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Rupturing the 'political': Socialist-Utopian Performatives in Satyajit Ray's *Seemabadhha* (Company Limited)

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Abstract

The article delves into Satyajit Ray's film *Seemabadhha* (1971), as a pamphlet for social critique in the politically turbulent decade of 1970s Calcutta, with the aim to decipher the possibilities of the socialist-utopia it carries.¹ The focus will be on the politics of Ray's film aesthetics that project the vision of socialist-utopia on the audience community and predicate an emancipatory potential for the future. In doing so, the focus will be on the film's aesthetics that rupture the fortified notion of the 'political' and catalyse a process of mobilisation through the redistribution of the sensory experiences.² By socialist-utopian performatives, I mean - those performative nuances contained in the sensory registers of the medium of film, which crystallises hope for a more just future. The ethical-intellectual drive in *Seemabadhha* does not let the audience (the social agent) remain shrouded in pure contemplation. Instead, the audience becomes the active community, who see the representations of "configurations"³ in the cinematic space with an immanent quality of approaching a fulfilment, which forms the basis of what should come, which is, the emancipatory promise generated by the socialist-utopia.

Seemabadhha stands out in the entire Ray repertoire for it spells out the paradox, in vivid detail, of the post-independence Indian civil society by portraying the dialectics inherent in its construction, from the perspective of the urban white-collared middle class, which is completely absorbed by the State, so much so that it snatches from this class its identity.⁴ It is through this dialectics that Ray challenges the "aggregation" of the history of post-independence India.⁵ Ray's aesthetics in *Seemabadhha* stands out in its disagreement with the homogenous linear model of development of the Nehruvian socialist dream and are manifested in the film through various devices such as- acting strategies, camera positioning and sharp cuts.

¹The English title to film was given as Company Limited. It was the film rendition of the novel by Bengali writer Mani Shankar Mukherjee of the same name, who adopted the pen name Shankar. However, this article only deals with the film version.

² By "fortified notion of the 'political'" I connote to the concept of police through which the transformative potential of the political society is thwarted by imposition of stringent structures by the State. The politics of the private individual are negated in favour of a 'political' determined by public visibility that places the concept itself in the public sphere regulated in and by a civil society absorbed by the State.

³ Jill Dolan in "Utopia in Performance" (2005).

⁴ This dialectics is the confrontation of the politics of the police which I refer to as the 'political' which is ruptured by *Seemabadhha*, and the politics of the "autonomous domain". (Guha 2005).

⁵Ranjit Guha in "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" (2005).

Ray's *Seemabadha* and the other two films of the Calcutta trilogy, were representative of the conception of a decade marked by exponentially growing rates of economic investments from the Western countries in India, increasing expenditures on the processes of militarisation, public announcements of growing antagonisms across international boundaries, unemployment, inflation, failure or exceptional delay in implementation of government policies. The decade of the 1970s were part of the process of a massive democratic impulse in West Bengal, which had seen a recent large-scale peasant uprising in Naxalbari in 1967.⁶ The collapse of the movement resulted in further fractures within the Indian left. Such disjunctures within the left democratic movement on the one hand, and on the other hand, the anticipations of massive political upheavals provided the backdrop to Ray's *Seemabadhha*, which has to be seen within the larger process of the democratic cultural mobilisation of the decade. However, my study here is concerned with the subversive impulses that the film generates, contextualising it within the ambit of socialist-utopia, pertaining to specific moments in the film.

Here one must deal with the concept of utopia as a paradox. Firstly, it negates its own possibility. Secondly, and most importantly, out of its self-negation it becomes discontent with the 'here-and-now',⁷ thus initiating a promise of material change. It is in the constant reiteration of utopia that the emancipatory potential of humankind is strengthened. It needs to be mentioned that, this article does not deal with the concept of socialist-utopia within the purview of "The utopian socialists" of the early nineteenth century Europe. Nor, is utopia here associated with the narcissistic view of the private individual.⁸ My enquiry is to look at socialist-utopia through the notion of emancipation in the Marxist-Leninist trajectory.⁹

Rolling, Camera, Action

Seemabadhha opens with the shot of the employment exchange in Calcutta. We see the long shots of the youths stranded on the roadside sitting idly on the stairs of the pavements, or with applications forms they are filling up to get their names registered in the exchange in front of the closed doors of the colossal buildings. All the while, we hear the honks of the roadside vehicles, which whizzes past the screen on the horizontal axis

⁶ The Naxalbari movement was a massive peasant insurgency in the northern part of West Bengal.

⁷ Madhava Prasad in "Satyajit Ray: A revaluation" *Economic & Political Weekly* (January 19, 2008).

⁸ Ruth Levitas in "The Concept of Utopia" (2010). By the nineteenth century "utopian socialists" in Europe I mean here Levitas's reference of Saint-Simon in France, who envisioned a more just society by the "harmony" of "three human types", namely the "scientists, artists, and producers", Charles Fourier, also in France who schematised a just social structure in terms of "harmonious community" by deriving "810 different temperaments" of humans, and Robert Owen of England who tried to solve unemployment by planning the "model factory at New Lanark".

⁹ V.I. Lenin in "State and Revolution: Marxist teaching about the theory of the state and the tasks of the proletariat in the revolution" in 1978. Lenin forwarded the concept of Marx's dialectics by conducting revolutionary class struggles in the domain of emancipation which firstly implies the proletarian takeover of the bourgeoisie state followed by the abolition of the concept of state resulting in the formation of socialist communities.

thereby hindering the sight of the stranded youths momentarily. From the beginning, Ray harps on the invisibility of a large section of the populace. This is contrasted with the close-up shot of a high-rise in the city, from where the camera is zoomed out at a massive diagonal towards the audience. The spatiality of the audience here coincides with the street view of tall high-rises as is seen by the pedestrians. We then go inside the building and observe the name of the company limited. A close up of a hand is seen, cleaning the nameplate with the words written on it which reads as follows.

HINDUSTAN-PETERS

LIMITED

INCORPORATED IN ENGLAND

LIABILITY OF MEMBERS BEING LIMITED

Then follows a shot of the glimmering shot of the billboard, advertising the commodities whose manufacture is controlled and regulated by Hindustan-Peters Company. Here again the camera zooms out from the close up of the billboard which is mounted at the top of a city building. The products, 'Peters fan' and 'Peters light' are demonstrated in the billboard using flickering lights. Ray then takes us behind the curtains of this glimmering city to the industry workshop. The sequence of the production chain- of human labour and machines, which sustains the society of commodities, is played out. From a long shot of the factory, we are taken right in the midst of the manufacture chain. Ray captures in sequential detail the manufacturing process of a commodity, in this case, the fan. This Ray does using close-up shot of the human hands as well as automated machines moulding the raw materials into manifested products. At the end of this process, we witness the sales manager of the fans' division, Shyamalendu Chatterjee, signing an order of export, which the Hindustan-Peters company has acquired. Throughout the opening sequence we hear the voice of Shyamalendu (the actor BarunChanda) in a flat tone (which is maintained almost entirely throughout the film), acting as an interlocutor. What disturbs us most in this part of the opening sequence is the sound of the rattling of the machines, and the relentless movement of the human hands in coordination with the machines. The space of the industry workshop, which forms the fulcrum around which the entire film revolves, explicates the political interventions immanent in *Seemabadhha* through voicing a claim. This claim here is based on three aspects. Those three aspects are- firstly, the value that is generated by the *Seemabadhha*, secondly, the nature of the politics of art that Ray construes, and thirdly, the realisation that *Seemabadhha* leads us to.

The Claim and/as value

In his analysis of commodities in the first chapter of the 'Capital', Marx points out the dual characteristics of labour that the commodities contain, which imparts in it a dual nature of values. On the one hand, we see a type of labour directed with a specific utilitarian goal crystallised in 'concrete useful forms,' which lends the product its 'use values,' which

becomes directly proportional to 'productiveness.'¹⁰ On the other hand we see the other type of labour which transcends the 'concrete useful forms' and becomes an abstraction, the 'exchange value' which is inversely proportional to the 'productiveness.'¹¹ This contradiction within value and labour itself lends to the commodity its dialectical properties. Marx clearly mentions that not all labour leads to the creation of commodities. He distinguishes the 'use values' of labour, where the form and the quality of labour leads to 'a physical or natural form,' from the abstract labour which produces commodities in their 'value form,' in which the 'value' remains abstract and manifests itself in the 'exchange relation of commodities.'¹²

What becomes pertinent to us here, from Marx's analyses, is the fact that the duality within the concept of labour, which forms the basis of the dialectical character of the commodity, gives rise to a contradiction in value. In the opening sequence we see Ray deduce, from the creation of concrete products through 'useful labour,' the 'abstract human labour' and the commodities ensuing from it.¹³ This is further achieved by Shyamalendu's voice over stating that ten thousand fans (products) are due to be manufactured which have to be exported to Iraq in an agreement worth twelve lakhs rupees. Herein lies Ray's ethical claim, which works through the notion of the value of labour. The ethical reason in the claim lies in favour of 'use values' generated by labour. In other words, to highlight the 'useful labour' in the commodity market.¹⁴

The other question that concerns us here is to ask how does *Seemabadhha* release itself from the grasp of being a commodity, which does not comply with cultural hegemony? This is primarily achieved by Ray, through his treatment of the character of Tutul, who emerges as an anti-thesis to the miasma of commodity culture, as the socialist-utopian motif in the film. Here, debates can be waged over Ray's strategy to use a mainstream commercial popular actress as Tutul. Nonetheless, one can mention in passing, that Ray tries to deconstruct the persona of the actress to the fullest extent. Also a popular face playing the role of Tutul enhances the efficacy of the ethical value that the film tries to project, amongst other reasons.

Tutul, seems to be the only trace of life, that brings traces of antagonism through her satire (portrayed in the acting of Sharmila Tagore) in the dead space of the eighth floor apartment of Shyamalendu. This is in sharp contrast to Dolon (Shyamalendu's wife, Tutul's elder sister), the only other female figure we come to know in the film, who sits wrapped with her plethora of fetishisms. For most part in the film, we see Dolon sucked in by the jigsaw of the apartment. She is alienated from her spontaneous self, and only finds her identity in her husband's directorship of Hindustan-Peters. In the brief scene where we see Tutul open the door of the hair-dressing parlour, the camera zooms out of Tutul and exposes in front of us a theatre of fetishisms. In rapid cuts and counter-shots we see the

¹⁰Karl Marx in "Capital Vol.1" (1887).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

masks of fetishism (in the form of makeup, hair style accessories) being put on individuals which appals Tutul. In this display of mass fetishisms, where Tutul almost cannot decipher Dolon, individualities are reduced to homogenous categories, almost to the point of becoming a mannequin. At the end of the scene we see Tutul bid adieu to Dolon probably with a sigh of relief.

Just before the scene when for the first time we see Tutul, Ray presents us with the shot of Shyamalendu's apartment with a very slow movement of the camera along the horizontal axis. What is seen, is a homogenous space of accumulation of commodities, a space that does not reverberate with life, and only contains 'exchange values.' The camera here gives us the voyeuristic view of the intruder in a fortified zone. The transgression that takes place within the space of the apartment in the shot, which paves the way for Tutul's introduction in the film, are the two sounds of explosions heard through the open window of the apartment in city Calcutta down below, which becomes an anti-thesis to the secure, ordered space of the apartment, and thus creates a dissonance in that immaculate space.

Tutul alters the dimensions of the space of the apartment. The mechanical geometric shape of the apartment is transformed by a humane presence. Tutul becomes that thin layer of life that clings to the almost auto-generated behavioural patterns affixed in Shyamalendu's office and residence (which the actor playing Shyamalendu demonstrates by controlled, delicate and monotonous vocal and body acting techniques). When for the first time she enters the apartment, Ray makes her almost glide through the entire space. We see Tutul as an observer, who is at the same time curious, apprehensive and resigned, like one is in a never-before-gone territory. She gazes amazedly at the household appliances, becomes speechless after hearing the annual salary that Shyamalendu receives. Tutul in *Seemabadhha*, as depicted by Ray becomes an embodied collective standing at the crossroads of an anticipation and crystallises within herself the upsurge of an entire generation. It is important here to revisit some of the economic data around the time Ray directs *Seemabadhha*.

The gross profits of public limited companies rose by about 51% and those of private limited companies by 67% between 1960-61 and 1965-66...The pattern of the enlargement of the elite...is best brought out by a study of the growth of the Planning Commission by an economist. From a modest staff of 244 persons in 1951-52, the figure reached 1141 in 1964. The salaries of officers rose from Rs. 300000 in 1950-51 to Rs. 3 million in 1964-65, allowances and honoraria from Rs. 200000 to Rs. 1.3 million, and total expenditure from Rs. 860000 to Rs. 6.7 million.¹⁵

Sumanta Banerjee's accumulated statistics indicate towards the increase in 'white-collar' employment which coincided with the increase in unemployment in general. These statistics in turn are connotations of a certain violence in the social structure. This violence derives from the homogenising tendency of the social by a certain mode of politics which inscribes a separate sphere for itself and ascertains to itself the notion of 'Political' and draws its own periphery. This in turn cancels out heterogeneous subjectivities. Herein is

¹⁵ Sumanta Banerjee in "In the wake of Naxalbari" (2009).

Seemabadhha's claim, which tries to redeem these lost subjectivities. If we go back to the sequence where Dolon takes Tutul, in the sequence discussed above, to the window for a view of the cityscape of Calcutta, we see Tutul standing, as if, at the periphery of this homogenous 'political'. As the camera slowly zooms in on the two characters, we hear the sound of the factory siren (again a reference to the industry workshop). Dolon speaks of the murders at night in city Calcutta and their safe refuge in the eighth floor apartment. Tutul, with her composure, looking straight ahead of herself comments on the impossibility of violence in such an apparently quiet city. The sombre satire in Tutul's words and the sound of the siren of the factory bring about the claim from below. The fortification of the periphery of the apartment is ruptured. Tutul becomes the concrete form of possibilities with an ethical value/'use value', within the fortified space, which generates the socialist-utopian impulse.

Towards An Aesthetics of Rupture

Seemabadhha enhances the value of the claim by the interplay of its form and content. It is not quite the realist aesthetics that Ray construes in the film. Rather the intellectual drive resides at the boundary of the suggestive power of realism. In his writings Ray clearly maintains the sociological significance of the suggestive power of art, by stressing that 'permissiveness' which is associated with realism in art is not its sole criterion.¹⁶ For this, Ray tries to forge new 'idiom' of film 'iconography' which positions itself at the limits of realism. In this there is a double layered approach.¹⁷ In the first layer real time, real spaces are captured in the shots, which are complimented by minimal acting gestures. In this the characters become the imprints of the real time and space. At the second level it becomes contradictory in which through sharp gestures, and conspicuous cuts the cinematic space is extended beyond the cinematic frame. Ray's frame almost becomes the Brechtian stage of the "Not...But" suggestion.¹⁸

To take an example let us consider the sequence of the horse race in the film shot at the Calcutta racecourse. It is Tutul's sojourn amongst the elite in Calcutta through Shyamalendu. In the sequence, Tutul and Shyamalendu sit and talk about the bets they have placed in the race. Ray counterposes shots of this discussion with varied suggestive shots (which are the gazes of Tutul). Tutul had to shed off the ordinary dress of the third-class train compartment to be a part of this 'extra-ordinary,' well adorned crowd displaying a mass behavioural discipline, replicating each other. This is established by the brief shots of conversations among various people in the crowd. The motif of the sunglasses is important here. When Tutul asks for the race booklet from Shyamalendu, he also offers her his sunglass, wearing which Tutul now is elevated to the ranks of this ornamented crowd. This Ray makes us realise when we see three fast-cut shots of different women wearing the

¹⁶Satyajit Ray in "Our Films Their Films" (2007).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ray clearly does not want to create spectacles that brings together the film and its audience into a consummate whole, but rather emphasises on the critical distance between the audience and the film's affect.

sunglass right before Tutul wears the same. Right after this, we see Ray construct a disruption. In the crowd Shyamalendu shows the managing director and the financial director of Hindustan-Peters to Tutul, which is followed by a long shot of the crowd gathered for the race. Then Tutul utters, 'What if there is a bomb explosion over here?' followed by another long shot of the crowd gathered and the sound of the bell indicating the start of the horse race.

The long shot of the crowd is cut abruptly, and is juxtaposed with a close-up of Tutul, delivering the line with a highly energetic performative of the neck movement. This performative carves out a well-defined audio-visual register, which transcends the aesthetics of realist representation, almost to the point of becoming a 'gestus' in the Brechtian sense of the term.¹⁹ 'Gestus,' as Brecht defines it, is that anecdotal performative element that crystallises social relations and catalyses a process of critical contemplation in the audience community. This rupture brought about by Ray in the film, construes a novel sense experience of what is represented through the dialectic of 'autonomy' and 'heteronomy' of art in general.²⁰ In order to elucidate the dialectic of 'autonomy' and 'heteronomy' at work in *Seemabadhha*, we will have to understand relationality of these two concepts and then equate it to the cinematic language of *Seemabadhha*.²¹

The 'autonomy' and 'heteronomy' of art experience is related to what Ranciere calls 'the aesthetic regime' of art, in which the formal structures of art are transcended and what gains importance is the 'adequation of thought and sensible materiality' that moulds a process of transformation.²² The object of art remains available only to a certain extent and cannot retain a complete 'autonomy.' It is from the unavailability of the art object that the realm of 'heteronomy' is created which generates multiple subjectivities and new sensory structures.

To understand this process of 'heteronomy,' which substantiates the 'autonomy' of *Seemabadhha*, one needs to contextualise these concepts through the sequence of the party in Shyamalendu's apartment. The scene opens with a shot of a glass filled with wine and ice in it (probably a metaphor for the intellectual somnolence of the people at the top), with the music playing in the background, with a repetitive shrill note. This repetitive note adds sarcasm to the scene, and simultaneously sets the rhythm pattern according to which the behavioural patterns (bodily and vocal movements) in an hegemonic space are coordinated. Then we get to hear the conversation in which one of the characters narrates a tale of some miraculous monk and his magic locket that is a cure for epilepsy. The conversation then proceeds towards the problems concerning city Calcutta. Some find the solution in providing jobs to the youth, but also states that probably job is not the option for then they will start forming unions and making collective political demands. While others conclude that revolution is the only way for these youths to realise their political

¹⁹Bertolt Brecht in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948).

²⁰Jaques Ranciere in "The Aesthetic Revolution and its outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy" (March-April 2002).

²¹ Ibid.

²²Ibid.

promise, downplays the revolutionary upsurge as a poor aping of the West, and calls for dictatorship to confront the present situation with iron fists and rescue the city from being doomed.

These anecdotal representations of the body movements, costumes, speeches, misc-en-scene of the party sequence construes the “logos”²³ in the sequence. In this context, the construction of the materiality of the “logos” condemns itself. The “pathos,”²⁴ or the sense of a lack or condemnation, contained within the “logos” in the sequence projects an emancipatory horizon. The “logos” which is constructed is at once refuted on ethical grounds. *Seemabadhha* reaches a crescendo of self-containment in this sequence, where it vehemently tries to negate itself. Herein lies the first step to the thought of “heteronomy”, which seeps into the fissures of the over emphasised formal structure of the scene, and subsequently brings in subversive subjectivities. The premise for these subjectivities is constructed through a dialectic of the order and the egalitarian nature of an anarchic restructuring. In the cosy room of Shyamalendu this dialectic ultimately becomes the contestation for rights.

The ambiguity concerning rights over here becomes the paradox of constitutional rights and its principle beneficiaries in the new Nation-state. At this juncture is formed a fracture that lays a divide between the legitimate citizenry (the individuals present in Shyamalendu's room), regulating the rights, and the illegitimate ones vouching for the rights. It is through this dichotomy that Ray introduces us to the second step of “heteronomy,” by the “inscription of a power” in art “that is chaos.”²⁵ In the scene, one of the characters starts talking about the revolutions in India as an aping of the West. The camera zooms in towards Tutul, and we hear sounds of explosion along with the music and the voice of the character. It is this anarchic “pathos” that Ray introduces, that becomes the “radical alterity”²⁶ to what is seen as the well-knit structure of the film. In this sound scape, and the expression of Tutul, which expresses a distrust is embedded a disagreement (which typifies the radical politics of 1960s-70s Calcutta city), of the illegitimate voices of the doomed city. It becomes the tryst of the uncounted to be counted.

By that, one can infer that a certain sensibility of an innate status quo is being challenged. It is reinterpreted and redistributed. A homogenous societal relation distribution pattern is ruptured, thus carrying within it the inherent potential to go through a transformation, to bring about an ‘ethical experience.’²⁷ In this way, the above-mentioned performative moment in *Seemabadhha* becomes an insurrectionary apparatus creating its own realm of meaning that cannot be completely grasped by Shyamalendu's mode of rationality (typified in the film by the sequence of Shyamalendu climbing up the stairs after becoming the director of the company). This failure of Shyamalendu's mode of rationality exists in the film as an aesthetic rupture.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

The Realisation

Seemabadhha lays bare in front of us a realisation of what is to come for a more just future, which is expected by humanity with all its 'Anticipatory' force in its horizon.²⁸ What is portrayed in the film does not only remain virtual images, but becomes the elaborate reflections of everyday mundane experiences in the realm of art, which lets us realise the quotidian in a more profound way, through its dialectical character. Herein lies the force of the 'Anticipatory illumination' in Seemabadhha.²⁹ Writes Bloch,

[...] the anticipatory illumination is attainable in this way, that art propels its subjects, figures, situations, actions, landscapes to the end, that it expresses these things in sorrow, in fortune as well as in meaning. Anticipatory illumination itself is attainable by virtue of the fact that the craft (Metier) of propelling something to the end takes place in a dialectically open space, where all objects can be aesthetically portrayed.³⁰

It is the realisation of this “more elaborate,” “more essential” decisiveness that the socialist-utopian performatives of Seemabadhha compels us to deal with. It is through the performative syntaxes that the film attains an agency to intervene. In doing so Seemabadhha creates a double process. On the one hand Seemabadhha projects the quotidian “objects” as the harbinger of an emancipatory consciousness. On the other hand, in projecting the emancipatory consciousness surrounding the “objects” portrayed, Seemabadhha sets forth the socialist-utopian impulse in the “objects” towards an ethical becoming. In doing so Seemabadhha represents the “objects” portrayed as something “more immanent and accomplished”. To end, let us contextualise the above-mentioned proposition in the film.

The contradiction in the plot of Seemabadhha reaches its extreme in the sequence of the factory strike at Hindustan-Peters, which is manipulated by the owners (with Shyamalendu devising the plan), so that the company gets some more time to carry out the export order. The sequence starts (with the voice-over of Shyamalendu) from the workers' mess, where most of the shots are close-up of the hands of workers carrying plates of rice, who show their dissent for the bad quality of food by slamming the plates. This is juxtaposed with shots of the company director, while playing golf, discussing the issuing of notices to the workers, to stop dissent and sustain the production. Following which the workers' union stands up against the administration and stalls work. This is shown in the film by a rhythmic montage of the objects stacked in the factory. There persists a complete inaction with no human labour around, which is a complete contrast to the opening sequence of the film. After this, the company issues a charge sheet to the workers, following which there is a bomb explosion in the factory. In the explosion the watchman of

²⁸ Ernst Bloch in “The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays. Studies in contemporary German social thought” (1988).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

the factory, Tewari, gets severely injured. Shyamalendu's plan is successful, there is a factory lockout. At the end of the sequence of the factory strike Shyamalendu confronts Tewari in the hospital. Then the screen becomes blank with a circle of light approaching towards the audience. This is counterposed with the shot of a circular hallow around the lock which is finally put on the factory gate.

This hallow around the lock, illuminates the object (here the lock), in a dialectical space and bears the 'Anticipatory' force in its materiality. This dialectics hinges around, the figure of Tewarihaunting Shyamalendu. The lock becomes more "immanent and accomplished" for it lays bare a historical process and anticipates a force of material change. In recognising the historical process (of the contestation of rights) the "aesthetically portrayed" lock harkens the emancipatory potential (of an ethical promise) embedded in its cognition as a dialectical object. Ultimately the hallowed lock becomes the synthesis of the contradiction between the bandaged figure of Tewari and the haunted face of Shyamalendu.

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