
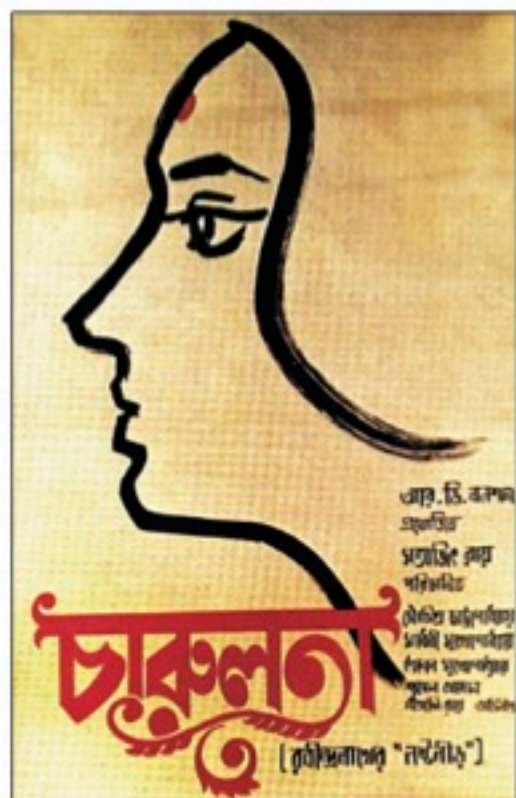


The one without second is emptiness,  the other one makes it true.

Narratives which make pictures move

Auteurs of Bengali cinema have adapted Tagore's stories to some of the most memorable films ever made, even if that meant going beyond the written text, writes Sayandeb Chowdhury



While filming *Inner Eye*, his bio-docu on the blind artist Binodbehari Mukhopadhyay, Satyajit Ray is said to have asked his former teacher at Kalabhavan and the man he deeply

admired for his amazing murals, what is that drives him to create works of such beauty without being able to know what they looked like? Binodbehari is reported to have replied, "Empathy, Satyajit, empathy!"

In a discussion about the films on the works of Tagore, this incident merits mention because of two reasons. Apart from the shared connection of Santiniketan, Tagore and Ray were men of extraordinary empathy for their subjects, exactly that empathy that a blind muralist has for his art. And those men of the marquee who have adapted Tagore to the screen have somehow managed to hold on to this sublime disposition. Doubtlessly Ray and Tapan Sinha are the most remarkable of them all but there have been a few other films where the maker has shown an occasional burst of the sublime.

Consider Tapan Sinha, who has made some of the most memorable adaptations of Tagore on screen. In one of his writings, Sinha wrote, "I do not know if *Atithi* is my best film. But I enjoyed making every bit of it. *Atithi* is about an

adolescent boy Tarapada whose wanderlust makes it impossible for him to remain bound by the ties of family, fraternity and fortune. He is an eternal guest — an itinerant, youthful minstrel. And Tarapada is none other than Tagore. Tagore was a mind-wanderer, and in his many works he has pined for being the child of pure nature, the wanderer, even in the midst of the fortuity he was born into and bred in."

Childhood, wanderlust, and a hummingbird imagination, not in that order always, warmed the most of Bengali auteur Tapan Sinha's heart and art. *Atithi* (The Wanderer, 1965), his better-known *Kabuliwala* (1957, pictured above) and under-rated *Khudito Pashan* (The Hungry Ghost, 1960) most productively links his lifelong preoccupations within the framework of a single narrative. They also most poignantly engage with the idea of release and return, the nucleus of Sinha's cinema. All of the above, including the stories of the three films, he happily took on loan from the man he considered his God. But Tagore was not a figure of distant reverence for Sinha, much as he might have belonged to a generation of stiff upper-lip Tagore apparatchiks — the bhadrolok coterie that sought to control public reception of Tagore. Sinha rather let his restive, imagination run free on Tagore terrain, which in turn lend an intuitive lightness of touch to his narratives. This is true as much for his piquant



adaptations of Tagore as much for the other films of his most remarkable repertoire. If Ray's Tagore, as we shall see, was a site for mature meditations on the impossibility of closure in the theatre of life, Sinha's Tagore was mostly the elderly endearing man next door who always has his door open for discussion and in his own, playful way consoles others on life's many meanings.

Ritwik Ghatak was perhaps the man most gifted with that intractable but palpable empathy that we have talked about except that Ghatak considered Tagore too much of an universalist, too nuanced for his taste. Ghatak, baptised under the hallowed portals of socialist movements in politics and culture, could never consciously make an effort to find umbrage under Tagore though in his writings and in thought, Ghatak

was never away from him, often grudgingly accepting the impossibility of turning away from Tagore.

In fact, in Ghatak, who like Ray, was bred under the Tagore tree, critic Chidananda Dasgupta sees a rare marriage of rationalist, Marxist cultural ethic and indigenous, folksy symbolism, a marriage that Ghatak was deeply and embarrassingly aware of but had never consciously acknowledged. That perhaps is why he never adapted a Tagore story. But Ghatak is to be credited for the finest uses of Tagore's songs in his films. Nobody could before or since capture in spirit and essence the melancholia, longing and the search for the sublime in Tagore's songs, as did Ghatak in his films (see page 4).

For Ray, Tagore was that huge cultural artifact, a Leviathan who could be referenced for life and for death as much for the imminent and the immanent. Ray had a shared Brahmo legacy with Tagore, to which Dasgupta blamed Ray's refusal to naturally sexualise women. That may be the case, but it is because of Tagore specially that Ray could invest so much of

humanism in his own adaptations. *Charulata*, Ray's most favourite film and perhaps one of the greatest works of world cinema display a meditative quietude, a genuine appraisal for the platonic and a genteel pause pregnant with the pain of lost love.

His *Postmaster*, part of the portmanteau film *Tin Kanya*, based on three stories by Tagore, could touch the rawest of chords of a lonely man's singular pursuit of finding meaning in a life full of banalities. Even *Monihara* and *Samapti* could do justice to Tagore's best gift as an effortless chronicler of life's amazing riches, that often lay claim to that of the dead.

Chore Baire (Home and the World) was an average film by Ray's standards because in ways unlike of him, he could not find means to make complete meaning of Tagore's ambivalence towards the Nationalists.

Some of the other notable adaptations include *Malancha* and *Strir Potro* by the very talented Purnendu Patri, *Agradoot's Khokababur Prottyaborton* with Uttam Kumar in the lead, *Chaturanga* by Suman Mukhopadhyaya, Kumar Sahani's *Char Adhaya* and the much hyped *Chokher Bali* by Rituparno Ghosh.

The search for the cinematic idiom for adapting and re-adapting Tagore continues, but it is unlikely that the heights already scaled by the Rays and the Sinhas will ever be peaked.

It's poetry, the poetry of the platter

An elaborate spread, that saw a perfect co-habitation of different cuisines brought back from their innumerable travels abroad was common in the Tagore household, writes Samabrita Sen



"Paathorer thala, charidikey shajano baati ebong haath pankha", (Rice served in limestone crockery, served with small bowls of lentils and curries, accompanied by the hand fan) — that is what the Jorasanko dining scene used to be. Jorasanko kitchen is an extremely important part of

the quintessential Bengali cuisine, or rather a part of the Bengali obsession with food.

The experimentation with food, international influences, Indo-western fusion and innovative names are unique features of the food that originated within the Tagore household. Tagore is known to be a diehard foodie and his love for food is primarily the reason behind the evolution of Bengali cuisine inside the premises of the Jorasanko kitchen. And a quick survey of the city's food scene will reveal how, often unknown to us, we enjoy the gastronomic legacy of this unique Renaissance family.

Chef Kaushik Saha of Saffron at The Park says that *Thakurbari ranna* becomes unique from the regular Bengali cuisine due to its treatment and process. It has a slender difference from the normal Bengali course. "It is entirely the style of cooking and not the ingredients. For example, a common Bengali favourite like fish fry was marinated in a different way by the Tagores, which completely changed the usual taste of the dish." Avik Mitra, the manager of Café Thé, said "The variety and uniqueness of this kind of food doesn't only limit itself to Bengali cuisine. Tagore liked Anglo Indian food a lot. So to satisfy his love for Anglo Indian food, the Bengali dishes were mixed with different kinds of herbs."

Anglo Indian influence is hence a core part of the Tagore kitchen. The inclusion of dishes like Chicken Tetrazzini served with spaghetti and the concept of the cutlets are outputs of his international trips. Famous dishes like the Chicken or Paneer panthras — a kind of spring roll — are also Tagore's contribution to the



Bengali cuisine. The Western influence is also evident in items like bread pudding and steam *deem* (egg), a kind of fusion stew that evolved in the Tagore household as each member, on returning from various trips abroad, would suggest the addition of yet another ingredient. The Tagore household had love for unique concoctions like musk melon and dill and water melon and ginger served as a regular drink in the Thakurbari. Tagore also loved a bitter drink of crushed neem leaves mixed with a dash of honey to make it palatable. He had once heard of this drink's health benefits and incorporated it into his daily diet.

The regular spread at the Tagore household was elaborate, the *daal* was accompanied with four to five fries and fish being one of them. The rice was served with *gawa* ghee, and some of Tagore's favourites were *Aam Kasundir Chingri Maach* and *Daak Bangla Chingri*. There was a huge influence of kulfis in the desserts, and the evergreen Bengali favourite *mishthi doi* was a regular feature. They experimented with different flavours of kulfis, "it was more of a trial and error method", said Chef Saha. *Sondesh* was also a regular dessert in the Tagore household as it was a speciality of the poet's wife Mrinalini Devi; who is said to

have been the importer of the English bread pudding to the household.

Purnima Thakur's book *Thakurbari Ranna* tells us that experimental cooking was zealously encouraged at the Thakurbari. Indira Devi Choudhurani, the favorite niece of Rabindranath Tagore, never cooked on a regular basis. But whenever she liked a dish, she would make it a point to collect the detailed recipe from the cook and note it down in her diary. So that it could be tried out in the Tagore kitchen. A new bride in the Tagore household was asked about her culinary skills. The women also came back with new ideas and inputs whenever they went on a trip abroad. Whenever he attended a dinner or lunch abroad he brought back the menu cards. Tagore had a love for offbeat *kebabs*, and whenever he tried a new kind of *kebab*, they started making an appearance at the family dining table. *Surti Meetha Kebab*, *Hindusthani Turki Kebab* and *Chicken Kebab Nosi* are a few of his favourites which were served at Café Thé. Lamb and chicken roasted with crumbs, prawn cutlets, prawn and ham patties, macaroni paneer, chicken and mutton pies were some of the other items that Tagore imported from elsewhere. He was fond of *kacha ilish er jhol*, *chitol mach aar chalta diye muger daal*, *narkel-chingri* and *daar maach*. (Ginger fish). Chef Sushanto Sengupta of 6 Ballygunge

Place says that Tagore was a great visionary when it came to food as well. "Thakurbari cuisine revolutionised Bengali cuisine. I got to know a lot about Thakurbari Ranna from a book written by Pragya Sundari Devi, who used to collect recipes and publish it in their newsletters, which was later turned into a two volume book. What surprised me the most about this book was the first recipe — tortoise soup made in a continental style. A soup like this back then was truly revolutionary."

Prawn, says Sengupta, was a favourite in the Tagore household, their east-west fusion created a dish called *Chingri Maacher Chinee Kebab*, which was Bengal's lip-smacking answer to the delicious Prawn Thermadore. Another prawn delicacy was *Chingri Maacher Salmi*, a dish with beaten prawns stuffed with mustard, poppy seeds etc.

The usage of poppy seeds, mustard and bread crumbs was introduced by the Tagores. Grilling was not a Bengali cooking style, the Tagores introduced it. *Badam bata maach bhaja* was a dish with abundant use of almond; it was a grilled fish dish.

In 1912, in a now-famous sit-in-dinner hosted by The Indian Society in London to felicitate the

Recipes from Purnima Thakur's Thakurbari Ranna

Fish Stir-fry (Maach Chachchhari): Fry the fish. You'll need potatoes and onions. Heat oil to fry onions and then add the potatoes. When potatoes turn brown, add turmeric and red chili paste. Add salt and green chili. You may add tomatoes if you'd like. After frying the spices, add water and cover. Add fish to the boiling sauce. Cook till the gravy thickens.

Mourala Fish (Mourala Maacher Ambal): Fry the fish in oil, then add turmeric and green tamarind puree. Add sugar and salt to taste and cook till the sauce thickens.

Egg Chao Chao: Get 4Eggs, 6 Onions; 4 whole dry red chili; 4 Garlic cloves; A pinch of turmeric, little cumin seeds (jeera), salt and clarified butter (ghee). Make a paste of red chilies, garlic, turmeric, and cumin. Slice the onions into fine shred. Heat ghee and fry the onions. Add the spice paste and fry well. Break the eggs and mix it into spices. Cook in low heat. When the egg turn reddish, add water and salt. Let the water dry off and serve.

Keema Dahi Vada (Fried meat balls in yogurt): Mix minced goat, meat boiled potatoes, minced green chilies, onions, and salt. Add eggs and garam masala and make dough. Make small balls and fry. Beat yogurt with a pinch of salt. Add roasted red chili and cumin powder to the yogurt and blend. Add the fried meat balls to the yogurt. Garnish with good quality ghee.

poet after the release of *Gitanjali* had the eye-popping spread of green vegetable soup, cream of tomato soup, salmon in Hollandaise sauce and cucumbers, pre-salted lamb with green vegetables, roast chicken, French fries, green salad and ice-cream served at the famous Crocadero. And Tagore is said to have savoured every bit of it.

Saat korai bhaja (seven types of slow-roasted lentils), *Lau paata bhaja* (Lauki leaves deep-

Thakurbari pathar mango

- No. Of Portions: 4
- Baby Mutton Cut 600gm
- Potato(Peeled) 200gm
- Sliced Onion 500 Gm
- Tomatoe Puree 300 MI
- Ginger Garlic Paste 50 MI
- Salt 10 Gm
- Jira Pwd 10 Gm
- Mustard Oil 150 MI
- Tejpatta 05 Gm
- Small Cardamon 05 Gm
- Dalchini 03 Gm
- Clove 05 Gm
- Slit Gr Chilli 05 Gm
- Red Chilli Pwd 10 Gm
- Kash Chilli Pwd 15 Gm
- Haldi Pwd 05 Gm
- Salt To Taste

- Heat mustard oil in a kadai
- Add tej patta, elaichi, dalchini, clove for tempering
- Sauté onions till golden brown
- Add ginger and garlic paste, sauté for few mins, add haldi powder, red chilli powder, Kashmiri chilli powder, jira powder, sauté till raw flavour goes and masala is dry
- Add mutton To the masala, stir to *bhunao* till water dries And oil oozes
- Add some more water and cover with a lid and simmer till mutton is semi soft
- Add semi boiled potatoes, deep fried in oil puree, add slit chilli
- Cook till gravy is semi thick, add tomatoes
- Sprinkle garam masala after putting the dish in a bowl, and a slit green chilli on top before serving

Courtesy: Saffron, The Park Hotel



fried in batter), *Aam ichorer torkari* (Curry of raw mangoes and jackfruit), followed by typical Bengali fish and meat dishes like *dudh maach* (fish cooked in milk) and *mangshor jhol* (meat in gravy) are few of the other family specialities. Little Robi loved eating cold rice with prawns in the summer afternoons.

At the Thakurbari it wasn't only about the food, but a wholesome dining experience. The Tagores had adopted an East-West fusion, making their table and chairs higher than the traditional *chowki-piri* but lower than the conventional dining table and chairs, so that one could either eat sitting cross-legged or in the western way. The crockery was fine porcelain.

Evidently, epicurean profligacy was as much a part of the Tagore's legacy as was their literary, artistic and cultural proficiency.

Clockwise from top centre: A doodle by Tagore shows fish and a bowl; A typical luncheon at the Tagore household, complete with the usual camaderie, crockery and the unmissable handfan

