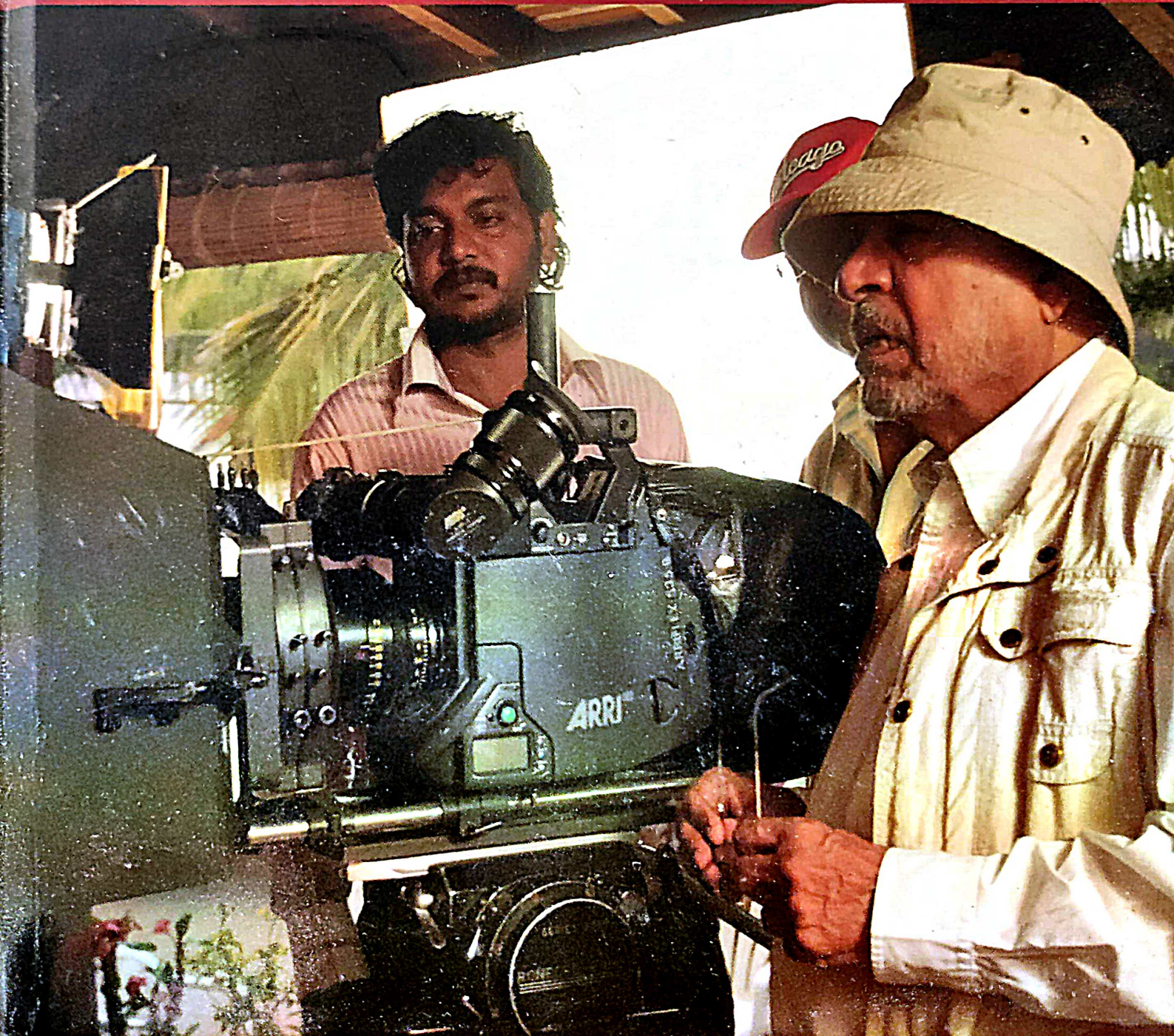


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ReFocus: The Films of Shyam Benegal

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The Ascent in *Arohan*

Partha Pratim Sen and Arunima Ray (Chowdhury)

INTRODUCTION

Class and class struggle have been profoundly dealt with in Indian cinema. This theme featured in Indian cinema whenever filmmakers tried to depict power struggles or power relations, be it in blockbusters or those films that simply made it to the various film festivals. However, it is not always that Indian filmmakers while dealing with power, power relations or class struggle, strictly adhered to the Marxist notion that the 'history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle'. Nevertheless, when it comes to critical analysis of these films, the Marxist perspectives indeed become 'profitable lenses',¹ which help us differentiate depictions of class struggle in the 'mainstream' from those in 'parallel' cinema. While looking into those parallel films where the central theme is struggle, oppression, power, and so on, we encounter some conscious adherence to Marxist thinking. The notion of class struggle culminating in a proletarian revolution similarly features in these films, but stops short of propagating a full-fledged revolution, given the parliamentary democracy practised in India. The democracy practised within an essentially bourgeois state tolerates Marxian narratives only within the purview of the Constitution. Thus, filmmakers who venture into depiction of class conflict and class struggle need to abide by the golden rule of the futility of armed struggle against the oppressor and the ultimate faith in the supremacy of the law of the land even if that is appropriated by the bourgeoisie.

While discussing the plight of cinema vis-à-vis the Indian bourgeois state, Anirudh Deshpande draws upon the understanding of the Indian bourgeoisie as depicted by Marxist critiques of the Indian cinema.² According to him, the Indian bourgeoisie comprises the lower middle class, the newly formed rich

middle class and the traditional upper middle class. This division although utterly simplistic might give us an insight into the clientele of Indian films and the urge to depict the eventual futility of a protracted class struggle and a proletarian revolution. This desperation often leads the parallel filmmakers to end their films with a message of class reconciliation and the 'righteous' path of parliamentary democracy, where even communist parties can thrive and function.

The decades following India's independence, particularly the 1960s and the 1970s, witnessed socio-political turbulence, and the constant effort by the Indian state to manage such crises found an expression through Indian cinema. Filmmakers who were trying to depict Indian society and polity in a manner different from the hitherto popular 'hero-heroine-villain' formula found ample opportunity to depict and highlight the minds, aspirations and struggles of the common Indian men and women who comprised either the subaltern or the middle class consisting of the daily office-goers commuting on public transport who engaged in social and political dialogues and debates at local tea shops, but never directly became enmeshed in political activities apart from voting. The formula worked because it gave these people an opportunity to vent their desperation due to the gradual failure of the Indian state to fulfil their growing aspirations and expectations. On the other hand, there was a parallel stream of cinema-making that started as early as 1947 in Kolkata. Film aficionados comprised of artists, journalists, documentary filmmakers and even clerks got together to discuss, make and promote what was known as 'good cinema' in the city.³ The aim was to constitute film societies along the lines of the cine clubs that were in vogue in Paris. Stalwarts like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Bimal Roy, Chidananda Das Gupta and Adoor Gopalarishnan were the pioneers of setting up such film societies, which were established between 1959 and 1981. They received direct patronage from leftist organisations such as the Progressive Writers Association, formed in 1936, and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which came into being in 1942. Members of these organisations, which essentially had anti-capitalist, anti-fascist and pro-worker/peasant agendas, lost no time in associating themselves with the 'film society movement'. The idea was to highlight the plight of the common masses, which the profit-driven mainstream cinema could not fulfil, as well as to act as a mirror of the aspirations of these masses. The movement also aimed to transform cinema as a medium of mass entertainment into an art form for social, political and economic consciousness among the masses.⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha has listed three films inspired directly by IPTA: *Dharti Ke Laal* (*Children of the Earth*, 1946) by K. A. Abbas; *Neecha Nagar* (*The Lower Depths*, 1946) by Chetan Anand; and *Kalpna* (*Imagination*, 1948), a musical drama by Uday Shankar. In fact, IPTA even produced *Dharti Ke Laal*.⁵ All the three films dealt, in their own way, with the conflicts between the haves and the

have-nots, very consciously harping on the theme of class and class struggle. Each film ends with a triumphant note, where the proletariat wins albeit the revolution is kept partly silent, or at best, sublimated.

Shyam Benegal has been grappling with the issue of class and class conflict in rural India from his debut film *Ankur* (*The Seedling*, 1974). The film essentially deals with the story of the son of a landlord who comes to his father's 'estate' and poses as someone who does not believe in caste or untouchability, but essentially succumbs to all the values and vices of feudalism. Benegal's concern for the less privileged and his attempts to highlight the contradictions within the rich Indian upper class, which essentially is firmly rooted in the feudal value system, while all the time flirting with liberal capitalism, are evident in the films that followed *Ankur*, namely *Nishant* (*Night's End*, 1975) and later *Trikal* (*Past, Present and Future*) and *Kalyug* (*The Mechanical Age*, 1981).⁶

The present chapter tries to take a peek into Benegal's mind (or his heart), which constantly gets intrigued by the dynamics of class in Indian society. *Arohan* (*The Ascent*, 1982) was chosen as a case where Benegal deals with violent class conflict, which swept Bengal in the late 1960s and very interestingly gets reconciled by none other than a Marxist state government that accords land rights to the sharecroppers and also empowers the rural peasantry by enabling them to take on their erstwhile masters through the democratic process of election to the rural self-governments.

AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN BENGAL, A BRIEF OVERVIEW

With colonial rule came huge changes in the determination of agrarian relations in Bengal, and these had far-reaching consequences. The small peasantry was impoverished because of their increased dependence on the moneylenders. Pages of *Sambad Prabhakar*, a Bengali periodical, portrayed the dismal condition of the peasantry of the late nineteenth century. For Bengal specifically, as Partha Chatterjee writes, it was the permanent settlement that led the peasantry to dispossess their land, which became the property of the *zaminder* or the landlord (Chatterjee 1986: 170).⁷ Again, commercialisation of production relations in agriculture led to the strengthening of semi-feudal forms of exploitation. Extensive control over the produce of the small cultivators began when the landlords, moneylenders and traders started using what Chatterjee calls the debt-credit mechanism. However, Chatterjee argues that the processes of commercialisation and exploitation of peasant labour were complex because exploitation of such labour could also be seen as a case of formal subordination of labour by capital. Again, although the small peasantry or sharecroppers were subjected to exploitation by the moneylenders, they retained partial control over their means of subsistence.

The nineteenth century, as Partha Chatterjee argues, saw one major problem regarding agricultural production in terms of a shortage of labour to cultivate the lands available in the northeast and south of Bengal. This was the time when parts of estates were sub-let to 'enterprising tenants who would undertake to mobilise cultivators to clear out and settle the new lands'.⁸ Meanwhile, the Rent Act of 1859 was 'intended to set right the relations between the landlords and their tenants mainly by restricting the powers of the landlords to enhance rents and also clearly defining the rights of the raiyats/tenants particularly to sub-let lands'.⁹ However, the act on the whole favoured the *zamindars* overlooking the interests of the 'sub-tenants' and the 'share-tenants'.

Between the Rent Act of 1859 and the Tenancy Act of 1885, a number of peasant rebellions came to be reported, foremost among which was the indigo rebellion (1859-62). It was primarily a clash between the peasants and the indigo planters. Peasant indignations had been on the rise and were becoming stronger by the late nineteenth century. B. B. Chaudhuri underlines the question of rent in the context of peasant disturbances. In 1873, the Pabna peasants in eastern Bengal revolted.¹⁰ According to Chaudhuri, the late nineteenth-century movement suffered from an 'absence of what may be called a philosophy behind the programme of action of rebel peasants, which by relating the peasants' grievances to some fundamental social and economic institutions, could provide the rebels with a broad perspective for their movement'.¹¹ However, Ranajit Guha argues that the peasants had their own philosophy of political consciousness which was derived from their own political traditions and even interrogates the 'elitist paradigm'.¹² Again according to Guha, the popular mobilisation was 'realised in its most comprehensive form in the peasant uprisings'.¹³ Partha Chatterjee is of the opinion that the 'Pabna Revolt of 1873 showed clearly that the economic context had changed enough to make it imperative for the colonial state to define more precisely, perhaps redefine, the legal rights of "property" among different agrarian classes'.¹⁴

From the beginning of the twentieth century, jute instead of indigo became the 'principal export crop in eastern and northern Bengal'. Partha Chatterjee argues that

it was the gradual subsumption of peasant production under a market economy . . . that brought into operation the familiar process of indebtedness leading to increasing control by the creditor over the surplus product of the small producer, leading in turn to the transfer of the small peasants' land.¹⁵

The lands passed to the typical *jotedars*, who were rich peasants engaged in 'money lending, grain trading, and often also in small agricultural processing industries, such as rice mills'.¹⁶ Following Partha Chatterjee, we can state that

the declining landed proprietors faced conflict from the peasantry as well as from the new *jotedar*/moneylender/trader class. This *jotedar* class was trying to challenge the *zamindari* rights, seeking greater control over the produce and peasantry. The poor peasantry growing out of the 'small peasant' production, the colonial state which was facing increasing challenges while trying to maintain conditions for more economic appropriations, and finally, the middle-class intelligentsia – all were 'formed principally out of the ranks of the declining rentier classes, but play[ed] an independent role of leadership in the political sphere'.¹⁷

Furthering the discussions on agrarian relations and mass movements in Bengal, Chatterjee tries to compare the specificities of the movements of eastern Bengal and southwestern Bengal. Eastern Bengal consisted predominantly of upper-caste Hindu landlords and had a very high proportion of Muslim population where the principal sources of discontent were the illegal exaction known as 'abwab' and high interest on rent. This led to the Praja movement in eastern Bengal from the 1920s, with the following demands – '(1) abolition of illegal exactions, (2) reduction of rent, (3) reduction of interest rates and relief from indebtedness, (4) "honourable treatment of Muslim tenants in the *zamindar*'s office", and (5) abolition of the landlord's fee on transfer of *raiya* land.'¹⁸ In the midst of such landlord-peasant antagonism the role of the colonial state was, as Chatterjee puts it, ambiguous. This conflict ended with the abolition of the *zamindari* system alongside Independence in 1947.

Southwestern Bengal, on the other hand, had an agrarian movement which, as Chatterjee argues, was directed against the colonial state. The movements were principally organised by the Indian National Congress and received support from the peasants of Tamluk and Contai in Midnapore on the question of increased taxes and against the formation of Union Boards in 1919. The richer peasantry was the primary mover behind the Union Board agitation, while the 'old *zamindari* classes were largely left by the wayside'.¹⁹ However, although initially the entire movement was directed towards the colonial government, divisions arose within the peasantry mainly between the '*jotedar*/*mahajan*/trader class and a large mass of indebted small peasants and share croppers'.²⁰ The sharecroppers demanded the reduction of 'ad hoc impositions'²¹ alongside a half-share of the produce. Although the Congress leadership tried to settle the problem, it cropped up again in the 1930s when there was renewed agitation among the sharecroppers, which became widespread in Tamluk. The demands of the *bhagchashi* or sharecroppers 'were now much more vociferous'.²²

Meanwhile, by the mid-1930s, peasant organisations had begun to grow in different parts of the country. In the conference held in Meerut in 1936 under the presidency of Kamala Devi Chattapadhyaya, a decision was taken to

form the All India Kisan Congress. However, until the Tebhaga movement of 1946 conducted by the Communist Party of India through the Krishak Sabha in support of the demands of the sharecroppers, no significant uprising can be noted. The Krishak Sabha demanded an increase (*tebhaga*) in the *bargadar's* (sharecropper) share from 50 per cent to 66 per cent. However, the movement could not gain ground in Midnapore, Burdwan, or in any part of southwestern Bengal. It did gain ground in northern Bengal and the Sundarbans areas of south Bengal where sharecropping was the norm. Then came the famine of 1943 which created a crisis in the rural economy, forcing the cultivators to take all the produce without sharing it with the *jotedars*.²³

The Tebhaga movement was met with repression by the state. However, as Partha Chatterjee writes, the 'question of rights of sharecroppers was to become a major, perhaps the principal issue of Communist-led agrarian struggles in West Bengal after Independence and partition'.²⁴ It certainly provided the background for the enactment of the West Bengal Bargadar Act of 1950 which provided certain rights to the *bargadars*. Among other things, the act stated that if the landowner provided draft animals and agricultural implements then he would get one half of the harvest, otherwise the sharecroppers would retain two-thirds. However, the Bargadar Act could not solve the problems of the *bargadars* primarily because it

did not provide security of tenure, there was no provision for recording of rights and obligations of the landowners and the tenant, and there was no possibility of making the *bargadars* the owners of the lands they cultivated in spite of their long standing status as tenants.²⁵

The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act (1953) dealt comprehensively with the structural problems that arose out of land laws under colonial rule. This act aimed to eliminate the *zamindari* and other intermediary interests through 'state acquisition on payment of compensation'.²⁶ But the act could not be implemented thoroughly.

The next most comprehensive measure in land reforms was the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955, which tried to consolidate the rights of the *bargadars* and sharecroppers. The act underwent amendments in 1957 and 1977. In this act, the provisions of the West Bengal Bargadar Act were incorporated whereby the *bargadar* received protection against eviction and their right to cultivate increased to 1.0 hectares. From 1952 to 1967, that is, under the Congress regime, the parties on the Left such as the Communist Party of India/CPI, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)/CPI(M), the Revolutionary Socialist Party/RSP and the Forward Bloc/FB stood by the *bargadars* and the landless peasants in their fight with the *zamindars* and *jotedars*. The parties on the Left were no doubt gaining in strength until 1964

when the split in the CPI took place. 'The principal causes of the split were the 'Sino-Indian border dispute and the Sino-Soviet ideological conflict'.²⁷ Sahail Jawaid remarks that 'the dominant leadership of the CPI found in the Sino-Indian border dispute an occasion, and in the Sino-Soviet ideological conflict an alibi, for forcing a split to suit its interests'.²⁸

Even after the rift between the CPI and the CPI(M), another extremist communist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)/CPI(M-L), was formed based on Maoist lines and believing in a democratic revolution by building rural bases. Thus, the background was set for the Naxalbari movement in 1967, which aimed at the absolute annihilation of the *zamindars* and *jotedars*. On March 1967, peasants of Naxalbari, a small hamlet in Darjeeling district, and other adjoining areas launched armed struggle against the landlords. Incidentally, these peasants were organised by local CPI(M) leaders such as Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. This caused much embarrassment for the CPI(M), which was a part of the ruling United Front (UF) government. Consequently, when the CPI(M) tried hard to distance itself from such armed uprisings, China, who was providing moral and material support to the Naxalbari armed revolutionaries (the Naxalites), readily labelled the CPI(M) as revisionists and the armed peasants as revolutionaries.²⁹ These uprisings gained a brand name – 'Naxalism' – and those who adopted the ideology came to be known as 'Naxalites'. The Naxalites would spread violence in the days that followed and ultimately break away from the CPI(M) to form the CPI(Marxist-Leninist).

The movement initially started in three areas, namely Phansidewa, Naxalbari and Khoribari, where more than half of the population were *bargadars*. Clashes occurred between the peasants and the landlords. The CPI(M-L) under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal led the violent movement with the principal objective of the annihilation of the old *zamindari* and *jotedari* systems thereby ending the existing exploitative semi-feudal system. What followed was an almost decade-long state reprisal through the police and the military, which ultimately led to the gradual demise of the Naxalite movement. The 1970s as the 'decade of liberation' dreamt of by Charu Mazumdar instead became a decade of repression. The enactment of anti-terror laws coupled with the national emergency of 1975 broke the backbone of the movement. The leaders and the armed rebels were either killed or put behind bars and subjected to custodial torture. Gradually the Naxalite movement waned and the West Bengal State Assembly elections of 1977 ushered in a new era in West Bengal politics when the CPI(M)-led coalition (comprising mostly of leftist parties) known as the Left Front came to power with a thumping majority, reducing the Congress presence to a mere twenty seats. This Left Front government would go on to rule West Bengal for the next three decades without a break.

*CALCUTTA 71, PADATIK (THE GUERRILLA FIGHTER)
AND PRATIDWANDI (THE ADVERSARY)*

Naxalism and the Naxalite movement gave ample scope for filmmakers to ponder the issue of growing economic disparity and dissension among the youth of Bengal. Three films sought to capture the mood of the Naxalite movement sweeping Bengal between 1967 and 1975. *Calcutta 71* by Mrinal Sen is actually a compilation of four stories which highlighted the class divide, economic deprivation, oppression, erosion of human values and growing disparity among the masses. Sen takes us on a journey of class conflict between 1933 and 1971. *Calcutta 71* was made in 1972 and a year later Sen came up with *Padatik*. In *Padatik*, Sen dealt with the contradictions and conflicts faced by a Naxalite (played by Dhritiman Chatterjee) who questions the nature of the movement that at that time concentrated more on its programme of annihilation of class enemies than on its politics and resorted to violent murders, which proved counter-productive for the movement itself. *Pratidwandi* was made by Satyajit Ray who very subtly depicted the causes that could have acted as catalysts for the youth to take up arms. The protagonist, again played by Dhritiman Chatterjee, goes through the rigours of job-hunting and also witnessing the withering of middle-class Bengali values. These three films in our opinion sought to depict the Naxalite movement in a manner that explained its causes and the way in which it unfolded, and were also successful in creating a narrative whereby the filmmakers hesitatingly questioned the efficacy of a violent, armed struggle in a democratic set-up. Given a choice, perhaps they would choose the constitutional struggle even if they found some justification in the Naxalite movement.

AROHAN (THE ASCENT)

Shyam Benegal's depiction of class, class conflict and class struggle in *Arohan* is utterly convincing in nature since the film captures the real plight of the peasantry, especially the sharecroppers and their daily struggle to attain their rights over the land they till and the produce they harvest. The film is set between the years 1967 and 1979 during which time Bengal witnessed massive socio-political turmoil culminating in the establishment of a Marxist Left Front government. Benegal takes up the task of explaining the backdrop and thereby the need for making the film in the first place. He does this through Om Puri who plays the protagonist Hari Mandal, a *bargadar* or sharecropper in a village called Giripur in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal. The story begins with the death of the older landlord or *jotedar* and the passing of the land ownership to his wife. Bibhutibhushan Ganguly, the son of the dead *jotedar*, administers the land on behalf of his mother who is not keen to let Hari Mandal and his

brother Bolai Mondal, both tillers of that piece of land, register their names as *bargadars* in the office of the local Junior Land Reforms Officer (JLRO). Therefore, when Hari and Bolai approach Bibhutibhushan for a loan of ₹2,000 for their sister's marriage, Bibhutibhushan directly orders Hari Mondal not to register his name in the JLRO office (Figure 7.1). Hari accepts the deal much to the annoyance of Bolai, who is reprimanded and ridiculed by the *jotedar's* estate manager Mukunda Karmakar. Karmakar had already warned Hari that he should not come under the influence of the new schoolmaster Halder Babu who is a member of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the major peasant wing of the CPI(M).

Though Hari is successful in getting his sister married, his predicament grows when Bibhutibhushan strips him of his peasantry rights and converts him and Bolai to mere daily labourers on that land. Hari will no longer have to bear the burden of seeds and fertiliser. Bolai becomes furious and makes up his mind to travel to Kolkata, which he does eventually after being sacked by Bibhutibhushan. Hari also has two extra mouths to feed apart from his wife, two sons, and his brother and sister. They are Kalidashi, whom Hari calls aunt, and her unmarried daughter, Panchi. After Bolai departs, Kalidashi relocates herself to Kolkata with the help of Hari's neighbour Hasan Mollah, where she takes up the job of a housemaid in a middle-class family. Panchi, exasperated



Figure 7.1 Hari and the reluctant Bolai come to Bibhutibhushan for a loan.

with the constant imprecations from Hari's wife, decides to leave the place for a better life in Kolkata. She comes in contact with a pimp who lands her a job at a rich businessman's house as his mistress. She is content with all the so-called luxuries, which she could never even have dreamt of before.

The communists within the second UF government of West Bengal formed in 1969 tried to push forward the cause of the *bargadars* again. Halder Babu, the village schoolmaster, is shown leading an AIKS procession as Hari watches has been sacked and is away), Hari delays taking the produce to Bibhutibhushan's farm house. Clearly Hari is in a dilemma. Karmakar threatens Hari and reminds him that if there are any further delays at all, and if Hari comes under the influence of the AIKS, he will invite the wrath of the landlord. The film captures just that moment of helplessness on the part of the *jotedar* since the crops are still in the field and he is unsure whether the 'deal' with Hari might be put off due to the increasing influence of AIKS and a left-leaning government in power.

Hari's neighbour Hasan comes to Hari's house with Halder Babu and Prabhudas Roy, a lawyer and an AIKS activist based in the district town of Siuri. Prabhudas and Halder convince Hari to file an appeal to restore his *bargadari* rights at the JRLO's office and ask him not to take the harvested crops to Bibhutibhushan's farm house but rather that he may just give the *jotedar* his



Figure 7.2 Schoolmaster Halder Babu leading a procession of All India Kisan Sabha along with Hasan.

share and if he refuses to take that share, Hari may deposit it at the JLRO's office. Hari reluctantly goes to the JLRO's office along with Prabhudas and Halder Babu and files an appeal with Prabhudas's help. However, Bibhutibhushan and Karmakar barge into the office along with their lawyer to file a counter application accusing Hari of fabricating facts; they claim that Hari is not a *bargadar*, but merely a labourer who has stolen the crops grown on the *jotedar*'s land. The officer, not impressed with Bibhutibhushan's accusations, promises to make a spot enquiry. However, before any such enquiry can be conducted Hari is accosted by Bibhutibhushan's goons who forcibly acquire his left thumb impression on a government-stamped paper, declaring a compromise between him and Bibhutibhushan. The JLRO, without checking the facts, declares before the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) that a compromise between Hari and Bibhutibhushan has been reached. The magistrate sees through the false papers, rejects Bibhutibhushan's claim and suggests that since the JLRO's enquiry had no basis, both parties should now seek the assistance of the Agricultural Extension Officer. He also asks the police administration to maintain the status quo. That very night, the police, acting on a complaint by Karmakar, raid Hari's house and confiscate all the grain and a pair of bullocks. Bibhutibhushan gets accosted by the villagers led by Halder Babu and he promises to withdraw the complaint against Hari. The SDM reprimands the police and restores the *bargadari* rights to Hari, and debars the *jotedar* from evicting Hari from the land he has been tilling for the past twenty years. The growing influence of the Naxalite movement is evident from the slogans praising Mao Zedong on the walls of the JLRO's office and later in a murder of an on-duty police officer on the streets of Kolkata. Meanwhile, President's Rule is imposed and the *jotedar* Bibhutibhushan is glowing with optimism. According to him, now that the UF government is no longer in power, the rule of law shall prevail and he will succeed in evicting Hari and making him his serf; after all, Hari has been a loyal servant of his family for years. He manages to acquire an interim order from the District Court (Munsiff Court) which debars Hari Mondal from visiting the premises of the *jotedar*'s land.

The President's Rule facilitated the return of the Congress Party, now known as Indira Congress or Congress-I. Hari again watches a Congress-I procession shouting slogans praising Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. The procession includes Youth Congress leaders Priya Ranjan Das Munshi and Subrata Mukherjee along with the then Chief Minister of West Bengal Siddhartha Sankar Ray. This time the procession is also watched by a dejected Halder. Meanwhile, Bolai, who went to Kolkata to earn a living, ends up breaking a wagon and then becomes as a henchman (*mastan* in local parlance) of a well-known political leader, surly Congressman Dhiresb Babu.

One night, Bibhutibhushan's henchmen drag Hari out of his house, beat him mercilessly and set his house on fire. This assault leads to grievous injuries

on Hari's body and he ends up with multiple fractures on his left leg. Both Halder and Prabhudas are arrested, obviously for being AIKS activists. This forces Hari to fend for himself. His injuries keep him away from court appearances and Bibhutibhushan's lawyer argues that since the interim order from the Munsiff Court has been procured, the SDM may kindly withdraw the benefits accorded by him to Hari. The sympathetic SDM refuses to do so. Then, when Hari is finally fit enough for an appearance, he does so without any legal representation. The SDM takes strong exception to the Munsiff Court's interim order and refers the case to the Calcutta High Court. The High Court sees this as contempt of court against the Munsiff Court and extracts an unconditional apology from both the SDM as well as from Hari Mondal. The whole judicial process, from the court summons to the proceedings in the High Court, make absolutely no sense to Hari since everything is conducted in English, a language which is alien to the peasants. Hence the so-called rule of law makes no sense at all to Hari. He loses his claim to his *bargadari* rights. When he tries to leave his village to work on another *jotedar's* land, he witnesses a skirmish between the AIKS- and CPI(M)-backed peasants and those who were willing to work elsewhere. The skirmish results in the police firing on the warring peasants and killing a few of them.

Come 1977, Bengal sees another change in government led by a coalition of parties on the Left known as the Left Front (LF). The Left Front promises a new beginning for the *bargadars* like Hari. It brings about a change in the state *panchayati* system and holds elections. Hari is coaxed by Halder, now a government employee, to contest the *panchayat* polls against Mukunda Karmakar. Hari wins the polls and exhibits good leadership qualities when floods hit his village in 1978. By 1979, the LF has launched Operation Barga under which the rights of the *bargadars* are secured and the onus is now upon the *jotedar* to prove the invalidity of the claims made by any *bargadar*. Hari goes one step further and appeals to the peasants that merely attaining *barga* rights is not enough, and proposes setting up a co-operative system in farming which will benefit everyone. Hari ultimately gets back his *bargadari* rights. Meanwhile in Kolkata, Bolai, who became a henchman for a political leader, is charged with murder and is sentenced to life imprisonment. Panchi becomes pregnant and the rich businessman forces her to go through an abortion and later drives her away from flat. Panchi becomes insane and wanders the streets of the city. Kalidashi, who once witnessed Panchi's plight, dies of shock. Hari, ignorant of these developments, comes to the city to search for them, but returns empty-handed only to die two months later.

The film, almost a platform for LF propaganda, highlights the need for a more developed and beneficial programme for the sharecroppers. Operation Barga was a modified version of the radical slogan of 'Langol Jar Jomi Tar' (Land for the Tillers). Through this programme the government identified

fifteen lakh (100,000) *bargadars* or sharecroppers and took steps to change the landlord-*bargadar* relationship.³⁰ A couple of the steps were:

1. Anti-eviction measures, through which landlords were largely prevented from forcibly throwing *bargadars* off the land. In fact, *bargadar* rights were made hereditary and thus perpetual.
2. A state guarantee that the *bargadars* would receive a fair share of the crop (75 per cent if the *bargadar* provided the non-labour inputs and 50 per cent if the landlord provided those inputs.)

The ultimate goal was to convert the sharecroppers into landowners through legislation because:

1. *Bargadars* would prefer working on land as landowners.
2. Many *bargadars* would negotiate voluntary and mutual deals with their landlords in which the *bargadar* would receive ownership of some portion of the *barga* land in return for giving up the *barga* rights on the rest of the land.
3. *Barga* rights would be retained even with a change in regime.

When the Left Front government launched 'Operation Barga' after it assumed power in 1977, it undertook the task of completing the recording of the *bargadars* within a time frame. The task of recording the *bargadars* was initiated by the previous Congress government under the 'Settlement Operation' programme. However, there were some constraints which impeded the process.³¹ They were:

1. The ignorance of the *bargadars* about the process and benefits of recording their names; they never wanted to antagonise the landlords.
2. The landlords never wanted the *bargadars* to record their names at all. They used threats, intimidation and outright violence against the *bargadars*. Many were physically assaulted and their houses burnt.
3. The landlords in rural Bengal also acted as moneylenders and most of the *bargadars* were indebted to them. The *bargadars* did not want this source of cash or kind to dry up.

Besides, the government officials were indifferent to the objective of the whole operation and often held the registration camps within the premises of the properties owned by the landlords. The Left Front government sought to remove these impediments and restore the land rights to the *bargadars*. Results started to show within a year of launching Operation Barga. There was a three-fold increase in the recording of *bargadars* under Operation Barga compared to under the Settlement Operation.

The Left Front in its 1977 election manifesto published on 19 May gave detailed plans and programmes, almost a like a governmental gazette, as to how the Front wished to undo the wrongs of previous Congress governments and also the steps it would take to usher in socio-economic development through the active mobilisation of workers and peasants. The manifesto contained a 36-point common minimum programme touching upon:³²

1. The Economy
2. Labour
3. Land Reforms and Peasantry
4. Education
5. Local Bodies
6. Appointment of Inquiry Commissions
7. Minority and Weaker Sections

The two most important declarations in the manifesto deserve specific mention, namely:³³

1. Nationalisation of all basic industries, takeover of foreign capital, ban on entry of multinationals and investment of private foreign capital, moratorium on foreign debt payments. Nationalisation monopoly of houses and certain specified industries in the interest of the masses. Nationalised sectors must be democratised, and clean and efficient administration ensured without making it subservient to the interests of monopolists.
2. Acquisition and distribution of surplus and *benami* (proxy) land to the landless and poor peasants and agricultural labourers free of cost. Radical changes in the land reform laws to do away with all forms of concentration of land holdings and to give substantial relief to *bargadars* (sharecroppers) and landless peasants and agricultural workers.

The newly elected Left Front government therefore faced a dilemma as to how to reconcile the ideological moorings of the government with the realities of a parliamentary federal system and with a bureaucracy which the Marxists always traditionally viewed as representative of the ruling class. In the case of India, the bureaucracy became an extension of the ruling party and therefore implementation of policies became more or less easy. However, the case of West Bengal was unique. The administration was mostly managed and manned by people who were rendered refugees due to the Partition and belonged to East Bengal, having no such connection with the landed class.³⁴ In fact, from the clerical to the middle-ranking officer level, the Left Front could easily establish its influence. Left Front leader Jyoti Basu confessed that '... although it is not possible to have radical change in administration now, many in the administration and

police are quite alive to implementing our policies'. Therefore, the Left Front was successful in bringing about a change in the administration and the police.³⁵ Jyoti Basu made the government's policy towards business clear at the beginning of the first term of the Left Front government. He said, 'We believe in Socialism but we know it well that we have to work with capitalists. Socialism cannot be ushered in overnight. Let the capitalists understand us — our policy and our interest; we shall also try to appreciate their point of view.'³⁶

POSTSCRIPT — DO WE NEED ANOTHER AROHAN?

In this film Benegal records some very significant events related to Operation Barga. Operation Barga was no doubt a success. Many Hari Mondals and their families benefited from it. The LF government continued to rule West Bengal for another three decades. Class-based political mobilisation in rural Bengal helped the peasantry gain a lot of dignity and a copybook-style de-classing of the erstwhile landlords (*malik-mai-baap*) began. Most of them initially held on to their allegiance to the Congress, but gradually buckled under the constantly growing influence of the Left in general and of CPI(M) in particular, and extended their support to them. The Left concentrated all their energies on rural Bengal since it constituted their primary support base. Through various frontal organisations the CPI(M) had made inroads into the lives of rural Bengali people and had more or less started controlling the lives of the peasants from the cradle to the grave. On the other hand, the culture of *gherao*, that is, preventing someone (mostly management staff of a factory) from leaving a place until one's demands are met, and *hartal* or total strike (also known as *bandh*) proved counter-productive after the Left assumed power. West Bengal started to witness an industrial exodus. Gradually lockouts overtook strikes. According to 'Labour in West Bengal', an official publication of the State Labour Department, there were 305 cases of lockout in the state in 2001, the highest since 1995. These lockouts accounted for 93 per cent of the total 211 for the country as a whole — seven lakh days lost during the year affecting twelve lakh workers.³⁷ The government was seen as anti-industry by industrialists, while the rural scene was getting more and more polarised with the erstwhile *bargadars* competing for loaves and fishes doled out by the Party, that is, the CPI(M). The lack of industry also meant a gradual depletion of urban votes. So, when the government tried to set up industries by way of land acquisition it was faced with tremendous resistance from the peasants who until then had extended their unflinching support. The scenes of unrest at Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh were reminiscent of the period between 1967 and 1977. The tension was accentuated by the police firing at Nandigram and the influx of Maoists from the neighbouring states of Jharkhand and Odisha into these

localities to lead and mobilise the peasants. These events proved that the protracted struggle of people like Hari Mondal no doubt reaped benefits and led to the empowerment of the rural proletariat, but the lure of power created more Bibhutibhushans and Karmakars out of the same Hari Mondals. It took another upheaval and another overthrow of an oppressive regime to provide justice to the Hari Mondals of Singur, Nandigram and Lalgurh. Hence, we may conclude that an *Arohan* is inevitable where there are Hari Mondals and Bibhutibhushans. The dynamics of class division, class conflict and class reconciliation through parliamentary democracy will continue for years to come.

Note: All dialogue translated by the author.

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