

## Carnavalesque Popular Culture and the *Goopi-Bagha* Trilogy of Films

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### Abstract

Satyajit Ray's films *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (*Adventures of Goopi and Bagha*, 1969), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (*The Kingdom of Diamond*, 1980) and his son Sandip Ray's *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo* (*The Return of Goopi and Bagha*, 1992) together form the *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy which has become an important part of the popular culture in Bengal since their release. Though primarily meant for the pleasure of the children, the directors have incorporated the carnivalesque cultural praxis into the films to resist the hegemonic power structure. However, while on the one hand, the films subvert the authority and provide new ways of imagining and sustaining the social relation, on the other hand, they reinforce some of the dominant ideologies of the society and seek to win the consent of the masses. Exposing the ambiguity and contradiction inherent in the very concept of carnivalesque popular culture, the paper would explore how *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy while critiquing some of the power games, also sustains the hegemony of a heteropatriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Carnavalesque, Power, Resistance, “double-voicing”.

Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* observes, while the word ‘culture’ generally refers to “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” or “artistic activity” (52), the word “popular” in contrast connotes “inferior kind of works” (180) or “low art”. Hence the phrase ‘popular culture’ becomes a kind of oxymoron. John Storey elaborates on the different connotations of popular culture. According to him popular culture may refer to those cultural forms which are of inferior kind and are liked by many people; it might also refer to the working-class culture or folk culture of a community or even commercially produced mass culture. The contradiction, or the “double-voicing” inherent in the concept of popular culture makes it a heterogeneous, unstable and mutable category which plays an important role in the struggle between hegemonic and subversive cultures. While popular culture can be constructed to reinforce the prevalent ideologies of the society, it also does have the potential to resist the hegemony. Through popular culture the dominant groups attempt to present a particular view of the world and win the consent of the masses. On the other hand, popular culture can also serve the purpose of symbolic

protest. Thus, popular culture becomes an important “terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two: a terrain ... marked by resistance and incorporation” (Storey 10).

Carnavalesque praxis plays a very important role in popular culture. Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* refers to the carnivalesque to acknowledge its subversive potentiality. By carnival, Bakhtin primarily refers to the folk culture or popular festivals of celebration in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is the time when different social groups come together in a spirit of Saturnalian revelry and mock at the official seriousness of the high culture. Bakhtin’s book on carnival thus articulates an aesthetic which celebrates the carnivalesque spirit of popular culture in opposition to the dominant ideologies of high culture. The discourse of carnivalesque popular culture is characterised by festive laughter, grotesque realism, parodic inversions, gay relativity, heteroglotal novelisation and ritualistic violation. In the utopian world of carnivalesque popular culture, people enjoy in jolly festivity without any inhibition subverting the official norms, dismissing the authority. But before valorising carnivalesque popular culture as forms of subordinate voices, one must be cautious of the ambiguous and “double-voicing” nature inherent in almost every kind of “popular culture”. Simon Dentith observes:

But the most common objection to Bakhtin’s view of carnival as an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State, is that on the contrary it is part of that culture; in the typical metaphor of this line of argument, it is best seen as a safety-valve, which in some overall functional way reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension (71).

Cinema as a “signifying practice” or “culture” has gained immense popularity since the beginning of its birth at the end of the nineteenth century. The connoisseur of high art, however had often dismissed cinema as a low-bred product of plebeian entertainment or as a form of commercially produced mass culture marketed for profit by the elites to delude the masses turning them into passive consumers. However, while this cultural institution has often been used to form the consent of the masses, the radical use of this cultural institution cannot be ignored. Satyajit Ray, the internationally acclaimed film director from Bengal, utilises the popular cultural medium of cinema as a site of resistance, a part of his political aesthetics to inculcate the feeling of liberal democracy. Though Ray has often been accused of his lack of concern for the contemporary troubles in India, it is often jejune. As a response to this accusation, Ray states, “I was so passionately interested in the cinema that I could not consider politics apart from film” (Roy 310). Maria Seton, the first biographer of Ray, also confirms Ray’s concern for the contemporary socio-political issues.

Ray’s famous films *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (*Adventures of Goopi and Bagha*, 1969) and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (*The Kingdom of Diamond*, 1980) bear the testimony of his

socio-political concern. They are soaked in the contemporary socio-political upheavals, especially the Naxalite movement and the National Emergency in India. Later Satyajit Ray's son Sandip Ray directed *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo* (*The Return of Goopi and Bagha*, 1992) as a sequel to these two films. Though these three are children's films in fantasy mode, they form a political reaction against the injustices and oppression meted out to the marginalised by the power. In *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy, the directors create a world of fantasy and incorporate the carnivalesque cultural praxis to resist the hegemonic authority. In spite of the fact that the last two films were produced by the government of West Bengal, Ray didn't cease to attack the authoritative power in the films. However, though the directors managed to bypass the censoring gaze of the authority through the use of the fantastic, the trilogy as forms of carnivalesque popular culture, attempts to maintain a balance between resistance and affirmation.

*Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* was actually an adaptation of Ray's grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhuri's short story of the same name. It is a pure fantasy which elaborates on the adventures of Goopi, the singer and Bagha, the drummer. Goopi and Bagha are banished from their native village Amlaki and Hartuki respectively due to the asperity of their musical accomplishment. Coincidentally both the outcasts meet in a forest where they encounter the King of ghosts. As the evening approaches, the forest ghosts materialise and begin their odd and extravagant dancing concert. Finally, the King of ghosts appears and being pleased with the simplicity of their nature and their urge for music, he offers them three boons of immense food and clothing, incessant travel and magical power of music. Invested with the boons they reach the kingdom of Shundi where they please the King with their musical feat and are immediately appointed as court musicians. Later when they come to know that the neighbouring King of Halla, the brother of the King of Shundi, under the influence of his wicked Prime Minister, is planning to wage a war on Shundi, they reach there and stop the war. As rewards Goopi and Bagha are married to the princess of Shundi and Halla respectively.

A few months after the release of *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* Ray wrote to Marie Seton "It is extraordinary how quickly it has become part of popular culture" (qtd. in Robinson 182). Though Ray's primary purpose was to make an entertaining film for the children, he also wanted to reach the plebeian section of the society to make them aware of the injustices and oppression and bring about a social change. In the words of Ray, "It might be very popular. It would reach every stratum of the audience. My films are generally aimed at the literate, the educated people; there's a large section of the public left out of consideration" (qtd. in Robinson 184). Through these films Ray wanted to reach to the masses and he was successful as Ajanta Sircar in her article "An 'Other' Road To An 'Other' Ray" contends, "The viewers live vicariously through the characters of Goopi and Bagha, who strive to overcome the forces of evil with a strong social, political and ideological message hidden

within the fantastic imagery” (53). But Ray could not be political without being evasive due to the fear of censorship. In an interview with *Cineaste* magazine when Ray was asked about the role of a filmmaker in India, he said, “In a fantasy like the *Kingdom of Diamonds*, you can be forthright, but if you’re dealing with contemporary characters, you can be articulate only up to a point, because of censorship” (4). Adding fantasy and humour in a carnivalesque spirit provided him the licence to become subversive and challenge the authority. Ben Nyce contends, “The film is equally pleasing to adults and children, functioning as it does as both serious commentary and pure fantasy” (113).

In the carnivalesque world of *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*, fact and fantasy are mingled, social hierarchies are reversed, rigid or serious is subverted, sacred is profaned and ‘jolly relativity’ of everything proclaimed. At the beginning of the film the caste and class hierarchies prevalent in the village life is ascertained only to be mocked at later. Goopi and Bagha not only belong to low caste but also lower economic class. Goopi’s surname Kyne indicates his lower caste and class. His childish ignorance makes him boast of his musical feat as he calls himself an *ustad*, a music maestro in contrast to the common farmer ploughing on the field. He taunts at the farmer, *tumi chasa, ami ustad khasa* (ploughing for you, singing for me). But his false pride is immediately punctured by the high caste Brahmins who consider singing a superior art and hence not to be practised by low caste people like Goopi. They not only scorn him but also set the stage for his banishment from the village by the king. Bagha also suffers the same fate. While this caste and class distinction in the real life oppress the lives of the multitude, the situation is reversed as the film takes recourse to the world of fantasy. In the six-and-a-half-minute dance sequence of the ghosts, Ray subverts the class and caste hierarchies. The four types of ghosts, the king and warriors, sahibs, fat people (like pundits, lawyers) and the common people simulate the four basic castes of a Hindu society. At the end of the dance sequence the social hierarchy is turned upside down since now the ghosts dance in four layers one above another with the priests at the lowest level and the common people on the top. In the high culture, ghosts are either considered evil or their existence denied. But in the film Ray does not only acknowledge their existence but also invests them with humane qualities. The King of these marginalised spirits empathises with the social subalterns Goopi and Bagha and invests them with power which not only sublimate their social status but also help them to correct many social evils.

Though Goopi-Bagha are endowed with magical power, they don’t impose their authority on others. Challenging the monolithic world view of official culture, the film celebrates plurality of voices. The heteroglossia is best explored through the use of music. The music in the film incorporates Western symphony as well as Hindustani classical, Karnataka music as well as Bengali folk tune. In the ghost dance ceremony, Ray not only avoids the melody of *raga*, but also uses classical and folk instrument together to make a

comical effect. This polyphonic praxis also cuts short the idea of the sacredness of music which once persecuted Goopi's life. Robinson argues Ray's humour and satire found perfect expression in these films through "songs and music that display a delightful capacity for parody and transmutation of styles from the folk, devotional and classical music of Bengal and other parts of India" (183). Though Goopi-Bagha know only Bengali, but they consider the language of their music can transcend speech. Dismissive of hierarchy, their songs celebrate human fraternity appealing to everybody, whether the king or the peasant, the hard-bitten practitioner of classical music or the ignorant children. Analysing Bakhtinian thoughts on carnival, Simon Dentith argues, "the carnival forms is an attitude in which the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular renewal and regeneration" (66). With their songs, Goopi-Bagha not only stop war and bring back peace, but also provide food to the hungry and voice to the silenced. Countering the principles of official monologic culture which believe in the power and acquisition, providing punishment to the defaulter, maintaining the distinction between high and low, the musical fantasy of *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy celebrate plurality, friendship, peace, merriment and jolly relativity of life.

After the success of *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* Ray ventures to make its sequel *Hirak Rajar Deshe* in a more obvious political note. Ray says, "I was definitely using more ideas in it than in *Goopi Gyne*... adult ideas, perhaps, but still comprehensible to a child." (qtd. in Robinson 188). Utpal Dutt, the Marxist playwright and actor, who played the role of the King in the film asserted, the film was "out-and-out political" (qtd. in Robinson 189). The film begins after ten years since Goopi-Bagha had become the crowned princes of Shundi and Halla. In spite of being invested with magical power, they cannot escape time's cruel hand. With no adventure they had become bored and now decide not to waste time any more. Being invited from the King of Hirak, they set out to show their musical skill in the royal concert to be held at the court of Hirak. As many musicians from different parts of the country flock to the land of Hirak, the King orders to clear any sign of poverty in his land. The King's servants drive away the poor destroying their huts. This scene bears a close resemblance to a contemporary political incident which moved Ray deeply. Ben Nyce observes, "This particular scene is based on his observation of the government's attempt to cover up scenes of urban poverty along the route taken by Soviet leaders during a state visit in Calcutta" (177). However, after the duo turns up in the court of Hirak, they gradually realise how the King tortures the poor people. Even in the land of diamond, the common people and the servants are poverty-stricken, the farmers are cruelly taxed, the diamond-miners are underfed. Whoever protests the King's atrocities, is put to the brainwashing machine and is forced to eulogise the King's benevolence. But the only overt enemy of the King is the village school teacher Udayan who tries to create awareness among the students of the injustices. The King could not capture him as he has hidden himself in the mountains.

Coincidentally Goopi-Bagha meet the school teacher and they together plan to overthrow the King.

Michel Foucault observes, “We should admit rather that power produces knowledge ... that power and knowledge directly imply one another ... that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (27-28). In *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Knowledge and power become contiguous as the King manipulates knowledge and technology. He closes down the village school and asks the court poet to compose rhymed verses eulogising the King which are then put in the brain of the subjects through the brainwashing machine which he has invented with the help of the wizard-scientist. The closing down of the school reminds a critic like Robinson of “a scene with as much bite in it as anything in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (190). The King uses a telescope to keep surveillance on the dissenting subjects. Thus, the land of Hirak has been turned into a vast panopticon where the common people have been subjected to self-discipline. The tall statue erected at the city square symbolises the all towering power of surveillance. But in the carnivalesque world of fantasy, knowledge also helps to resist the power. The docile subjects sometimes cause the embarrassment of the King. Music becomes the most potent weapon for Goopi and Bagha to suspend the official culture at times and punish the wicked. The King’s scheme of oppression turns boomerang and he along with his ministers are put into the brainwashing machine. The film thus in a carnivalesque spirit, parodically reprocesses the King’s scheme of things to rob him of his power. After being brainwashed they run to the city square where the people of the land had gathered to raze the statue of the King to the ground. In a carnivalesque spirit the King himself joins the others to pull the rope and recites *dori dhore maro taan, Raja hobe khan khan* (Pull the rope to bring down the King). The fall of the statue accentuates the decrowning of the King and the victory of the masses, comprising of the children and the adult, the miners and the farmers, the teacher and the students, the singer and the soldiers, the Hindus and the Muslims. As a carnivalesque pageantry, the film effaces the distance between different groups of people. A new mode of interrelationship is built between the individuals with the crowning and decrowning of the carnival King. With the cynical exposure of the tyrant King in the public sphere, the film makes a serious commentary on the socio-political issue in an otherwise children’s fantasy. The poetics of fun in the last scene of the film contributes to the carnivalesque merriment through which the authority is subverted, the sacred is profaned and the jolly relativity of life celebrated. Repudiating the monolithic worldview of the authoritative power, the film accentuates the polyphonic micronarratives of the masses. Referring to its mass appeal as a popular cultural product, Robinson observes, “When Bangladesh television showed *The Kingdom of Diamonds* in 1981, the words of its main songs appeared all over the walls of Dhaka” (189).

Ray wanted to make a trilogy with Goopi-Bagha, but his age didn't permit. The last song in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* ends with "We'll come back". To that end Ray composed twelve songs and a story for a third adventure of the duo, which was later directed by his son Sandip Ray as *Goopi Bagha Phire Elo (The Return of Goopi and Bagha)*. The film was released in 1992 around the time of Ray's death. The film starts with a song which speaks of their dissatisfaction of an unadventurous life as kings and their urge for travel. They reach Anandapur to enjoy the competition of magic held in the royal court. There they meet the court pundit Brahmacharya who is also endowed with the occult power. Though his necromantic master has provided him with much power he is not made immortal for his avarice and he is warned of his death by a twelve-year boy of Anandapur, named Bikram. The pundit's avaricious nature and fear of death make him wicked. He captures all the twelve aged children with the name of Bikram in Anandapur and hypnotise them and engage them as child labour in his own service. On the other hand, coming to know about the magical power of the duo Goopi-Bagha, the pundit plans to engage them in his possession of the three most precious jewels in the world. He hoodwinks them with the false promise of making them young if they could steal those stones for him from the crowns of three Kings. The geriatric anxiety of the duo and a sense of adventure in stealing the gems in the form of disguise prompt them to comply with the wishes of the wicked pundit. However, they remain hesitant and in the nick of time the ghost King reappears only to warn them to keep off the evil path. They ask for forgiveness through their song and then plan to punish the pundit and rescue the children. Kanu, the divine-powered child, previously named Bikram, who has just attained twelve years of age, comes to their help and they together stamp out the evil.

An important function carnivalization plays in this film is making possible the transfer of the ultimate questions from the philosophical sphere to the plane of everyday life. The film not only asserts the victory of virtue over vice, but also attests a philosophical truth about aging and death in a mundane way. Be it the innocent and good people like Goopi, Bagha or the evil soul like Brahmaanda, geriatric anxiety overpowers them all. In spite of their effort, none of them can escape the law of nature. Through the fantastic mode of supernatural and carnivalesque humour, the film upholds the truth about aging and mortality. The film might have also functioned as the objective correlative of its author Satyajit Ray who was also on the verge of his death when he wrote the story and composed the songs.

From the above discussion it becomes evident that *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy as a popular cultural product resists the hegemonic authority in a carnivalesque mode. However, the "double-voicing" or the ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque popular narrative is also discernible in the films. First of all, in spite of belonging to the popular culture, as Ray himself claims, the films' appeal was limited to the enlightened Bengali middle-class living

in the city. Ray writes to his biographer Marie Seton about *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*, “It is extraordinary how quickly it has become part of popular culture. Really there isn’t a single child in the *city* who doesn’t know and sing the songs” (emphasis mine, qtd. in Robinson 182). The very use of the word “city” exposes Ray’s elitist idea of the “popular culture”. Ray’s cultural upbringing in a Brahmo family in Kolkata helped to form his attitude. Though the Brahmo family of Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhuri and Sukumar Ray opposed the derogatory practices meted out to the women at their time and thus played an important role in Bengal Renaissance, they conformed to the nationalist idea of *bhadramahila* who in spite of being educated was supposed to maintain the sanctity of home away from the public sphere of masculine affairs. The miniscule representation of women characters in the public sphere in the literary canon of Ray’s father and grandfather attests to the fact. However, though Ray attempted to move beyond the masculine prejudices in his certain films for the adult, his children’s films which are supposed to make an important influence in the formative years of children’s life in forming their character and attitude in future, remain consistent with the dominant patriarchal ideologies of the society. Mondal argues, “Ray’s nationalist anxiety might have propelled him to construct the characters of women thus within the private sphere of domesticity” (348). In the masculine world of adventure in *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy, one is surprised to find the conscious exclusion of the female characters. In *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*, only once at the end the two princesses of Shundi and Halla appear. But even then, their representation is so very normative. Though they appear, they remain silent and are given as awards to Goopi and Bagha for their success in stopping the war between Shundi and Halla. Presenting the women as mere property and prized possessions of the male heroes, Ray participates in the dominant power games of the patriarchal society. Ajanta Sircar observes, “During the 1960s when feminist theory and a new wave of the women’s movement globally were taking form, the women in Ray’s film continued to be prize money” (65). In the second film, after their marriage when Goopi and Bagha set out for their new adventure in the public sphere, the wives’ movement is restricted to the domestic world of private sphere. They are only praised for their traditional feminine qualities. The duo sing *moder ghare ache dui rajkanya/tara rupe gune jeno sadharan na* (Two princess adorn our home / Peerless in beauty and virtue). The film remains completely bereft of any female presence except in a scene where the camera just once focuses on Udayan’s mother’s helpless face while the family is kicked out of their house by the King’s servants. In *Goopi Bagha Phire Elowhich* unlike the other two films, abound in child characters, all the children are male. The conspicuous absence of female figures in this joyous carnival of characters in *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy questions the very appellation of these musical fantasies as children’s films since the very word ‘children’ in this case remains highly gendered. The gendered way of storytelling exposes the inconsistencies and the contradictions not only of the genre of children’s literature but also of the carnivalesque popular culture.



The last film also conforms to the hierarchical binary construction of adult/children like most of the popular cultural products for the children. The subjugation of the children persists even in this world of carnivalesque fantasy. While on the one hand, the evil soul like Brahmananda uses his occult power to exploit children's innocence, on the other hand the parents consider their children incompetent and vulnerable and keep them under their controlling gaze as Pradip informs Goopi and Bagha that their children never go out without their permission. The parental imposition is never questioned but justified through the incident of children's entrapment by Brahmananda. Pradip, being unaware of Kanu's divine power, also attempts to restrain Kanu as he moves to punish the evil pundit, mentioning the difference between his own strength and the boy's lack of it. Though the film ends with the poetic justice, since the child ultimately becomes the cause of destruction of the evil, the child has to be invested with a divine power.

The limitation of the women's role in the lives of Goopi-Bagha also prompts one to consider the homoerotic dimension in the relation between the two friends. Goopi, Bagha do not possess the hypermasculine traits that many other super heroes in children's films own. They are more effeminate and are inseparable from each other. The two friends celebrate their unparalleled coupledness through their songs like, *moder moton juti khuje pabe nako aar / mora jai kori tai kori jote / sei vabe vab jome othe* (You can't find a pair like us / Whatever we do, we do together / And grow love for each other). Even to enjoy the boons offered by the ghost King they have to clap each other's hands. The scope of adventure also provides them with the opportunity of enjoying their homoerotic relation. But ignoring this aspect of their relation, the films conform to the regime of heteronormativity and the duo are married to the two princesses. However, the effect of marriage is not so fulfilling as the two friends feel bored with the domestic world and desire to move away from their home in the hope of adventure. Once become free of their domestic world they sing *Aj gharer bandhan chhere mora hoyechi swadhin* (getting rid of the domestic ties, we have become free). Thus, the films though consciously attempt to corroborate the idea of heteronormativity, the sub texts refuse to completely repudiate the homoerotic sensibilities. The doubleness is always held in tension.

As forms of popular culture though *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy questions some of the norms in the existing society and resists some of the hegemonic power games, it also participates in reproducing and sustaining the hegemony of a heteropatriarchal society. "This combination of multiple contradictions is congruent with the principles of Bakhtinian carnival" (Karimova 40). Through the double voiced discourse, the directors negotiate the power relation in their professional field. The contradiction or "double-voicing" underlying *Goopi-Bagha* trilogy permits it as an example of carnivalesque popular culture.

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