

Reliving the Passion of 1971: A Review of Ekatorrer Jishu

by Niaz Zaman

changes his mind.

Next day the villagers leave. With them apparently many of the villagers have left as well, because when Desmond rings the bell for service, there are only a handful of faithful compared to the joyous congregation of earlier days. This time the padre narrates Peter's rejection of Christ. He tells the sparse, grim-faced congregation how Jesus said to Peter, his faithful disciple, that Peter would deny Jesus three times that same night before the cock crew. Peter, surprised, tells Jesus that he will die before he denies Christ. But three, Peter does reject Christ. The third time, hearing the cock crew, he



realizes what he has done and weeps bitterly. This is the last sermon that the padre will preach, because he too departs. He has heard tales of atrocities committed on missions, and it is not safe for him or for the holy sisters to stay. Desmond is alone but for a tiny wail left behind by the flood of refugees. Dumb and terrified, the girl seems hardly alive, but then she slowly starts responding to Desmond's warmth. One tragic day, however, Desmond returns to find the little girl dead, killed by the same brute forces that have mowed down a crowd of villagers. Desmond is not alone for

very long, however. There are others who need shelter: the young freedom fighters. Desmond is only too happy to make tea for them, give them a meal before they go off on a mission. Tragedy strikes once again. The young freedom fighters are apprehended by Pakistani soldiers. They attempt to hide in the church, but are discovered and brought out one by one. Watching from the barred window of his hut, Desmond sees the young men being dragged out. Do you know them, the soldiers ask. And



Desmond, like Peter, denies the young men. Outside the church is a large crucifix. Seeing the crucifix, the leader of the troop orders a similar punishment for the freedom fighters. Nailed to the cross, the young men re-enact the passion of Christ. Too impatient to let the men die a slow death on the cross, the soldiers fire at them — replicating the lance wound given Christ by the Roman soldier. After the soldiers leave, Desmond emerges from his hut. Kneeling before the bodies of the crucified freedom fighters, he weeps at his denial of the young martyrs. Depressed and unhappy,

Desmond still continues to make crucifixes, only now the crucifixes too have shrunk in size. Suddenly, from outside, there is a triumphant cry. Through his window Desmond sees another band of freedom fighters. These freedom fighters, he knows, will not die. Shaahriar Kabir's short story, brilliantly transformed into a screen play by Selim Al Deen, is ably directed by Nasiruddin Yusuf. Using the analogy of Peter's rejection of Christ and Christ's passion, and by leaving out everything extraneous to this analogy, *Ekatorrer Jishu* transforms history into cinematic art. Not distorting history, but refusing to be tempted into making a documentary, Nasiruddin Yusuf has succeeded in capturing the trauma of 1971 and the spirit that led to the birth of a new nation.

In his introduction to the English translation of Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, Govind Nihalani explains how historical events affect the creative artist or writer. A traumatic historic event usually finds the artistic/literary response twice. Once, during the event or

immediately following it and again after a lapse of time, when the event has found its corner in the collective memory of the generation that has witnessed it. The initial response tends to be emotionally intense and personal in character, even melodramatic. On the other hand, when the event is reflected upon with emotional detachment and objectivity, a clearer pattern of the various forces that shaped it is likely to emerge. Nihalani was writing about the impact of Partition on creative writers, but his comments are equally true with reference to the Bangladesh War of Liberation and the events of 1971.



movie had led me to believe that the movie would "distort history" by presenting a partisan view of it. When I saw the movie, I wondered what it was that had made it so objectionable. Was it the full-throated cry of "Joy Bangla Joy Bangabandhu" raised by a band of freedom-fighters? Was it the ruthless mowing down of unarmed people by a well-equipped army? But these are not distortions. Or was it because the movie leaves out many things? That it does not show the first declarer of inde-



pendence? That there is no reference to 30 lakh people being killed? That there are no images of mutilated, tortured bodies? No images of violated women being rescued from bunkers? No incidents of bearded men plotting the murder of "heretics" and "renegades"? No incidents of the formation of Peace Committees? There are many things that the movie leaves out — in the interest of artistic and thematic unity. *Ekatorrer Jishu* is not purporting to be history, carefully documenting all the atrocities that took place. True, the failure of a Christian padre to stand by his flock could be misconstrued by

character he portrays. The stoop of his shoulders, the slight hint of bandy legs and splayed feet as he walks, the mannerism of moving his mouth — Faridi is always and completely in character. The little wail is feelingly portrayed by Sharmilee Gomes. If in the part of the padre, Pijush is slightly wooden, his priestly gait and his resonant voice more than make up for what his acting lacks.

The use of music, ranging from Amar Ekushey tunes to the songs of 1971, reinforces the visual impact of the movie, recalling not just the terror and the trauma of 1971, but also the indomitable spirit that had led an unarmed nation to dare the might of a well-equipped army.

If there are any false moments in the movie, they are when, without any preparation for the volte-face, the priest informs Desmond of atrocities committed by the Pakistan army. Even more jarring than this perhaps is the portrayal of the soldier who decides to nail the freedom fighters to wooden crosses. All the other scenes of a marauding army are executed very skillfully. The faces of the soldiers are always shaded so that on never sees their faces. The soldiers thus become the forces of evil, of terror in the night. In the crucifixion scene, however, the soldiers are shown full-face, and the faces are typically, unmistakably Bengali. The full impact of this scene is, therefore, lost, and perhaps even distorted. A careful casting would have easily avoided this jarring note.

As one of the audience, fortunate to have seen *Ekatorrer Jishu* on its first "public" screening, I think all those connected with the film. I would like to think that every Bangladeshi will see the movie. It is a must for those who lived through 1971 as well as for those who were not there. Though much has been omitted, as it must be in any artistic portrayal of a historical event, there is more than enough in the movie to convey the spirit that inspired and sustained Bangladeshis through the dark nights of 1971.

orthodox Brahmin elements who were fiercely opposed to the Kannada films of the seventies and eighties. Kasaravalli was not the only director who needed to be blacklisted, one openly partisan spokesman said.

To return to the beginning, what the Karnataka Brahmin Mahasabha did by its ill-advised tirade against films like *Samskara* or *Ghatashradha* was to set the clock back in matters of popular understanding of past and present history; of conditions and situations that moulded that history. Besides, it is not as if these films are mindlessly critical of the individual/collective Brahmin persona. In many of them there is — as there must be if they are not to be one dimensional and hence removed from reality — at least one 'minority' Brahmin character who does not conform to the set pattern of community conduct, thereby quite rightly enabling the viewer to judge a situation in its totality. Think of Phaniyamma or the young girl she encourages to re-marry in defiance of fierce orthodox opposition; or the fearless Brahmin who proves his point in *Grahana*, even at the cost of his life; and the role of the new Kannada directors starts to shine. No amount of canards or disinformation spread by vested interests can take away from New Kannada Cinema its gifts of courage and commitment combined with the ability to tell a story with simplicity and strength.

In conclusion, the action of the Mahasabha as indeed that of the Karnataka Film Chamber was, in truth, only a reaction. The helpless, pathetic reaction of a once-powerful community — powerful in money, learning and social eminence — but not in lasting human resources. Each of these slipped out of its grasp due to diverse reasons, most of which were of the community's own making. The reaction betrayed the community's refusal or inability to counter the changing times with a straight face. Taking recourse to fundamentalism, as practised by other beleaguered communities, cannot compensate for the absence of a sense of vision. New Kannada Cinema, in a sense, eloquently emphasizes these facts. It is about time, especially since the platinum jubilee of Kannada cinema is being observed with fanfare in Karnataka, that the riches created in the seventies and the eighties are unearthed from the debris of indifference and neglect, and exhibited afresh for popular and critical re-examination. That legacy of high art wedded with grace to a quiet but stout ideology of protest cannot be allowed to gather dust and droppings as the industry and its friends in the government, the bureaucracy and the media go about singing paeans to thrillers and mythologicals and high-pitched social dramas that are the staple of present-day Kannada cinema.

Reptiles Strike Back

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repression of the dream state in reptiles. They were, as Aschylus described, "dreaming", in their waking state. I wonder, whether the under developed left hemisphere in "Romulus" and its absence in the "wolf mother", that repressed the dream state, fused the two different species in a mother-child bond! Otherwise, they should have feared each other.



Man ponders himself. By Vasalius, the founder of modern anatomy.

R-complex and in the nighttime stirring of the dream dragons, we may, each of us, be replaying the hundred million year old warfare between the reptiles and the mammals. Only the daytime's vampiric hunt have been reversed. Our inaccessible dreams that more often turn into nightmares, and in turn, awake us to feel that it's just a dream, perhaps caused from the memories of the haunted past of our ancestors stamped in the present state of our mind. R-complex strikes back in the

dreams of humans: the dragons can be heard, hissing and rasping, and the dinosaurs thunder still.

It is of no exaggeration to sketch the "killers on the rampage" as the hunting dragons exhibiting a chilling fixity of purpose; of stalking and slashing the prey which bleeds to death, while the hissing forked tongue flicks over the blood. If we gave full rein to the reptilian aspects of our nature, we would obviously have a low survival potential. But the function of R-complex cannot be entirely avoided for long. Perhaps the dream state permits, in our fantasy and its reality, the R-complex to function regularly, as if it were still in control!

Human beings clearly exhibit enough reptilian behavior even in their conscious state of mind: the haunted eyes of the worldwide refugees; the universal blood-baths of the civil-war victims; the racist-sextist-religious inferno; the everlasting hunger for material satisfaction; and the commercial success of crime-violence-sex based movies, certainly count as the ready evidence of the beast-like aspects of human nature. The facts of Bible revealed that at the beginning of the civilization there was fratricide. Indeed, the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

The "Tales of Dim Eden" revealed serpent's trickery over Adam and Eve — that offers the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Does the metaphor of the serpent refer to the use of the aggressive and ritualistic reptilian component of our brain in the further evolution of the neocortex — the abstract and moral neocortical functions? Nevertheless, a sad-eyed sage of human tragedy, Albert Einstein, forewarned and thereby closed the cycle of evolution, thermodynamics, nuclear fusion, the prides of modern civilization in a single sentence: "Man grows cold faster than the planet he inhabits." One way or another, reptiles strike back!

WHEN one rightly goes into raptures speaking of contemporary Malayalam cinema, one often tends to overlook the fact that in the seventies and a part of the eighties, the films emerging from neighbouring Karnataka made viewers throughout the country sit up in disturbed awe. One Kannada film after another reflected with skill and a suppressed anger the stronghold of the Brahmin community and the exploitation of the "lesser" communities in the name of religion. On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Kannada cinema, one cannot but feel sad at the present rot which has set into what was till the other day one of the most vibrant and relevant regional cinemas in the country.

While Kannada cinema is certainly not without a past, clarity of thought, conviction in choice of subject and control over varying styles of expression came to it rather late in the day. In fact, it was not till the likes of Pattabhira Reddy, Girish Kasaravalli, Girish Karnad, BV Karanth, MS Sathyu, T S Nagabharana, Chandrashekhar Kambur, Prema Karanth and others made their appearance that Kannada cinema came into its own.

Many of the films by these directors dwelt on individual traumas and tragedies as indeed the occasional triumph at high personal cost against the backdrop of economic deprivation and social injustice frequently engineered by the priestly upper class in connivance with the landed gentry.

If *Samskara* (1970), based on a story by the reputed UR Ananthamurthy and directed by Pattabhira Reddy, and *Ghatashradha* (1977) by Girish Kasaravalli, are most enthusiastically spoken of in the context of the New Kannada Cinema of the seventies and the eighties, it is simply because they are among the best-made films of the period which helped in placing Kannada cinema among the leading regional cinemas of the land. Contrary to the fulminations of the Karnataka Brahmin Mahasabha all through 1990 that these two films had made fund of the Brahmin community in the name of fighting social evils, they were in fact made with the best of intentions, combining thematic thrust with artistic excellence in a vigorous neo-realist style of latter-day vintage.

KANNADA CINEMA Mirroring A Feudal Order

by Vidyarthi Chatterjee

Exclusive to The Daily Star

protest march to the Bangalore Doordarshan. Among other things they demanded the sacking of the screening committee.

Poojari Krishna is about two priests, one of whom is shown stealing a temple idol in broad daylight. The Mahasabha's contention was that the misdeed by the priest had been deliberately used to denigrate the entire Brahmin community. The secretary of the Mahasabha angrily alleged that this was not the first time that a Brahmin character had been shown in poor light in a Kannada film. The organisation's complaint to the Press in this regard made somewhat naive reading. It said that "things have come to such a pass that Brahmins are beginning to feel like outcasts today". While the tone of injured



A still from Girish Kasaravalli's most recent film "Mane" (The House) 1989, Kannada.

innocence made for a certain amount of amusement, it would justifiably enrage those at the receiving end of Brahmin double standards and worse for centuries together.

However, even more curious than the strident reaction of the community leaders was the active role played by Hegde and Gundu Rao in fanning the flames of bigotry and obscurantism. If anything, the role of the two so-called leaders underlined the close connections between cinema and politics in Karnataka as indeed in all the southern States with the honourable exception of Kerala. Gundu Rao had always declared himself a leader of the Brahmin community, which makes his performance understandable if not pardonable; but this was the first time that an otherwise level-headed Hegde chose to

adopt a cheap populist posture.

The trend started by *Samskara* spawned a steady stream of films that shed revealing light on a feudal society which made a mockery of humanity as the upper classes used rituals and archaic customs to keep the 'lower peoples' in a state of permanent bondage. Among these films those that readily come to mind are BV Karanth's *Chomana Dudi*, Nagabharana's *Grahana*, and Prema Karanth's *Phaniyamma*.

Prema Karanth's film took its name from that of a Brahmin child widow who suffered deprivation and discrimination to live to a ripe old age, destined to side with the forces of change against Brahmin orthodoxy. Each of these films

films of Akira Kurosawa. The film launched the late Shankar Nag (who later directed the highly successful television serial, *Malgudi Days*) on an acting career of considerable worth.

The other is Girish Kasaravalli's *Tabarane Katha* (Tabara's Story), a tale of individual tragedy as indeed of the erosion of faith in the world of officials and clerks. A story of modern India, reflecting callousness and cruelty towards the poor and powerless, the film was a fresh triumph in mood and matter, style and treatment, for the brilliant young Kasaravalli who must, however, rank as the most neglected among the handful of truly gifted film-makers this country can boast of. It speaks volumes about the institutionalisation of



A still from Girish Kasaravalli's most recent film "Mane" (The House) 1989, Kannada.

mediocrity in present-day India that a director like Kasaravalli seems to have no place in the hearts of film-goers or film administrators in Karnataka, what to speak of other parts of the country.

It startled more than one serious viewer at the Bangalore international film festival in 1992 to find that none of Kasaravalli's films figured in a package of Kannada films shown as a separate section to critics and delegates. When the director of the festival was asked to explain this glaring omission at a press conference, she quickly passed on the buck to the Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce which, she said, had done the selection. On enquiring, it was discovered that the Chamber is largely composed of and led by

A Glimpse of Post-1997 Hong Kong?

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In Weihai, such anti British sentiments contrast sharply to romantic memories of the past. Nostalgia seems to have given local residents an almost proprietary view of their former rulers.

History and fiction mingle in anecdotes handed down through generations by residents.

Xu Yuxun, a local fisherman, watches with pride the renovation of an old British hotel building formerly owned by a wealthy opium dealer from Shanghai.

He says his grandfather who

once worked as a watchman there, had told him that former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was born in Weihai and Johnson was her grandfather.

"After retirement, she wanted to come and have a look at her birthplace, but she changed her mind because Weihai is small and does not have facilities to accommodate an ex-prime minister," he said.

Like Weihai in 1930, Hong Kong too will become a part of China after 1997, says Xu, the retired constable. "Our people are different from the past. China is strong and no Western country can bully it anymore."