

THE LONELINESS OF *SADHU BHASHA*

Naeem Mohaiemen

First came the word. Soon after, came divisions: regulations and lines that set up hierarchies and domains.

My earliest encounter with these sharp lines was in a St. Joseph classroom in Dhaka. In Bangla class, we learned sadhu as the high written language of Tagore, Saratchandra, and Bankim (few Bengali Muslims entered this list, something we noticed much later). Shuddho was a variation of this, working as the spoken language of the elite. Cholito was the language that the nascent middle class and city subaltern spoke in. Gradually and grudgingly, it was entering the written word. Later it became cholti; the naming of the colloquial was subject to opobhrongsho— an alteration that was both destruction and birth. Though one of our frequent exercises was to transform sadhu sentences to cholito, it was clear that sadhu was the aspirational proper way “to be.”

Sometime in the 1980s, a broadside was launched against shuddho in Bangladeshi textbooks.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s Srikanto was removed from the SSC (“Matric”) syllabus. My father was horrified: If you don’t read Srikanto, how can you learn proper Bangla? The education board sternly insisted that the way to improve national pass averages (and build the model citizen) was by removing “difficult” works. Soon textbooks were filled with essays and stories written in cholito. There was now a gap between the Bangla literature we read, and that of our parents in the days of “united” Pakistan (ironically, the period when Bangla itself was under attack by the state).

Was there a tinge of religious anxiety to this replacement? There may very well have been, although it was not formally articulated to students. Recent scholarship has documented the development of “Musalmani” Bangla in pre-1947 Bengal. My encounter with these currents was at a granular and unremarkable way in the classroom. The familiar phrase “Thakur ghore ke? Ami Kola khai ni!” (Who is in the worship room? Came the guilty reply, I didn’t eat

the banana!— ascribed to a child caught as she stole a god’s offering) was quietly converted in the 1980s. “Thakur Ghor” was replaced with “Bharar Ghor” (Storage room), a manifestation of discomfort with the putatively “Hindu” origins of words and phrases. Modernization of the nation meant transforming the language— cholito now dominated and the success of novelists like Humayun Ahmed can be attributed to novels shorn of shuddho. Almost accidentally, an erasure of Sanskritic origins was accomplished in the process.

In the last few years, during repeated viewings of Ashish Avikunthak’s films, I have revisited buried memories of that St. Joseph classroom. The association of a specific project of modernity with the erasure of shuddho Bangla sits at sharp angles with Avikunthak’s most recent films Rati Chakravayuh and Kalkimanthankatha. The latter film is translated as The Churning of Kalki, intriguingly omitting the phrase Katha (words, tales, legends). The language spoken by the characters in these two films fascinates and alienates me—an effect very much the director’s intent, as part of his argument against forms of modernity associated with jono-mukhi and bastob-mukhi. These two phrases translate as “for the people” and “realistic,” but mukhi also translates to “facing toward” and can be a parable for the janus-faced sadhu/cholito that marks one possible high/low experience of Bengali in the last century.

When Rati Chakravayuh premiered, the breathtaking cinematic achievement of a 105-minute single shot film overcame our senses. It was as if Russian Ark’s

languorous Steadicam single take journey through the Hermitage Museum had been transposed into a tightly wound sacred thread around a spindle in Rati (clocking in at 9 minutes longer than Sokurov’s film). As Rati’s reel unwinds, and the nihilistic despair of the lovers’ worldview sinks in, a slow dance of the destroyer begins (an inter-cinematic reference where Avikunthak prefigures the finale of Kalkimanthankatha). At the end, Rati cuts to black and in the absence of image arrives the ritual completion of self-death.

In an interview about Rati, Avikunthak said his films were not codes that needed unraveling; instead, they were akin to the liturgical Sanskrit that the majority of worshippers do not understand . Since his public commentary is as precisely constructed as his films, one can glean even from this disavowal a hint at a complex cosmology that will take many pleasurable viewings to unpack. The invocation of an illegible temple Sanskrit brings to mind the fate of Harihar in the second part of Satyajit Ray’s Apu Trilogy (Aparajito, 1957). Harihar recites Sanskrit to a crowd of possibly unlettered Benares pilgrims, and their largely vacant expressions do not interfere with the flow of alms at the reading’s end. The soothing effect of the illegible text is clear in the scene, and can also invoke the effect of Quranic Arabic on a Bengali Muslim population that finds it as alien as the Benares pilgrims found Sanskrit.

In yoking together Ray’s film and Avikunthak’s commentary, I want to highlight the way that the latter constructs films in radical opposition to the neorealist observation style pioneered by Ray in Bengali cinema’s post-partition decades. Each of Avikunthak’s films is

constructed in a deeply anti-realist style— both in visual structure, and in the language that I have been fascinated by. In Rati, the spinning camera is matched by a dialogue that is arch construction, with sentences that bear little similarity to how dialogue may work in everyday Kolkata (or, further east, Dhaka). Language games, such as the finale of remembering the last words uttered and adding your own, are another gesture away from reality—even that of an imagined, Sanskritic, pre-colonial past. Yet, just as we sink ourselves into allusions to stories from the Puranas, contemporary violence enters stage left. Which riots are they referring to, when characters say, “Something we know but cannot see...”? Noakhali 1946, Delhi 1984, Gujarat 2002, or Ramu 2012? We are not told and will never know. This too is part of Avikunthak’s design, a purging of familiar signposts that would allow the viewer comforting purchase.

I want to return to Ray one more time in thinking through the visual structure of Kalkimanthankatha. In Avikunthak’s film, rumors—of war are faced down by readings from Chairman Mao’s red book (in Bengali, naturally—and here, the theatricality of martial language carries out a second purification of shuddho bhasha), recalling also the mischievous employment of the same red book in Godard’s *Le Chinois*. The clearly Beckettian underpinning of scenes within the Kumbh Mela reminded me of Rabindranath Tagore’s hallucinatory *Tasher Desh* (a children’s musical that may have been inspired by Lewis Carroll; in its 1930s staging it also predicted the ascendancy of European fascism).

Throughout the scenes (immersion, walking, writhing, and war games), the actors look almost always out into the horizon, barely at each other (even though so much of their dialogue comes soaked in tender eroticism—not quite homoerotic, but rather what I would call homosocial). I thought of the jatra scenes in Ray’s work while watching this. In Part one of the *Apu Trilogy* (*Pather Panchali*), the jatra is on a stage built in the middle of the village. In Part two (*Oporajito*), modernization has moved the jatra to celluloid, with silver painted streaks encircling the minor god’s head. In Ray’s hands, the theater form of looking into the horizon underscored the gap between fiction and the village life he so meticulously reconstructed as the real. In Avikunthak’s film, this relation is inverted— the stylized, archaic and hyper-emotive acting of a certain form of theater is the entire film. There is no cutaway to a “real” moment; the fictional form is all—a Bengali language that rarely existed in the spoken word except in the imagination of mythmakers.

When watching Bengali films with subtitles, I often try to effect a temporary blind spot in the lower third of my vision. Otherwise, the temptation is too strong to read the subtitles and inevitably turn to my companion and whisper, “Uhhu, that is not really what she said.” Avikunthak’s films however are deeply textual—they contain reading exercises inside the visual arc, and reading his subtitles doubles that motion. He writes his original screenplay in English, and longtime collaborator Sougata Mukherjee translates it into Bengali. I say “translate,” but the act is closer to another grammar exercise from our childhood classroom— *bhabanubad* (translation of the soul of the

text) rather than *banganubad* (translation into Bengali). Sougata’s Bengali is stylized high form, inflected with his experience of growing up outside the metropolitan center of Kolkata. Instead of matching this dialogue with his original screenplay, Avikunthak does a fresh translation for the subtitles. In several scenes, the translations therefore lead to new puzzles for the Bengali viewer. Why, for example, is a river’s description as *chirabega* (forever rushing, or, possessed of velocity) and *chirasthir* (forever still) translated as “ever-flowing, unperturbed and forever”? These bilingual moments may add up to nothing more than a creative flow in translation. But, given the meticulous structure of the films, I like to think that Avikunthak placed his subtitles for multiple readings. For a Bengali audience, darting between spoken Bengali that is distant and subtitles that seem from another playbook, the film offers numerous textual possibilities.

These films intend to produce a sharp alienation in the viewer, detaching them from the realism they encountered in the first decades of post-1947 Bengali cinema (e.g., Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen in West Bengal; Zahir Raihan, Sheikh Niamat Ali, and Subhash Datta in Bangladesh). I think there is an additional layer of removal that Avikunthak had not planned, and that is these films’ possibilities for a Bangladesh (the former East Bengal) audience. In drawing explicitly and immersively from Puranic and Tantric texts, Avikunthak has placed his cosmology firmly within a Hindu religious and scriptural tradition. I want to suggest that the effect of partition has been to abruptly remove many traces of this Hindu scriptural tradition from one of its two homes—what was once

East Bengal, and today is Bangladesh.

As the upper caste were often the earliest to leave for West Bengal after 1947, East Bengal was left with a Hindu population largely shorn of its Sanskritic elite. Practical expediencies of surviving inside an increasingly strident monoculture (ironically growing more shrill after independence from “Muslim” Pakistan) has led to outward expressions of Hinduism shrinking from public life in Bangladesh. Over the last four decades, this erasure of traces of Hindu mythology from everyday practices has sharpened; the nervous “conversion” of something as microscopic as the phrase “Thakur ghor” is only one example among multitudes. As a part of the first generation that was deprived of fundamental texts such as *Srikanto* from our curriculum, I approach Avikunthak’s films almost as if Bengali is not my language. I understand every word (and those I do not are found quickly in a weathered copy of *Chalantika*), yet it is almost as if I understand little. The films sadden me in the end; in their expression of mythology in a high linguistic register, they remind us again of what was lost to both Bengals through partition.

Naeem Mohaiemen is a filmmaker and Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University. Thanks to Nusrat Chowdhury for sharing parallel stories from Holy Cross School, Dhaka.

1. Ratnam, Niru. “Future Greats, 2014,” Art Review, March 2014.