Utopian Art and Literature from Modern India

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UTOPIAN ART AND LITERATURE FROM MODERN INDIA

Interweaving Dystopian and Utopian Spaces, Constructing Social Realism on Screen: *Bakita Byaktigato*/The Rest is Personal

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This article investigates the role of utopian and dystopian spaces in the construction of social realism in *Bakita Byaktigato*/The Rest is Personal (Pradipta Bhattacharya, 2013). The inherent contradiction between the implausible fictional construct of utopian and dystopian spaces and the existing socio-political reality is finely foregrounded through multiple loci of narrative actions. The film, based in Kolkata, revolves around Pramit, an aspiring documentary film-maker, and his quest for love. There are two spaces in the depiction of Kolkata: the city that contains the contemporary socio-political reality which is neither utopic or dystopic, and its dystopic underbelly that embodies the absence of hope for redemption or respite for its inhabitants. Pramit meets a fraudulent astrologer who occupies the dystopian space of 'darkened shadows' but knows about the utopian space that remains beyond his reach. The dystopian space is riddled with poverty, deprivation, unfulfilled desire, and hopelessness, along with fear and volatility. The final locus is a village called Mohini, a utopian space representing absolute harmony and undiluted bliss. Only the chosen ones have the privilege to enter the village. Everyone is happy in this space and prone to falling in love that lasts a lifetime. This is commemorative of arshinagar ('the mirror city'), a coveted space in bāul practices and a metaphor for a utopian space that stands in stark contrast with the reality. By interweaving these spaces in his cinematic experimentation, Bhattacharya addresses issues such as folk-cultural practices and community, economic crises and class, caste hierarchy, and social relationships, while attempting to create an alternative cinematic language to counter the filmmaking practices in Bengal that rendered itself vestigial.

Introduction

This article seeks to highlight the role of utopian and dystopian spaces in the construction of social realism in Pradipta Bhattacharya's film *Bakita Byaktigato*/The Rest is Personal (2013). Inspired by the documentary movement in Great Britain in the 1930s and the sensibilities of the kitchen sink genre of the 1950s, social realism emerged as a distinct style of filmmaking of the British New Wave with Jack Clayton's and Tony Richardson's 1959 films *Room at the Top* and *Look Back in Anger*, respectively. This form went on to flourish further in the 1960s and 1970s. Social realist films were unique both in terms of content and style. Breaking stereotypes of working-class characters as either victims of the system or occasional heroic figures or buffoons, the social realist films began depicting them as fully-developed characters with vigour and vibrancy in real settings such as their workplace, homes and day-to-day lives (Hill, 1999: 130). The depiction of quotidian social interactions among the ordinary working-class people in a naturalist way, devoid of ornamentation, remains at the core of social realist cinema. *Bakita Byaktigato*'s social realism continues this representational practice in terms of content and style. It represents real people, both from the working-class as well as from the middle-class, in rural and urban contexts in postmillennial Bengal. The film acts as a vehicle to foreground the cultural, social, and economic conditions that prevail in this context. Whereas British social realism aims at representing the conditions of working-class people in close likeness to their lived reality, *Bakita Byaktigato* stretches its boundary further by including the utopic imagination of an ideal society as part of its social realism. Since the idealism that Mohini embodies is not fantastic but a realist imagination of a better and inclusive society with potential to accommodate class, caste, gender, and cultural differences, it becomes a befitting component of the film's social realist style. In its refreshing cinematic experimentation, the film embodies 'enormous vitality and vibrancy of youth, something that the Bangla cinema has not seen in a long time' (Ghosh, 2015: 135). The spirit of the film is transnational, not merely in style or technicality, but in its philosophy (Rudra, 2015: 143). In addition, and most crucially, cinema (and performance) is the subject of this film (Sengupta, 2015: 128). Bhattacharya

creates an alternative cinematic language, that counters the filmmaking practices in contemporary Bengal that rendered themselves vestigial, with reference to the Bengali film history. There is hardly any trace of the once-distinguished filmmaking style of Bengal.

It is important to briefly go over the contemporary Bengali filmmaking context to understand the crucial significance of independent cinema projects such as *Bakita Byaktigato*. The Bengali film industry at present is typically controlled by a few big production houses with political clout who either own or control both the distribution channels and the exhibition spaces. These companies dictate the content, style, and crew of films that are produced within the industrial set-up. Trying to work beyond the mandates of these big companies means a film either is not released or does not find spaces to reach its audiences. Nevertheless, this prohibitive condition fortunately does not deter cinematic experimentation. The vibrancy of cinematic experimentation of yesteryears is continued sporadically in recent times by independent Bengali filmmakers beyond the industrial setting of Bengal, a group to which Bhattacharya belongs. They face humongous difficulty with funding and exhibition space for their films. Bhattacharya's journey in making the film demonstrates this. A trained film editor, Bhattacharya started his career by making short films for Bengali satellite television channels and commissioned documentaries for government and non-government organisations. *Bakita Byaktigato* is his debut feature film. He started working on this film in 2008 (Bhattacharya, 2015: 10). The film is a consolidated result of his personal interest in sharing his own discovery of how he views Kolkata, Tehatto (the rural town in Bengal that Bhattacharya comes from), and people of these places (Bhattacharya, 2015: 77). He considered the documentary form apt for his story-telling because he was trying to interweave the experiences of real people into the fictional world of his film and to construct what he calls 'ashchorjobastab', which can loosely be translated as 'wonderful realism' (Bhattacharya, 2015: 77). The uniqueness of the script and his style made it difficult to find a producer for the film (Bhattacharya, 2015: 77). Utsav Mukhopadhyay (2015: 83), writing to the first producer of the film, remarked in 2011, 'this is a kind of film that either a producer

agrees to produce or he/she does not ... because for [sic] films like this do not have "definite mainstream formulae of success"' (sic). Quite expectedly, when Bhattacharya approached producers, they wanted considerable change in the script to make it commercially viable which he was not ready to do (Bhattacharya, 2018). The film was shot, cut, and completed between 2010 and 2011. However, the film's release was stalled after the first producer backed out in 2011. After Satrajit Sen agreed to produce the film in 2012, the work resumed and he released the film in September 2013 (Bhattacharya, 2015: 10).

The difficulty with the film did not end there. As it was made outside the industrial set up, it was very difficult for him to find halls to screen his films. After the first release in 2013, it was only screened in a couple of theatres in Kolkata and ran for a limited time (Patrika, 2014). Despite rave reviews of the film from audiences and media including social media, the multiplex cancelled the screening under the pretext of low turnout; the same distribution barrier prohibited the film from being shown in rest of Bengal (Patrika, 2014). Following this restriction, Bhattacharya began exhibiting the film by taking it to remote rural areas as well as the city and organising screenings with help from local people, projecting it sometimes in community halls and sometimes in open-air spaces on makeshift screens. He organised more than twenty such screenings. This alternative exhibition practice attracted media attention and there were a number of reports subsequently published in both regional and national level newspapers about it. A renewed interest prompted the re-release of the film on 7 February 2014 (Patrika, 2014). A third re-release of the film happened in Nandan-2, a government film-exhibition space in Kolkata, a month later. The film ran there for a week, attracting more audiences. The last two days' shows were sold out and the film received a standing ovation from the audience on the very last show there. This film is the only film which made its repeated appearances in theatres on popular demand, yet it failed to win the necessary government support for a proper exhibition. The film received the much-deserved recognition of winning the 61st National Film award in April 2014 as the best feature film in Bengali released in 2013. Since it was uploaded to YouTube on 10 November 2014,

the film has been viewed 583,355 times with 3.1k likes and 333 comments from the audience. The film's journey itself is impressive in that that it managed to remain in circulation despite a striking absence of distribution and industrial support and win a national award. Besides inspiring the independent filmmakers, the film also influenced the stylisation of some contemporary films made within the industrial set up; the use of handheld camera shots in *Chaplin* (Bandyopadhyay, 2011) and the use of documentary shooting mode in the opening sequence of *Chawlochitro Circus*/The Film Circus (Bhaumik, 2017) are some of the examples.

Through a unique cinematic experimentation, using the documentary mode for a feature film and interspersing documentary footage as part of the narrative, *Bakita Byaktigato* attempts to challenge 'the rigid dichotomy of real versus non-real' and 'the distinction between reality and illusion in the cinema' (Rushton, 2011: 3). The film interweaves three spaces together: dystopian, utopian, and the intermediate real. The utopic space in the film is that imagined society which is harmonious, hopeful, and ideal whereas the dystopic space—disharmonious, inhospitable, dehumanizing, and devoid of hope—is its binary. The intermediate real space is simultaneously the point of reference and of access to the dystopian and utopian spaces of the film. Synchronized depiction of the dystopian and utopian spaces is the strategy of representation that Bhattacharya adopts to adequately illustrate the social reality and transformative aspirations for the future. Interweaving these spaces has been intrinsic to construct the social realism in this film. On one hand, these imagined spaces allow Bhattacharya to accommodate social, political, and economic issues along with cultural contradictions prevalent in the society; on the other, they also enable him to codify the yearning for utopia and subsequently construct a hopeful picture of a more harmonious future capitalising on the cultural memory, should the situation be transformed. Besides these, the article also investigates how the communitarian potential of folk and mass cultural practices allow for the construction of a utopian space with historical traces that effortlessly accommodate differences and diversity while the absence of it marks the dystopian space. The inherent contradiction between the implausible fictional construct of the utopian

as well as dystopian spaces and existing socio-political reality is finely foregrounded through portrayal of three spaces as the loci of narrative actions.

The argument of this article is undertaken through three sections; each section has two subsections. Section I deals with the narrative premise of the film that supplements its cinematic experimentation. Section II discusses the characteristics of the social reality and the dystopic spaces as represented in the film. This section has two further subsections: the first deals with the intercommunication between the utopic and dystopic spaces, while the second carries a discussion on social incongruities. Section III addresses how Mohini abets narrativising the utopian alternative as the embodiment of hope. There are two subsections here: one investigates how the idea of a utopic alternative develops by reversing and rewriting the mythological narrative and subverting gender roles, while the second looks into the references to the folk-cultural forms and rituals used in this film. These sections are followed by the conclusion.

The Coordinated Coexistence of the Real, Utopic, and Dystopic Planes

Bakita Byaktigato oscillates between real and imagined spaces with such ease that the latter become intrinsically integrated into the former creating a phenomenological ambiguity about the objective reality and the imagined projections of it. The filming style contributes to this carefully crafted ambiguity greatly. The absence of proper framing, precise composition, and disparate lighting constitute 'the handy-cam aesthetics of the film, "out-of-focus shots or low-light-grains" are far from being limitations of the film, actually creates a refreshing ingenuity of this particular stylisation' (Mukhopadhyay, 2015: 82). Complementing this style, Bhattacharya creates an ambiguity between the real and the imagined at the level of the narrative as well. The film does not have a conventional narrative structure. The ad-hoc expository narrative that the filmmaker-cameraman making a documentary on love unfolds and creates a snowball account involving many real people and fictional characters. This also enables the nurturing of the Benjaminian historical traces by constructing engagement between the past and the present which is discussed in

part 1.2 of this article. This section discusses the narrative premise of the film as well as how it includes imprints of historical traces to forge a meeting between the now and the historical to construct its utopic imaginary.

The Narrative Premise of Bakita Byaktigato

The film opens *in media res* with bite-size cut-to-cut fragments of documentary footage of people representing various social strata commenting on a number of issues. The opening shot of a huge paddy field with a giant under-construction site at the background can be taken as a subtle reference to the turbulent Singur controversy, which occurred between 2006 and 2008, and which destabilised the political equilibrium in West Bengal leading to a change in government.[1] The next shot depicts two farm labourers commenting on their income, from agricultural work, which is inadequate to look after their family. This is followed by the musing of a woman about the volatility of both sorrow and joy in her life, a madman's incoherent words, another woman's statement about her fears, the grievance of a village farmer for not being able to go to the city, the chortle of a street vendor when asked a question regarding the essence of his life, a vaishnav commenting on the highest position of human in the cosmic order, and a dumbstruck street vendor constantly nodding at a loss for words. The bite-sized documentary footage in the opening sequence simultaneously foregrounds the real people in their social contexts who serve as points of reference for the rest of the film. The title sequence appears immediately after. Prefaced by a dark screen with the arshinagar (a 'city of mirrors') song playing in the background, the camera slowly pans over a big pond with trees at its side being reflected on its still water. The tranquillity and calm of this sequence stands in sharp contrast with the tension of the first interview sequences

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[1] In 2006 Tata Motors announced construction of a compact small-car manufacturing unit in Singur, a small rural vicinity under Chandernagar Subdivision of Hooghly District in West Bengal. The protests of the unwilling farmers backed by a number of political interest-groups and stakeholders led to massive political turmoil in the area, drawing international media attention. In 2008 Tata Motors pulled out their project to shift it to Gujarat as a result of the aggressively conflictual situation, leaving the nearly-completed structure of the factory behind.

depicting the sense of inadequacy in the interviewees' lives. Through posing the two starkly oppositional affective conditions in the opening sequence, Bhattacharya introduces the content of his film, i.e. the dystopic social reality and a utopia of hope and harmony for a better future. The film successfully embodies the restlessness of the dystopic reality and the tranquillity of its utopic alternative. The quick cuts contrast with the smooth, phlegmatic, slow panning of the following long take of the title sequence. Similar aesthetic strategies are used throughout the film. It is through revealing the sense of inadequacy in the inner world of different people that the film exposes the socio-political anomalies that characterise the lived experience of people in contemporary times. By a concurrent presentation of dystopia, utopia, and the real, Bhattacharya's filmic reality successfully counters the idea of films as 'abstracted from reality and can thus only offer a deficient mode of reality' to utilise the medium of film as 'part of the reality we typically inhabit, as part of the world we live in, as parts of our lives' (Rushton, 2011: 2). The dialectical representation of spatial organisation as sites for lived experiences and human imagination coupled with creativity as agentive towards forming transformative alternatives lies at the core of Bhattacharya's filmic reality. A journey of the protagonists looking for harmony, peace, and love under these circumstances becomes imminent thereafter in the film.

The film revolves around Pramit, the aspiring documentary filmmaker, and his journey with his cameraman, Amit, into documenting the former's personal quest for 'love'. Amit, too, falls in love in the process. The duo undertakes their journey through the city to the shoddy locality in which the astrologer lives and the film traces their escapades. As the film progresses, we encounter different spaces along with their respective attributes. The serenity of the rural landscape of the opening sequence is once again replaced by a montage composed of glimpses of life in the city with voiceover narration about Kolkata. The narrative of the film includes the fractured aspirations of city-dwellers, the despair of the underprivileged living in the dark underside of modernity and progress, the social barriers vis-à-vis class, caste, and gender discriminations, and a desire to seek a hopeful alternative for a better future.

Utopic Vision, Verabredung, and the Historical Traces

Contemporary Bangla cinema has mostly omitted positive representations of life in villages and rural areas. Even in films in which the village appears, it is usually an exoticised bubble that represents poverty, backwardness, superstition, gullible simplicity, and abomination. It is a place of helpless confinement with a claustrophobic ambience impairing the growth of individuals: *Shatru*/The Enemy (Anjan Choudhury, 1984), *Utsav*/Festival and *Bariwali*/Landlady (Rituparno Ghosh, 2000), *Alo*/Light (Tarun Majumder, 2003), and *Goynar Baksho*/The Jewellery Box (Aparna Sen, 2013) are some examples of films that represent village in the above light. *Bakita Byaktigato* is different. It represents the village as a locus of the utopic vision that nurtures an egalitarian society and collective cultural practices. Such a representation of village nurturing the venerable tradition, indigenous cultures, and communitarian life bears traces of Gandhi's utopian vision of India in *Hind Swaraj*. It is the vision in which he considers villages to hold the true spirit and culture of India as they remain unaffected by modernity and industrialisation (Gandhi, 1938).

The bucolic Mohini embodies the Gandhian utopic vision of the nation that accommodates hope and transcendental potential. In his discussion on the 'Spaces of Utopia', Ashcroft (2012: 4) identifies hope as a characteristic feature of the postcolonial utopian vision which is transformative in its ability to eradicate 'disappointment and entrapment of the nation-state'. Besides hope, the other marked distinction between the utopian and dystopian spaces in *Bakita Byaktigato* is the presence and absence of memory, happiness, and historical continuum. For example, the oral narratives and folk cultural forms circulated and practiced in Mohini serve as the archive of collective memory of the community. The dystopian space lacks access to hope via such memories; the lives here are confined within the present moment without past or future. The redemptive and transformative potential of happiness that Walter Benjamin considers as resonating 'irremediably with that of resurrection' also characterises the idea of the past which carries 'a secret index with it' in order to make 'history into its affair' (1940 [1974]: n.p.). The defining characteristic of the utopian space in the film is the cultural inheritance and communitarian celebration

of mysticism of the subaltern music and religio-cultural practices of the region as the Benjaminian secret index connecting the past to the present.

Cultural practices in Mohini embody the 'secret protocol [Verabredung: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own' (Benjamin, 1974 [1940]: n.p.). Historical traces retained in collective memory are transmitted through personal oral narratives from generation to generation. The unique use of memory not only carries the historical traces but also enables the Verabredung (literally meaning meeting or engagement) which connects people, scattered and located far and wide, who once visited Mohini or know about it, as part of the collective of this utopic space. It is through this Verabredung that the possibility of resurrection, the sustenance of hope, and the yearning for utopia is codified in the film. Shampa's (the female protagonist) grandmother narrates how Bhaben's (the van-rickshaw puller who brings visitors to the village) father brought her to Mohini in the past, exactly like how Bhaben brought Pramit and Amit there. Sasmal and Mallika's[2] oral narratives also carry similar traces of their memory of the place and the people associated with it. The unnamed dystopian space, on the other hand, lacks this inheritance of the secret protocol; dystopia is not coveted, there is no secret-keeper of access to dystopia, and dystopia lacks memorial continuity. Existences are ad hoc and precarious in this space with the inhabitants' past or historical traces being muted or written off. There is no Verabredung in the film's dystopic imagination; it is transitory, non-redemptive, and melancholic.

The traces of Bengali film history are also retained in the film by creating references to some iconic shots from the films of previous eras. K. K. Mahajan's influential handheld camera shots following the fugitive Naxal figure in the labyrinthine trail of the North Kolkata in Mrinal Sen's 1972 film *Calcutta 71* is a landmark sequence of Bengali political films of the 1970s. The sequence in *Bakita Byaktigato* in which

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[2] Sasmal is the man who has been to Mohini and mentioned it to the astrologer, without giving him any further detail. The astrologer sends the duo to Sasmal for directions to reach Mohini which he no longer remembers. But he tells the name of his student, Mallika, who has gone to Mohini as well, hoping that she will still remember how to get there.

Amit's handheld camera follows Pramit and the astrologer along the winding gullies of the slum invokes the memory of precarity of the dispossessed and the ominous foreboding of Sen's film. Other than about two to five percent of images shot with static camera, the rest of the film has images shot with handheld camera (Bhattacharya, 2018). But whereas handheld shots in the clustered narrow alleyways of the slum communicate claustrophobia and a sense of portentous apprehension in both Sen's and Bhattacharya's film, similar shots convey an adventurous playfulness in Mohini. Additionally, as Sengupta (2015) notes, the frame of the film serves as a utopian location, commemorating Bengali cinema of yesteryears, an entry of characters to the cinematic frame ensures their falling in love. Through an intense interweaving of mutually exclusive spaces in his cinematic experimentation, Bhattacharya addresses culturally and historically pertinent issues such as economic crises and class relations, caste hierarchy and social contacts, the waning sense of the collective in Bengali society as a result of drastic urbanisation, and the disappearing folk-cultural practices and community of artisans that practice them. By archiving the nearly-extinct folk cultural performative forms and rituals, Bhattacharya uses his film as a discursive field with reference to the nationalist discourse driven by the imagining of the nation, a derivative of Western nationalism (Chatterjee, 1986). The discourse in *Bakita Byaktigato* is hopeful and positive as it celebrates common life and moments of enlightenment despite critical engagement and polemic interchanges. It celebrates and weaponises mass and folk cultural forms as a counter-force to resist globalisation without either essentialising or exoticising them.

Kolkata and Its Dystopic Underbelly

Kolkata is an intermediate space in the film, the representative real between its dystopian underbelly and the utopian space beyond its borders. The access to both dystopian and utopian spaces is mediated in Kolkata. The city, bearing 'the aspect of lived *experience*' (Gordin, Tilley & Prakash, 2010: 2, emphasis original) represents 'the sombre realities of post-independence political life' (Ashcroft, 2012: 2) in India. The first phase of shooting for Pramit's documentary happens in Kolkata. He interviews random people to arrive at the theme that he finalises for his forthcoming

documentary project, i.e. the idea of love in a space peppered with scepticism about it, how people fall in love, and what love does to them, while trying to negotiate his own failure to be in love. The responses in the interview sequences expose sombre realities of a wasteland, with people delivering perfunctory superficial responses. While talking about their views of city life, several interviewees nonetheless occasionally show attachment to the city, express their deep anxiety regarding growing difficulties and the deteriorating conditions in Kolkata. However, with reference to their views about love, the responses are varied and interspersed with scepticism. As a point of contrast, this sequence includes two brief comments, one from a vaishnav and the other from Mansoor Fakir, introducing the idea of selfless love following the ritual practice of the bāul-fakir communities and the Sahajiya vaishnav practices.[3] After this brief tour demonstrating an optimistic worldview as a point of contrast, the narrative returns to its materialistic and dystopic locations to continue the interviews.

Dystopia Hosting the Secret-keepers of Utopia

In course of interviewing people for some days, Pramit meets a fraudulent astrologer. This astrologer claims to know about Mohini. At this juncture, the film enters into the realm of the fiction. Through a fine blending of fiction and non-fiction, Bhattacharya builds his filmic reality by breaking the rigid dichotomy of the real and non-real on one hand and blurring the boundary between the reality and illusion in his film, on the other. From this sequence until they reach Mohini, the film captures a fictional narrative performed by professional actors. This part of the film is fictional but follows a documentary style. In Mohini again the film comes to combine the fiction with non-fiction. The prerequisite that the astrologer sets to divulge the secret about the village is their visit to his home. Determined to get further information, the intrigued Pramit decides to accompany the astrologer to his home along with Amit.

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[3] This is a tradition of tantric Vaishnavism with its origins in 14th century Bengal also known as *Bamachar*. The ritual practice of the *Sahajiya* tradition stands in stark contrast with the Vedic orthodox Vaishnavism.

The astrologer leads them to the dystopian underbelly of the city in a slum. This space embodies the non-illuminated side of modernity. They undertake a stressful ride in an overcrowded, noisy train followed by an extended walk through the labyrinthine trail cutting across an expansive shanty-town to reach the dystopian space of darkened shadows riddled with poverty, deprivation, unfulfilled desire, helplessness, futility, and broken dreams, along with fear, terror, anxiety, and uncertainty of a precarious life. This space is dubious in nature. The living condition of people in the slum is exposed as the handheld camera follows them to reach the hovel in which the astrologer lives with his two wives. The experience of people dwelling in this dystopian space is 'marked by disappointment' and 'entrapment' under 'the oppressive functions' of the social system perpetuating the colonial legacy (Ashcroft, 2012: 4). The vulnerability and perilous existence of people stranded in this cluttered space is depicted well through the labyrinth of narrow alleys connecting different sections of the slum and the claustrophobia of dim interiors of overcrowded thatched shacks. People inhabiting this space demonstrate different moral and ethical orders prompted by their precarity. For example, a man having two wives while flaunting them proudly does not appear an aberration in this space. That he is able to feed both the wives without inflicting physical violence is acceptable even by the wives. They are entrapped in the cycle of unending misery, deception, and deprivation because of their pinching poverty. The camera movement and editing are similar to the opening sequence comprising handheld camera and brief cut-to-cut shots sutured together without smooth transition, embodying the pent-up tension and anxiety of people inhabiting this location. Like the utopic space, the access to this otherwise invisible dystopic space is also privileged. One can access this space only by invitation. It is in the heart of this dystopic location that they are provided with clues to get access to the utopic Mohini, thereby exhibiting the complementarity of these spaces. One cannot exist without the other.

From this dystopic space, they begin their journey in search of people in Kolkata who have been to Mohini. As if on a treasure hunt, Pramit and Amit visit a number of places looking for the right person who could help them access Mohini. In course of

their search they visit more sites of darkened shadows in the city exposing different aspects of reality. Interestingly, contemporary Bengali cinema typically depicts North Kolkata locations as a mysterious archive of stagnant time and primitive memories of the city that remain unaffected either by temporality or modernity—*Bakita Byaktigato* follows this too. After an intensive search they finally find a deserted, dilapidated mansion in North Kolkata with dark unlit rooms and alleys invoking the labyrinthine trails of its dystopic underbelly. This is the space in which the secret-keeper of Mohini, Naren Sasmal, lives. He is a lonely widower, a former physics teacher who is short-of-hearing. Though often oblivious about things in his life, he retains a sharp memory of Mohini. However, he cannot recollect either the address or the means to reach there. All that he is left with is the memory of love that he and his deceased partner shared after they met in Mohini. When, disappointed, Pramit and Amit decide to leave, he calls them back. He reads out the name of Mallika Saha, written on his address book, but her address went missing with the torn page. Other than the name and the year of Mallika's birth, he fails to provide anything else. After much effort, they finally locate Mallika. Initially she refused to speak on-camera. They hoodwinked her to speak on condition that there will be no recording. In the fashion of sting operations, they record the entire conversation still. A low angle camera work is used during their conversation. She discloses that she got access to Mohini with the help of her former teacher, Sasmal, while pursuing her love for Debashish, her senior in college. Sasmal convinced the reluctant Debashish to visit Mohini, where they did fall in love. They were separated after coming back to the city due to caste barriers between them. Pramit traces Debashish too. While talking about their escapade and amorous adventure, he confides his persistent love for Mallika, a feeling which she reciprocates. Thereafter, she discloses the route leading to Mohini. Pramit, in return, arranges a surprise meeting for the estranged lovers. A moment of utopic nature was, hence, created in the heart of the city.

Social Incongruities: Caste, Gender, Class

The disparities in contemporary Bengali society have their origin in class relations, caste hierarchy, and strict gender-roles in an aggressively patriarchal system. *Bakita Byaktigato* represents these issues as the backdrop of the narrative and discloses their

intrinsic interconnections while investigating the issue of love and its effect on lives of individuals under the influence of the above social dynamics. For example, when Mallika, hailing from a socially-disadvantaged caste, falls in love with a Brahmin man, she encounters a caste barrier, additional to the fact that she expresses her desire for the man, subverting the social expectations. In her resolve to pursue her desire, she seeks help from her former teacher to fulfil the relationship. Her advances threaten Debashish. The socio-political reality cannot accommodate an emboldened woman with active agency over her life. Only the utopian Mohini can bolster such rebellious nonconformism. Their relationship materialises in that utopian space as it is free from the socio-cultural constraints of the world they inhabit. However, the caste barrier is restored between them as soon as they travel back to their own reality, and their relationship ends. Family, as one of the most powerful Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2001), preserves and propagates the cultural values of the predominantly Brahmanical patriarchy in India (Menon, 2012). The idea of the Indian nation organises itself around the idea of the family with a patriarch ruling the family, following the principle of obedience by its other members. Debashish's father, as the head of the family, disapproves of this inter-caste alliance, leading to their break up. Mohini is free from such control. Dismayed by the contradictions between their lived experiences and despair emanating from a conflict-ridden materialist real-world as well as the dystopian space, individual characters seek their solace and fulfilment in a space that is free from the limitations of their inhabited worlds. The utopic Mohini accommodates that vision of future possibility of a transformed Bengali society free from such restrictive impediments.

Another symptom of an aggressively patriarchal system and structural misogyny is domestic violence and the inferior position of women in the family. *Bakita Byaktigato* includes a reference to that. Domestic violence is normalised, particularly in economically disadvantaged classes, to such an extent that abstaining from inflicting physical violence on women is considered a virtue. For example, when Pramit interviews both wives of the astrologer regarding why they continue to live with their husband, the second, younger wife comments, 'Other than smoking pot and talking rubbish, he doesn't have any other bad habits. He never beats me up'.

Her shot is cut to the angry outburst of the first wife who comments, 'That disgusting old man, I feel like beating the hell out of him'. Clearly, her idea of virtue does not include lechery, unfaithfulness, and fraudulence. Combined, these attributes too are part of domestic violence practiced at a psychological level. When asked why don't they leave him, the second wife readily replies, 'because of love', while the first wife, unable to respond, introspects for a moment before bursting out crying. Her frustrated outburst exposes the helpless entrapment and dejection that is largely due to her gender position.

Mohini as the Embodiment of Hope: Narrativising the Utopian Alternative

The third and final locus of the narrative action is Mohini, a village serving as the utopian space, representing absolute harmony and undiluted bliss, the entry to which is privileged and mediated by a secret keeper. With reference to postcolonial contexts, Ashcroft (2012: 2) points out that rather than signifying a place, utopia represents 'the spirit of hope itself, the essence of desire for a better world'. Mohini serves as that space of refuge, solace, and hope that can potentially counter the limitations of the real world, mentioned above. It is a utopian space in the sense that it embodies hope and aspiration for a better society, as Ashcroft notes. For example, the society in Mohini successfully resolved the unresolvable socio-cultural issues—with reference to class hierarchy, caste discrimination, gender equality, hypermasculinity, and misogyny, along with consequent violence—that plague Indian societies, to form a harmonious collective that is tranquil and happy. The term Mohini, literally meaning 'the enchantress', owes its origin to Indian mythology. This term refers to the only female incarnation of Vishnu, one of the Hindu male Trinity. He appeared in form of Mohini, a sexually provocative woman, to entice the Asuras to keep Amrita (the elixir that bestows immortality) away from them.[4] It is interesting how this mythic reference,

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[4] Asuras (demons) are the archenemies of Adityas (gods). They are children of the same father but have different mothers. The enmity between these half-siblings ensued around Samundra Manthan (churning of the ocean) over the distribution of the elixir of life that immortalises whoever drinks it. With a desire to subordinate the Asuras by not allowing access to means of immortality, the gods resorted to deception though at the time of churning both groups agreed to share whatever the ocean throws out.

which has deception and hierarchical privilege at its core, is utilized in the film to create the utopian space for wish-fulfilment in which love, music, happiness, and celebration of life cohabit the air to create a lasting enchantment on people who share the space.

Rewriting mythological narrative, reversing gender roles

This space demonstrates the transformative potential to rewrite mythological narrative and reverse gender roles, offering a sharp contrast to the dystopian context dominated by strict gender roles. This potential allows Mohini to reverse the mythological narratives about the life of Lord Krishna. For example, after reaching the destination, when both Amit and Pramit dive into the river for a swim, a slender, bangled hand of Shampa, soon to become the love interest of Pramit, stealthily removes their clothes that they kept at the bank. This reverses the story of Lord Krishna's stealing the clothes of bathing milk-women, by making a woman steal clothes of strangers playfully. Another example of playfulness is when, during the courting period, Shampa throws a bucket of water on an absentminded Pramit from a hidden spot, reversing the mythic act of Lord Krishna playing pranks on Radha and other milk-women during Holi, the festival of colour. These instances of spirited bounciness are not restricted by any socially-allocated strict gender role or restrictions of expected behaviour. Shampa's proactive pursuance of her desire sharply contrast that of Mallika's. In the case of the former, nothing hinders her agency over herself, whereas the latter is entrapped in her gender role and expected social behaviour. The autonomy that this space provides to an individual is not gender-based. Here, a woman has the privilege of choosing one partner over another in a love triangle, without creating violent rivalry. After her clandestine advances, she finally makes an appearance and kisses Pramit while he was walking through the mango grove. The final instance mythology reversal occurs when Pramit leaves after spending a few days in Mohini to catch up with the funding of his film in Kolkata. Leaving Shampa behind after a period of intense courting to carry out his responsibilities is reminiscent of Lord Krishna's leaving Brindaban, a space demarcated for his love with Radha, to go to Dwarka to deliver his regal duties as the king, never to return again. However, Pramit leaves Mohini after promising to come back a few days later to take

Shampa with him as his wife, to which she consents. The relationship is shown to be premised on equality and mutual respect. As promised, Pramit goes back to Mohini, only to find out that no such space ever existed.

Shampa is brought up by her grandmother. Theirs is a woman-only household, yet they don't exhibit any sorrow or misery of orphanhood. They look after each other in the family and as members of the community undertake their responsibilities to look after guests. Mohini has other households with working women. However, gender roles seem to be fluid here. For example, as Bhoben, the rickshaw puller who is in charge of bringing guests to Mohini, arranges shelter, prepares their bed, serves them food, and fans them. Unlike the dystopian space, the social and economic crises, as well as the issue of love, do not appear as a problem in Mohini.

References to Folk Cultural Forms and Ritual Practices

The narrative of the film utilises a number of concepts from bāul religio-cultural practices, folklore, and mythology to construct the utopian space. Bāuls are esoteric folk religious communities of Bengal, historically traced to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Their practice is marked by enigmatic songs. Their religion is heterogeneous, comprising ritual practices with roots in Hindu, Buddhist tantric, and yogic doctrines, as well as Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavism and sub-continental Sufism. Bāuls believe that the human body is a macrocosm which should be cultivated to attain a proper spiritual apotheosis. They perform complex religio-sexual exercises which generally could be called body-cultivation including controlling of breath, maneuvering of body fluids, and attain prolonged sexual union through seminal retention. This is to transcend the physical essence to a higher spiritual state. To perform such ritual practices an initiated male practitioner would require female consort(s) or Sādhan Sanginī. For Bāuls, the divine love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, the mythological divine couple who holds the essence of primordial masculinity and femininity respectively, is present in the love of a man and woman. They believe that the bodily desire or Kām could be transformed into Prem, the divine desire for the supreme, and thereby trigger the spiritual apotheosis in the corporeal matrix.[5]

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[5] For detailed discussions on Bāuls and their practice, see Openshaw, 2001; Jha, 2010; and Das, 1992.

The general scepticism about love in the sequence in which Pramit asks his informants about their views about it, is juxtaposed with the idea of love in folk spiritual traditions, i.e. vaishnav tradition and bāul ritualistic tradition. For example, Mansoor Fakir, a practicing bāul carrying on Lalan Fakir's egalitarian legacy in West Bengal despite not belonging to the Lalan-Shahi tradition, advised people to love without any ulterior motive. His suggestion is with reference to the teaching of Chaitanya Dev who considered altruistic love as the sole weapon in time of crisis.[6] Mansoor Fakir's comment introduces the idea of nirhetu sadhan ('ritual practice') without being driven by kām ('worldly desire') such as procreation or any other materialistic desire. The goal of this ritual practice is to achieve spiritual apotheosis via corporeal act or practice. This idea remains at the core of the bāul practice. That the couples who met or came together in Mohini do not have any offspring is no coincidence. The idea of unconditional love without any ulterior motive is the driving principle in the society in Mohini, which is also called 'premer grām' ('a village of love'). Mohini also appears as the Nitya Vrindavan, demonstrating a time and space continuum. Nitya Vrindavan, or the eternal Vrindavan, is a site commemorative of the space in which the amorous encounters between Radha and Krishna took place. It is a space for ananta leela, the unending playful encounters, between the divine authority and an earthly contingency. It is a space that can only be inhabited with a siddha deha, a body without worldly or materialistic desire. This reference becomes pronounced as the song of Bhaba Pagla, 'ekhono shei Brindabone banshi baje re'. The flute, which Krishna is believed to have played when courting Radha, keeps playing in the background, playing on the idea of Nitya Brindavan.

This idea is further referred to in the narrative which confirms Bhattacharya's use of arshinagar metaphor in a bāul ritualistic sense. Mohini is commemorative of arshinagar, a metaphor for a coveted space in bāul ritual practices beyond the materialistic space with traces and trauma of the lived experiences. The idea

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6 Chaitanya Dev, also known as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, was the founder of the Gauriya Vaishnavism and a leading figure of the Bhakti Movement in Bengal in the 16th century. The Bhakti Movement was a counter-hegemonic social movement that strongly promoted social justice, peace, inclusivity, communitarian society, eradication of the discriminatory caste system, and communal harmony.

of arshinagar in Lalan Fakir's 'Barir Kache Arshinagar' ('the city of mirrors beside home'), removes the restrictions of the mundane world and delves deeper into spiritual realism using allegories. However, the idea of seeking love and the coveted resident of arshinagar is not to be confused with the idea of 'desire' in either a literal or a Freudian sense. Although this metaphor reflects the desire for love and beauty at a time that is dominated by extreme materialistic pursuits, it inheres the idea of eternity that involves both the materialistic and spiritual. Pramit's search for Mohini—looking for everlasting love—is analogous to a bāul's quest for arshinagar, that is, the abode of the not-yet-seen-neighbour who can transform the seeker's life by removing miseries and lack by touching his/her life, leading to fulfilment. The idea of a guru is important in the folk-religious practices (such as bāul and sahajiya vaishnav doctrines) based on body cults. The transcendence to the utopic zone of arshinagar is impossible without the help of him/her. The painter interviewed in the second documentary sequence refers to the idea of guru first in the film.

Bhoben the rickshaw puller continues the legacy of such guidance of a guru. His father Haren brought Shampa and her grandmother to the village. Pramit and Amit arrive at Mohini on Shampa's birthday. The reference to the arrival of a potential partner on her birthday also has a bāul ritualistic reference. According to the bāul ritual practices a woman is born twice, once when she comes out of her mother's womb and the second time when she menstruates for the first time when a potential mother in her is born, awakening her sexuality and procreative potential. The highly cryptic Lalan song, 'Chander gaye chand legeche/amra bhebe korbo ki' ('a moon touches another, why should we be worried'), refers to this transformation in a woman. Bhoben, a metaphoric position for guru in the sense of a guide in life, knows about the forthcoming arrival of a guest as soon as the biological inauguration of an individual's womanhood comes closer and yet she is not in love. Unlike several mainstream religious practices, bāuls do not denounce body and sexual acts which are used as means to achieve the spiritual apotheosis.

Besides the bāul practices, Bhattacharya documents a number of other folk cultural forms, such as Hapu (a traditional form of Bengal's folk culture and mass

entertainment, now nearing extinction, in which martial physical acts are exhibited while telling a story through the rhythm of songs), Bolan (a form of folk cultural performance from West Bengal, done during the last month in Bengali calendar, to celebrate the festival of Gājan, associated with the worship of the Lord Shiva), and Kirtan (devotional songs narrating stories about Hindu gods and goddesses). These are disappearing fast, due to rapid urbanisation and neo-colonialism of the global capital (and resultant Americanisation of Indian cultural expressions). He archives these forms with the precision of a trained ethnographer by making artisans perform for his film who have never performed before a camera. Use of non-actors for his film is another important aspect of his social-realist style. It is no wonder, therefore, that he borrows insights and concepts from the philosophy and cultural practices of bāuls, a community that has been serving as 'iconic bearers of a venerable indigenous heritage' since the 'second half of the nineteenth century' in India as an apt cultural resource for the colonised seeking their cultural roots (Openshaw, 2017: xviii). Bāuls share the cultural, class, and caste identity with the folk artisans of this film—members of both groups are mostly poor, engaged in cultural activities as a way of self-expression/spiritual practice, and marginalised in the caste hierarchy. They share the social and caste locations with the people who inhabit the dystopic urban slum though their predicaments are very different in the absence of hope and transformative aspirations.

The film represents a subtle critique of modernity and its affective influence on urban contexts by foregrounding the ancestral cultures of people. Mohini represents the simplicity of a bucolic life in rural India without valorising it, which is prominent in Gandhi's utopian view. Far from being mutually exclusive, banal day jobs and cultural performances are integral complementary parts of its society. People are the patrons, participants, and their homes are the exhibition premises for the cultural performances in Mohini. In this conflict-free space, everyone is happy and prone to falling in love which promises to last a lifetime. Love is what binds people here. The exploration of the self in search of love that characterises *Bakita Byaktigoto* is aligned with the mystic search of Lalan's Arshinagar, the elusive 'perfect world' in

which a union between the 'never-seen neighbour' and the seeker is imminent. Mohini camouflages itself from the sanctimonious real-world as well as its dystopian underbelly, plagued by broken or bad dreams, to protect its inviolability and sense of bliss. Unlike the dystopian slum, love does not create troubles in human relationships in Mohini. It is a given here that is cherished dearly.

Bhattacharya's imagination of the utopic space is deeply rooted in the alternative spiritual philosophy and folk cultures of Bengal. These are egalitarian in nature and can counter not only the culturally-homogenizing project of globalisation but also the elite upper-caste Brahmanical tendencies in India that are condescending, unconcerned, or dismissive of these forms. In foregrounding the folk cultural practices as predominant components of the narrative, Bhattacharya follows his celebrated predecessor Ritwik Ghatak who magnificently interweaves Chhau (a martial dance form of West Bengal, Odhisa, and Jharkhand based on folklore, oral mythological, and epic), bāul songs, and the tribal cultural expression of festive celebrations in his autobiographical film *Jukti, Takko, aar Gappo*/Reason, Debate, and Stories (1974, released posthumously in 1977). Both Ghatak and Bhattacharya use folk forms to represent the ongoing conflict of the culturally supremacist, Sanskritised, upper-caste Brahmanical culture and the indigenous cultural practices based on oral narratives and folklores, usually practiced by the members of the marginal castes and communities in India.

In consolidating marginalised forms at a rural location which remains muted in the periphery of the nation's imagined boundaries, Mohini assumes the 'political form' that Partha Chatterjee (1986) refers to. The political character of this spatial imagination emanates from its capacity to represent the subjugated 'ancestral cultures' of the dispossessed (even forgotten or unknown) fragments that have been left out in the imagining of the Indian nation (Chatterjee, 1986: 2). The references to the bāul and other folk cultural traditions counter the exclusion of such elements, which are integral to heterodox traditions of religion and poetics in Indian cultural practices. Thus, they represent the aspiration of decolonising the imagining of the nation. However, the utopian vision as represented in this film does not conform to

the hagiographic nationalist discourse, that demands worshipping the land, culture, and the spirit of the nation as divine and sacrosanct, thereby prompting the citizens to follow definitive norms and behaviours to obtain/retain membership of the nation. Contrarily, this vision contextualises a complementary reality, which is inclusive and egalitarian, foregrounding subjugated knowledge about underrepresented cultural practices coupled with aspirations of spiritual and social wellbeing as part of progress.

Conclusion

Bhattacharya's social-realist style celebrates the ordinary and the everyday. Through this style he represents lives of working-class people in society and discusses the cultural, economic, and social situation in Bengal. Through this, he also launches his critique of socio-cultural practices while suggesting possible systemic improvement. To achieve this dual goal, it was, therefore, imperative for him to interweave the documentary mode as part of the craft of his feature film. *Bakita Byaktigato* by itself is a utopian project vis-à-vis the filmmaking practice in that it subverts the narrative style, star system, editing, sound, music, distribution, and exhibition practices that characterise contemporary industrial filmmaking in West Bengal, and offers a pathbreaking alternative. *Bakita Byaktigato* accommodates the unresolved conflict between playfulness and seriousness (Ashcroft, 2012: 2) as an artform challenging the status quo. It is this aspect—the impossible resolution of problems and stark contradictions—that makes this film more than a cinematic experimentation, a social critique, and a commentary. It is utopian also in that it attempts to capture 'the actuality of the life-process' in nondescript locations in which 'reality means praxis, i.e. the activity of human individuals submitted to circumstances which are felt as compulsory and seen as powers foreign to their will' (Ricoeur, 1976: 18).

Bhattacharya continues a tradition of utopian spatial imagination prevalent in Bengali literature and films. The literary predecessors of Mohini in Bangla literature are: the Ladyland in Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream'; *Moynadwip* in Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padma Nodir Majhi* (The Boatman of the River

Padma) (1936); *Telenapota* in Premendra Mitra's short story *Telenapota Abishkar* (The Discovery of Telenapota) (1952); the nondescript rural location in Samaresh Basu's short story *Uratiya* (1955); *Dikshunyopur* (literally meaning a city of no direction) in Sunil Ganguly's *Nillohit Samagra* (Nillohit Collection, 1999); *Ochinpur* (The Unknown Land) in Humayun Ahmed's 2002 eponymous novel; and *Ranighat* in Syed Mujtaba Siraj's novella *Ranighater Brityanto* (The Annals of Ranighat) (2005). However, the fundamental difference between the imaginary spaces in the above texts and Mohini is that the latter is a conflict-free zone of eternal celebration of life in keen likeness of the spiritual apotheosis of the *bāul* practices, whereas the former includes references, undercurrents, and even perpetuation of conflicts and struggles that characterise that social reality out there. Mohini shares the celebratory mood and projected freedom of individuals in a communitarian, exploitation-free, egalitarian society that Begum Rokeya imagines in her feminist utopian narratives, 'Sultana's Dream' and 'Padmarag'.

There are filmic precursors to Mohini in Indian cinema as well that share its philosophical, temporal, and spatial attributes. Several of the above texts have been adopted as films. For example, *Jago Hua Savera*/Day Shall Dawn (Dir. A.J. Kardar, Urdu, Indo-Pakistan production, 1959) and *Padma Nadir Majhi* (Dir. Gautam Ghose, Bangla, Indo-Bangladesh coproduction, 1993) are based on Bandyopadhyay's novel. Though the literary text maintains ambiguity regarding the nature of Moynadwip as the imagined space, the films interpret it as a dystopic space taken to be a utopic space. The same is true of Premendra Mitra's *Telenapota Abishkar* which has been adapted twice into film—*Swopno Niye*/Of Dream (Dir. Purnendu Pattrea, Bangla, India, 1966) and *Khandhar*/Ruins (Dir. Mrinal Sen, Hindi, India, 1984)—in which the utopic space of the literary text is represented as a space for entrapment, memory, and decadence. Anjan Das adapted Siraj's *Ranighater Brityanta* into his film *Phaltu*/The Disposable (2005). These cinematic depictions of imagined space lack the sense of hope and desire for a better future that Mohini embodies. It is in this embodiment of hope, envisioning an inclusive, egalitarian society reclaiming ancestral cultural inheritance, that Mohini becomes a unique cinematic experiment. Mohini foregrounds a utopic

alternative that challenges the neoliberal global project of cultural homogenisation and attempts to decolonise the cultural expressions.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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