Mayanagar and its Maker: Experiencing the City in Cinema

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Abstract

The enclosed article is a close, critical study of Aditya Vikram Sengupta's recently released feature film *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta* (2021). It engages with the principal recurrent motifs in Sengupta's restrained, imagist representation of the city of Calcutta/Kolkata. It tries to argue that Sengupta interweaves the quotidian lived-in experiences of individuals in the city with the historical dynamics to which it is subject in such a way that the city ceases to be merely a passive setting for the lives of others. Instead, Sengupta's deeply sensuous craft, which relies on the gaze and the discerning ear of a flâneur, brings the city alive as a living entity constituting and in turn constituted by its people. It is claimed that sound is a powerful narrative device in Sengupta's cinematic language, even more than evocative visuals.

Further, the article locates Sengupta's immersive narratives around Calcutta, both in *Once Upon a Time* and *Labour of Love*, his acclaimed debut film, within a larger corpus of Bengali-language cinema set in and focally concerned with life in Calcutta/Kolkata. In doing so, it contends that Sengupta's cinema neither invites nor resists the recognition of subtle parallelisms, perhaps even serendipitously, without turning itself into derivative, or consciously imitative pastiche of older cinema. It proposes that *Once Upon a Time* embodies and testifies to the uniqueness of artistic memory, in the way in which it responds to both historical events and public oblivion about them.

The essay concludes with a comparative discussion of Sengupta's three films till date, acknowledging the distinctiveness of each in form, theme and style, while ultimately positing *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta* to be the most complete cinematic experience among them all.

Keywords

"Aditya Vikram Sengupta", "Once Upon a Time in Calcutta", "Independent Cinema", "life

in the city" "Bengali cinema", "ekphrasis in cinema, "urban allegory"

Mayanagar (Once Upon a Time in Calcutta, 2021) does not use the cinematic medium to tell a story that could well have been rendered in some other form. It offers what is decidedly a cinematic experience. Scenes and sounds flash unbidden through one's mind, making the viewer realise all over again how the grammar of immersive art is not to be equated with 3D glasses or a Go Pro camera. It could be something as simple as the position of the camera or the length of the shot. A lay viewer like this author is neither able to understand nor replicate the technique. All that is asked of her, though, gently but firmly, is that she pay attention.

Epic, ekphrasis and the everyday city

One seemingly inconsequential scene that goes on for longer than expected is that of a truckload of young migrant workers in yellow helmet riding into the city. Among them, as they struggle to keep standing, buffeted by the patchwork asphalt on the road, is a tender youth who can barely keep his eyes open and his torso from bumping into his neighbours. In a foil to this long, apparently uneventful sequence, where the camera appears to be perched above the driver's cabin facing away from the direction of the truck, there will be another later on where an old man leaves with all his mortal belongings for his ancestral village. Unlike the young worker looking ahead, the old man will be staring forlornly at his son following him on a motorcycle. Aditya Vikram Sengupta seems to be deeply struck by the city as a site of comings and goings. This, too, then is a tale caught at the cusp of entries and departures, i.e., *āshā jāoār mājhe*.

That long road scene, somewhat reminiscent of the drive through a tunnel in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) did not however strike this author as being ekphrastic in the sense that it assimilates the mundane and the inconsequential into the narrative as a means of diffusing the focal intensity of the main action. Ekphrasis may have begun as the epic's own built-in safety valve for assimilating the ordinary. In a film like *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta*, however, the ekphrasis *is* the epic of the city in its totality. It is the lead story that is broken up into slices of people's everyday lives: jostling for space in a public bus or autorickshaw on the way to work and back, stopping to gorge on an egg roll, catching raw blue paint on one's tired elbow from the kerbside railing, shadow-practising pace bowling in police uniform on the corridor of an apartment complex, bathing one's dog, running into an old flame at a shopping mall, and so

on.

Everyday lives intersect through an entirely convincing, believable network of kinship and professional relations engendered by the city itself. Here, in other words, the city is not just a backdrop or the canvas for people to tell their stories. It is constituted of people's lives and is what people's lives are in turn constituted of. We come expecting cinema to replicate the intricacy of the novel, driven by its protagonist-driven, action-driven plot. We usually reserve the category epic for war films, Marvel comics, science fiction, and grand historical or mythological tales of putatively national or global import. Yet cinema also has the ability, the tools and the idiom to lift us out of the novel's preoccupations – in this case its commitment to the intertwined lives of Ela, Shishir, Raja, Ananta, Bubu, Bhaskar – onto the epic that is the city itself. The epic is not to be sought alone in the evocation of the monumental in space or scale, such as the glimpse of Howrah Bridge at the start of Ghatak's *Nāgarik* (1952). It can also be located in the effort to capture the cohabitation and interplay of multiple lived-in times within the same space. A city like Kolkata is particularly amenable to such layered kaleidoscopic explorations. Indeed, Bengali cinema since the turn of the millennium has been quite deeply invested in this play of time in Calcutta-turned-Kolkata. Anik Dutta's *Bhooter Bhobishyat* (2012) and Atanu Ghosh's *Abby Sen* (2015) take the route of supernatural comedy and the science fantasy of time travel respectively to relive the bygone city. In his debut film, *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe* (Labour of Love, 2014) Sengupta demonstrates how the Calcutta of the 70s or 80s does not need to be artificially recreated and revisited as a chronotope. For some parts of the city and the people residing in them, that Calcutta is the reality that still envelopes them. In *Mayanagar* too, this motley city inhabiting both the "once upon" and the *here and now* is apprehensible in its everyday reality. It is this seeming elasticity of its time-identity that can be designated as epic. Ekphrasis, i.e., seemingly unrelated and extraneous frames and sequences, are the visual language of holding these multiple coexistences together.

Leitmotifs and metatexts: Dinosaurs, cigarettes and alcohol

Speaking of ekphrasis, the same could be said for an under-construction dinosaur, again an actual detail from a particular moment in the city's history of relentless building and unbuilding. Yet, the frequent and unsettling closeups of the dinosaur's massive canines do not allow us to see it as a mere distraction or narrative relief. Nor do they attempt to set out to fix its metaphorical significance. The tyrannosaurus's teeth could well be a reminder of a timeless

past subsuming this and other cities. Alternatively, the message may be that no matter how benign and lifeless this giant toy looks, its concrete mass also kills. Dinosaurs had once ruled the earth, only to be humbled by it in the end. It is likewise with cities and their relentless hunger for soaring concrete.

These days one is acutely aware of the insidiousness of viewing conditions and of competing sensory claims in shaping the cinema-watching experience in a public theatre, even in a multiplex. Watching *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta* is also about watching the insistent inscription, "smoking kills", fade in and fade out every time somebody lights a cigarette in the film. How is one to respond? The captioning is admittedly a nuisance, but a necessary, well-intentioned one. On deeper thought, it adds a darkly humorous commentary upon the film's narrative, especially because that narrative begins and ends with death.

It is also a film where grief, gratification, daily rituals of comfort and self-indulgence, the deceptions at the foundation of interpersonal conversation, all of these are measured not with coffee spoons but alcohol. Alcohol seems to be a leitmotif, defying the statutory warning surfacing with ominous regularity. It is the drug that people in the city appear to live on, the unlikely tonic that both revives and kills. Alcohol, sadly, is that tonic-poison, like the city itself: one cannot seem to be able to quit it even if it is slowly killing you. The name of the film and the city in that film is *Mayanagar* after all. *Maya* is an exasperatingly equivocal word that subverts itself. It is both the illusion and the recognition that there are only illusions. It is also a Bangla commonplace for tender attachment, sometimes an inexplicable one. Perhaps it also describes what the storywriter-director feels for his characters, never losing sight of their flaws and foibles, never withdrawing the tenderness that he and his cinematographer lavish upon their facial muscles and hand movements. We see them grimace, contort in pain, snort or snore while asleep; we see their hands flirt with the alcohol glass, their eyes brim over in silent hurt, or their face cast down in guilt or shame. Perhaps *maya* is what defines the pull between the city and its hustlers. The old servant, Ananta, is banished and leaves reluctantly; but Raja's girlfriend, the door-to-door beautician, cannot bring herself to.

Sengupta puts together an ensemble, credible narrative around the characters and their daily or at least regular interactions without fuss or contrivance. Yet he also gently tugs them along towards a convergence of climactic events, the first being the collapse of a bridge that busts the *Kalpataru* realtor scam. The city erupts in protest and the spectator almost expects Ela's end to go the way of a certain lady employee of an actual chit fund company that then fell foul

of law. Instead, and this is where Sengupta's understanding of ordinary, flawed, vulnerable people, as being driven by the dual engine of dream and reality, surfaces again. It makes way for a tragicomic denouement in Ela's life. The actual ending, as in *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe,* offers no genuine resolution, only the hope, the possibility, perhaps the mere freedom to imagine and envision a long-awaited breakthrough. In Sengupta's cinema, dreams and fantasies are not an escape route, but a parallel reality fuelling and propelling the human instinct for survival in the city. We experience this expansive autonomy of the human imagination most evocatively at the end of *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*. Romance and the imagination are not the forte of a few, Sengupta seems to be saying. Ordinary people can think up, feel up a get-away in Darjeeling in a passing reverie. A lot happens in a dream, even action, even drama, even cinema, even when nothing seems to happen in reality. All it takes is Geeta Dutt's magical voice from *Harano Sur* on the radio. Sengupta is ready to give transformative agency to dreams and nostalgia in the lives of ordinary people.

Sengupta and Calcutta/Kolkata on celluloid

A really powerful film also unleashes a resistance of sorts, a resistance to unqualified approbation and a corresponding urgency to place the experience that it has gifted in dialogue to analogous cinematic or other kinds of aesthetic experiences. One did not feel a similar urgency with *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*, for its cinematic idiom is fundamentally unique. With *Mayanagar*, though, a contemporary filmgoer finds herself trying to think where, if at all, the film offers us a unique narrative about the city. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* (2024) is a comparable tribute to the city of Mumbai. In fact, at the start of that film, somebody is heard calling Mumbai "*mayanagari*". Unlike Kapadia, who begins her film with a kind of visual flânerie of working-class life combined with documentary testimonies of migrants into the city, Sengupta does not frame his telling with glimpses of city life in general. The workers whom we saw in the truck ride early on are all headed for the construction site to be overseen by one of the protagonists in the plot. One of those workers will also get killed at the end. Kapadia's people are all acutely aware of their outsiderness in Mumbai, linguistically or otherwise. Some of them seem to see the city as a limbo of borrowed time, either seeking a love match or running away from one. The journey to the hamlet by the sea in the second half of the film affords a profoundly liberating experience for them, from anxieties, inhibitions, taboos and prejudices. The narrator leaves them there in the end, by the sea, savouring the

humble magic of makeshift fairy lights and a newly discovered tenderness for one another. In other words, *All We Imagine*, like Shakespeare's romantic comedies, creates an alternative site of renewal and rehabilitation from the relentless grind of Mumbai. Sengupta's story never follows those who leave. It never leaves the city. Those who leave, those who must, that is, disappear from the frame.

Sengupta's representation of the story of Kolkata as a city that seduces its loyal dependents, coaxes them to make concessions and pacts, either to prosper, survive or endure, also invites comparisons with a a fairly long and rich series of art-house films in Bangla, indeed leading all the way back to Ghatak's *Nāgarik* (The Citizen, 1952) through Ray and Mrinal Sen's respective Kolkata trilogies. The Bangla title itself may well be a deliberate play on Ray's *Mahānagar* (The Big City, 1963) with its very different story about a woman's struggle for identity. Raja's tribulations in *Mayanagar* reminds us, the class difference notwithstanding, of Siddhartha's in Ray's *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970) or Somnath's in *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman, 1976). Bhaskar's elevator ride home after a rendezvous with Ela could well be an intentional citation of *Simābaddha* (Company Limited, 1971).

In short, *Once Upon a Time* does nothing to resist comparison with contemporary Bengali cinema. Nor does it ever imitate any. It gives free rein to the spectator's own memory of cinema-watching. The beautician's daily peregrinations remind us of the lead protagonist in Indranil Roy Chowdhury's *Bhālobāshār Shahar* (City of Love, 2016) and the woman petrol pump handler in Atanu Ghosh's *Rupkathā Noy* (2013). Real estate scams and syndicate *raj* are the context for both Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Antaheen* (2009) and Ghosh's *Rupkathā Noy*. The idea of lonely survivors of yesteryear's thriving cultural scene in Kolkata is also the central theme in Atanu Ghosh's evocative *Shesh Pātā* (2023). Most of all, Sengupta seems to be almost teasingly citing Sreelekha Mitra's performance in Anik Dutta's *Āshchorjo Prodip* (The Astonishing Lamp, 2013) as an upwardly mobile middleclass housewife and mother by day and high society escort by night.

Kolkata has been a focal presence in Bengali cinema, and the tropes around it, flânerie, the moral predicament, its architectural and cultural tripolarity – North, South, and now the post-millennium East that first began to be showcased in films like Anjan Dutt's *The Bong Connection* (2006) and Ghosh's *Anshumāner Chhobi* (2009). It would be facile to ask Sengupta if indeed he had watched these films. Perhaps he has, perhaps not. The city itself is a pool of memories, something that over time becomes an image of itself, indistinguishable

from the images that stand for it, a cinema of cinemas.

Like other contemporary film-makers in Bangla, Sengupta too celebrates the mongrelness of Kolkata's urban spaces. He takes us into an old, often decrepit residential house with a long, quadrangular balcony, into run down low-income housing on the fringes of local and suburban railway tracks and stations, an abandoned and dilapidated theatre house in North Calcutta, a quaint old bar cum restaurant with curtained cabins of early twentieth-century gastronomic parentage, as well as into shopping malls and swanky new residential and commercial high rises. One of these high rises, incidentally, is funded and developed by a suggestively named fraudulent company, *Kalpataru*, the tree that grants all wishes. In a grim ending, *Kalpataru*, that symbolic tree of progress and development crumbles and collapses on the head of its sleazebag proprietor. Instead of showering its blessings, it crushes any vestigial dreams that the likes of Raja or Ela might have of finding love, stability and freedom in city of delusions.

Yet, for all its drawing attention to its own cinematic nature, as a text inevitably bearing within itself the spectres of texts before and after and their representation of city life, *Mayanagar* is emphatically historical. Both the dinosaur under construction and the collapsed bridge invites the viewer to relate the narrative to a specific historical time in the life of the city. At the same time, its evocation of history is categorically different from what a systematic historical chronicle of the city would do. *Mayanagar*'s historicity allows us to understand the interstitial nature of artistic memory of spaces, things, events and phenomena. Memory in art is intermediate between the factual, definitive, positivist nature of historical memory and the indistinct near-forgetting of public memory. Art reminds us of a forgotten event, but in ways not only oblique but constructivist and liminal. Sengupta's sense of history is lived-in, phenomenological, rather than academic.

Kolkata and the industrialisation of culture

Another casualty of this stomping dinosaur of a city, Sengupta seems to insinuate, is the slow fossilization of the city's cultural vitality into a mindless, robotic routine of regurgitations. The bridge falls on the truckloads of mass-produced busts of Rabindranath that had been intended for installation at numerous city locations. The sonic equivalent of these mass-produced statues is a rock musical remake of the feisty Rabindrasangeet number, *āloker ei jharnadharāy dhuie dāo*, which, at an earlier juncture in the film, agents are rollicking to at *Kalpataru*'s rooftop party. It plays again as a derisive commentary on the mock-idolisation of Tagore at a climactic

moment in the film. In this Kolkata, Rabindranath's aura is the casualty of massification, state-sponsored culture industry, a suitably sanitized capsule of concrete peddled as culture: an opium for the masses. The viewer is reminded here of the survey conducted by personnel of Shahar TV in Rituparno Ghosh's pathbreaking television serial, *Gāner Opāre*. Samrat Singha berates Bengalis in that episode for their tendency to deify Tagore, stripping him of his everyday relatability. Sengupta seems to be showing how the answer to such bardolatry may not lie in commoditising Tagore.

Watching *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe* and *Mayanagar* in succession alerts us to how socio-cultural shifts in a city can be mapped through something as simple as the changing sound of Rabindrasangeet. In the earlier film, phrases from a song number a home tutor in music is teaching his female pupil in an adjoining house afford a serio-comic comment on a familiar cultural adjunct of middle-class Bengali neighbourhood life. In *Mayanagar*, Rabindrasangeet has been catapulted from the confines of an inner-city neighbourhood onto loudspeakers at traffic signals.

The rest of *Mayanagar*'s sound-track is a rather Wagnerian/Hans Zimmerian refrain of taut, linear, symphonic chords. The effect, as with the patient camera, reminds one of Wordsworth's sombre lines, "the still sad music of humanity". We heard a similar soundtrack in *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*, except that it had a softer, more romantic timbre to it.

Leitmotifs: mosquitoes and street food

In one of several brilliantly bathetic touches, mosquitoes emerge as yet another leitmotif. Everything in this city seems to be proliferating with the dangerous virulence of mosquitoes, the film's imagery seems to insinuate: seedy astrology channels run by the same chit funds that pump poor people's hard-earned money into fly-by-wire residential high-rises. Kolkata is caught between the monstrosity of the *tyrannosaurus rex* and the infestation of mosquitoes. Its growth is a kind of perversity, a travesty. It knows no equilibrium, no proportion. The moderate has no place there. Even the auratic Rabindranath is turned into an object of forced consumption in a voracious city. Like so much else in the film, images of street food staples like chow mein, chilli chicken, egg rolls help map the quotidian lives of its people. Afterwards, though, the same images acquire added, unexpected signification.

Non-human citizens

Sengupta's three distinct films yield interesting, subtle linkages forged through the non-human presence. There is a neighbourhood cat in *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*, flitting in and out of the room and the bylanes noiselessly. It is solitary but not quite as desolate as the cat that similarly prowls around the decrepit theatre house where Ela's step brother lives and dies in *Once Upon a Time*. There is, again, an Alsatian dog in both *Jonāki* and *Mayanagar*. The howling dog is a forlorn, melancholy backdrop to the dreamscapes in the former. In the latter, Elsa is a gentle soul, tenderly cared for, who ultimately also finds a mate. In a deliberately created equivalence of the human and the non-human, canine mating is juxtaposed with Ela's knock on a hotel door for a *quid pro quo*. The objective is not to generate any exaggerated sense of revulsion; but simply to suggest how humans and non-humans are co-inhabitants and co-participants in this city of desires.

Bird songs are an insistent presence but not an indiscriminate background noise in both *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe* and *Jonāki*. In *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*, the bird sounds that mark the everyday passage of time are those we commonly hear in the city: a chorus of crows at daybreak, pigeons and spotted doves nesting in the crevices of houses in the stillness of the afternoon. These sounds are distinct from the climactic eruption of bird song at the end of the film. Cooing pigeons return in droves in the soundscape of *Jonāki* (2018). In the surreal ruins of old mansions that are conjured up in the old, frail, terminally ailing Jonāki's daylong stupor and reverie, the pigeons are more assertive, assured as they are of their ownership of those abandoned spaces. Notably, fewer birds are heard or at least registered in the changed cityscape of *Once Upon a Time*. Of all the aspects of the cinematic language that Sengupta's cinema leaves a deep and lasting impression about, the finest probably is sound: in terms of what happens with sound *within* each of these narratives, and from one through another.

The mosquito reference in *Mayanagar* transcends the bathetic and attains lyric agency later in the narrative. The dispenser of celluloid smoke through which we see Ela on her way to the tryst that will secure her the new dwelling she craves is a fumigating spray against dengue and malaria in pre-Covid Kolkata, not the liquid carbon dioxide produced on stage out of theatrical fog machines. Even a passing remembrance of the first and last scenes of *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe* helps create a surprising intertextuality here. The unnamed young wife's brisk, workaday gait as she hurries and up down the staircase every morning and evening could not have been more different from Ela's dreamy levitation. Likewise, the early morning smog into which the

factory-worker fades as her husband looks on longingly from their window. Yet, the fact of the spray does not diminish the effect that it produces in *Mayanagar*, nor Ela's charm as she glides down the stairs and away. (Ela's name, by the way, could well be a tribute to the brave and bold Ela of Rabindranath's *Char Adhyay*). The disinfectant shrouds her in the same kind of halo that would have accompanied her mother, the cabaret dancer and prima donna of the stage that no longer moves. Sengupta is a poet of the moment, be it the epic moments in a city's life, from one political dispensation to another, one technological dominance to another, or the lyric interludes in the lives of its people. For him, no matter how harsh the realism, the language of cinema, indeed the language of life itself, must find and cherish the poetry of the moment.

Not summarising

Summarising Sengupta's art of film-making across the past decade is a challenge best not undertaken. We have had three breathtakingly different texts so far, of which the profoundest and most poignant is probably still *Āshā Jāoār Mājhe*, brave too in its revival of the idiom of wordless films. *Jonāki* is the most *avant garde*, most Surrealist of the three, one in which the visual and aural poetry of the debut film takes on a more unsettlingly prosaic texture, like the shabby, discoloured, dented wallscapes of old houses that his camera is so wont to linger on. *Jonāki* reminds us how dreams are not only real in the sense of being a simultaneous and integral part of our conscious, subconscious and unconscious lives, but also in the vivid, tangible, even concrete reality that a dream constructs within its seeming unreality. In this, dreams are very unlike poetry. They make no effort to be lyrical, to appeal to the senses, even to art. They are disturbingly raw, profoundly prosaic. *Jonāki*'s boldest statement is in its representation of the livingness of love and desire in bodies and spaces crumbling into decrepitude. This is why, for all its poignancy, its appeal can at best be very limited, very select.

Once upon a Time in Calcutta presents us with a storyteller whose love of images and sounds has transcended the purity of the radically personal. It marks a rare convergence of all the departments of cinema – a story, a keenly political one at that, where multiple individual stories can come together, a space where in turn multiple life-experiences and times can come together, and a narrative style which subsumes the art of visuals and sounds in a way that allow them their autonomy and yet rein them in together with rare economy and restraint.

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