and Saregama among others. Goutam Ghose's *Moner Manush* on the life and times of

Fakir Lalan Shah, a noted spiritual leader, poet and folk singer, and Srijit Mukhopadhyay's *Autograph* on a director's yearning to remake Ray's *Nayak* ran for 100 days each. Quite a record by the standards of any region.

One would be lucky if Tamil works, for instance, ran beyond two or three weeks.

"I feel the golden period of Bengali movies has returned. The audiences are back in the theatres again. Directors have begun thinking differently and producers are putting in money again," says Aniruddha Roychowdhury, who has won four national awards, including one for best film, *Antaheen*, in 2009 that examines a man-woman relationship which develops through Internet chatting. "We are seeing a spate of serious, thought-provoking movies that have begun to appeal to the common man," Roychowdhury adds.

New young directors are stepping in, and they are transforming Bengali cinema stylistically. It is no longer linear, verbose and melodramatic. It is smart and captivating. Aniket Chattopadhyay's *Bye Bye Bangkok* explores with refreshing flair how a few couples get inspired by the city's easy charm to bite the forbidden fruit. They toy with extramarital affairs in what seems like a light, breezy and non-conformist look at this age-old issue.

With the momentum now set, it is predicted that over 100 Bengali films will be made this year. Revenue — including that from television rights, sale of DVDs and overseas distribution — is already up by 200%, and is expected to rise further. Some movies have already gone to the bank laughing: *Dui Prithibi*, *Josh* and *Amanush* grossed Rs65mn, Rs50mn and Rs40mn respectively. These are no mean earnings for regional fare. This year, Aparna Sen's *Ihi Mrinalini* and Rituparno Ghosh's *Memories in March* have been doing splendidly well.

Now with the new Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, promising to build a film city in Kolkata, the infrastructure for cinema will get a tremendous boost.

What is more, talks are now to take Bengali cinema to neighbouring Bangladesh. But it is also imperative that Bengali movies are distributed in other Indian states with a sizeable Bengali diaspora.

But, that apart, why not really widen the market by subtitling Bengali films in English?

India's multiplex audiences are a widely informed lot, keen on exploring newer movies, especially those from other states.

Bengalis have never been great migrators, but then, in the current pan-Indian, pan-global mood, they better push their films beyond the Padma and the Hooghly. Otherwise, an interesting cinema will remain largely unseen.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)



* *Bye Bye Bangkok*: Aniket Chattopadhyay's witty film examines an age-old issue with a fresh flair.