

#MIGRANTS

The Story of Irani Cafés in India

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In the busy street corners of old Mumbai, with their wooden chairs, marble-top tables and the comforting aroma of chai and freshly baked buns, Irani Cafés became more than simple tea houses. They grew into symbols of migration, resilience and the blending of cultures that shaped modern India.

The story of these cafés began in the late nineteenth century. During the 1870s, parts of Iran faced severe famine and political instability. At the same time, many Zoroastrians experienced persecution under the Qajar Dynasty. Struggling with hardship and uncertainty, numerous Iranian families left their homeland and travelled to Bombay, now Mumbai, in search of safety and opportunity.



Most of these migrants arrived with very little money or property. What many of them did possess, however, were culinary skills and experience running small tea houses back home. In Iran, neighbourhood chai shops had long served as gathering places for workers, travellers and ordinary citizens. The migrants carried this culture with them to Bombay.

At the same time, Bombay itself was rapidly changing. The city was in the middle of a major cotton mill boom, attracting thousands of labourers and factory workers from across the region. These workers needed affordable food and tea before early morning shifts and after long working hours. Recognising this need, Iranian migrants began opening small cafés and tea shops that offered inexpensive meals, bread, tea and snacks.

One of the most distinctive features of Irani cafés was their location. Many of them were established on corner plots across the city. According to traditional Indian architectural beliefs linked to Vastu Shastra, corner properties, known as "Shermukhi" plots, were often considered unlucky or unsuitable for successful businesses. Because of this belief, such properties were usually available at lower prices.

The Iranian café owners, however, did not place much importance on Vastu traditions. For them, these corner spaces were practical, affordable and highly visible to



RABINDRANATH TAGORE ON CELLULOID



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Rabindranath Tagore's works are universal in terms of time, space, emotions and human relationships. The universal language of cinema makes it possible to render Tagore a literary piece for the consumption of an international audience ideally through the medium of film.

In India, with its low literacy rate and diversity of languages, cinema has become a major medium of communication to reach Tagore to the masses. The process works backwards where sub-titled films based on or adapted from a Tagore original could inspire viewers to read the book after having watched the film. When an Indian publishing house brought out a paperback English translation of Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* almost simultaneously with the release of the film, the book sold out like hot cakes. Interestingly however, the film failed to repeat the magic the paperback did. *Noukadubi* (2011), produced by Subhash Ghai in Bengali and Hindi under the direction of Rituparno Ghosh, is another example.

Tagore's *Golpo-guchcho* (Bunch of



Prosenjit in *Noukadubi*.

Stories) remains among the most popular fictional works in Bangla literature. To this day, *Golpo-guchcho* remains a point of cultural reference. *Golpo-guchcho* has furnished subject matter for numerous successful films and theatrical plays, and its characters are among the most well known to Bengalis. The acclaimed film director Satyajit Ray based his film *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife) on *Nashanir* (The Broken Nest). This story reportedly has an autobiographical element modelled on the relationship between Tagore and his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi.

Ray made memorable films of other stories from *Golpo-guchcho*, including *Samapti*, *Postmaster* and *Monihara*, bundling them together as *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters). *Atithi* directed by Tapan Sinha is another poignantly lyrical Tagore story. Tarapada, a young Brahmin boy, catches a boat ride with a village zamindar. It turns out that he has run away from his home and has been wandering around ever since. The zamindar adopts him, and finally arranges a marriage to his own daughter. The night before the wedding, Tarapada runs away again. *Strir Patra* (The letter from the Wife) has to be one of the earliest depictions in Bangla literature with a bold statement on the emancipation of a woman. Mrinal is the wife of a typical Bengali middle class man. The story is structured through a letter written by Mrinal to her husband, describing her petty life and its struggles. She declares

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Aishwarya Rai in *Chokher Bali*.

that she will never come back. The last line says, "Amio banchho. Ei banchlum" (And I shall live. Here, I live). Another story, *Khokhabur Prottyabartan* (The Return of Khokhababu), tells the tragic tale of an old retinue of an affluent household who places his own son as his employer's lost son to be brought up as the heir of the family. When this boy grows up, arrogant, self-indulgent and proud, he misbehaves with his biological father.

Hindi cinema has had its interpretations and adaptations of Tagore. Examples range from *Kabuliwalla* directed by Hemen Gupta and produced by Bimal Roy to the adaptation of *Char Adhyay* by Kumar Shahani. Bimal Roy's *Sujata* made telling use from a scene from the Tagore dance drama *Chandalika*, to bring across the acceptance of an 'untouchable' by Ananda, the Buddhist monk, to juxtapose this against the 'untouchable' Sujata of the film. *Sujata* also used the original tune of a Tagore song with Hindi lyrics that were not a translation of the Bengali original. Musical adaptations have been prolific in the 1950s and 1960s in Hindi films. Music composers S.D. Burman, R.D. Burman and Hemanta Mukhopadhyay have been strongly inspired by Tagore songs and have often used his original music in many of their compositions. Tapan Sinha made three films

Suman Mukherjee effectively incorporated significant visual, musical and religious metaphors to invest the form and the narrative with Tagore's world-view as presented in the novel in a more concrete manner. This world-view could be read in terms of relationships, man's spiritual beliefs, man's constant search for an anchor, spiritual, ideological, moral, emotional, the shifting nature of man's one-to-one communication with God, the conflict between idea and truth, the conflict between physical desire and emotional longing, the blurring of lines between birth and death, society's moral injustice towards women, cutting across class, religious beliefs, education and awareness.

based on Tagore's works. These are *Kabuliwalla*, *Kshudista Pashan* and *Atithi*. In his other films, he has used Tagore songs very often and with good effect. Strains of a popular Tagore song form the theme music of *Kabuliwalla*. In *Bicharak*, based on a Tarasankar Bandopadhyay novel, Tapan Sinha used two rare Tagore songs. One was the theme song, *Aamaar Dichar Tumi Kawro*. The other underscores the bubbly nature of the second woman in the hero's life, juxtaposed against the solemn, suspicious and old-fashioned wife of the hero. Suman Mukherjee made *Chaturanga* (2008) but took liberties through structural changes for the transition from word to picture. He effectively incorporated significant visual, musical and religious metaphors to invest the form and the narrative with Tagore's world-view as presented in the novel in a more concrete manner. This world-view could be read in terms of relationships, man's spiritual beliefs, man's constant search for an anchor, spiritual, ideological, moral, emotional, the shifting nature of man's one-to-one communication with God, the conflict between idea and truth, the conflict between physical desire and emotional longing, the blurring of lines between birth and death, society's moral injustice towards women, cutting across class, religious beliefs, education



Celebrating the Device That Changed Home Entertainment

Observed every year on June 7, National VCR Day celebrates the video cassette recorder, a device that transformed home entertainment in the late 20th century. Introduced widely in the 1970s and 1980s, VCRs allowed families to record television shows, rent movies, and watch content on their own schedule, revolutionizing how audiences consumed media. Video rental stores became cultural hubs, and "movie night" turned into a beloved household tradition. Though digital streaming has replaced tapes, the VCR remains a nostalgic symbol of technological progress and the early shift towards on-demand entertainment. The day honours a gadget that paved the way for modern home viewing experiences.



torial fathers on their obedient, duty-bound sons; (b) on the misguided belief in horoscopes to match the ideal pair for marriage; (c) on the patriarchal dictates that deny women the truth even when they deserve it. To establish that one boat wreck can truly destroy all these pre-conceived, socially conditioned arrangements at one stroke of storm, thunder and rain.

Tarun Majumdar's rich sense of cinema comes across in his use of the Tagore song in his films. *Alo*, adapted from a Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's story, revived interest in Tagore songs in cinema. It has been beautifully rendered and imaginatively positioned Tagore songs. In *Nimantran*, based on a Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's story, Tarun Majumdar used Tagore's *Purano Sheel Diner Kavtha Bhulhi Ki Re Hai* as the theme music for the film. Another Tagore song, *Doorey Kohai, Doorey Doorey* was placed beautifully in a picnic sequence to establish the loneliness of the young girl. The film also uses Tagore's famous poem, *Nirharer Swapno Bhang*, recited without dramatic inflections by the hero Anup Kumar to express his free spirit when he first arrives in Bakulpur.

In *Balika Badhu*, the resident tutor, an old man plays Aamar Shonar Bangla, Aami Tomaye Bhalobashi on his violin. Later, when the police arrives to arrest him, we discover that he was a terrorist in disguise and the significance of the tune is realised. In

Dadar Kirti, Majumdar uses a beautiful Tagore song sung by the non-descript, humiliated and slighted hero. Some works of Tagore that have been filmed over the years are Malancha, Jogajog, Musalmanir Galpo, Laboratory, Ghare Baire, Kshudista Pashan, Chirokumar Sabha, Bouthakuranir Haat, Nishithej, Shubha O Debatar Grash, among others.

Through cinema, the director-author presents an interesting fusion of the modern and the post-modern, thereby raising questions on the possibility of creating a third genre of films based on classical literature in general and on Tagore in particular, a genre that effectively blends the word with the picture, and yet sustains the independence of the original literary work, as well as the independence of the film, which then is deeply enscenced within an identity of its own. Having decided to make a film on a Tagore original, the director-author moves away from the original to create his own narrative through the language he knows best, film. Yet, parts of the original remain intact and can be identified as well as compared with the literary source that inspired the film. The director remains firmly rooted in his directorial habitat. Yet, it makes way for elements of the post-modern, such as intertextuality, nostalgia in varied manifestations, and a sense of the perpetual present, to step into his film.

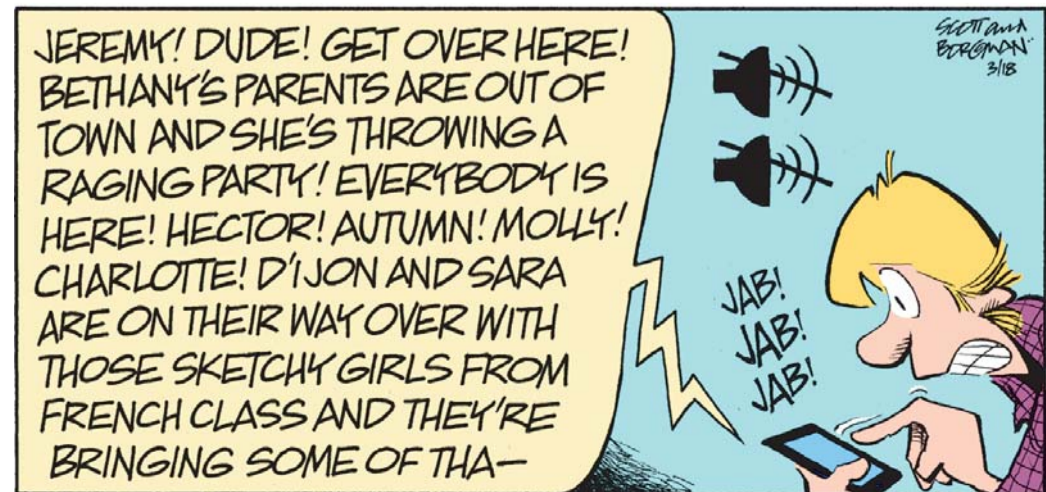
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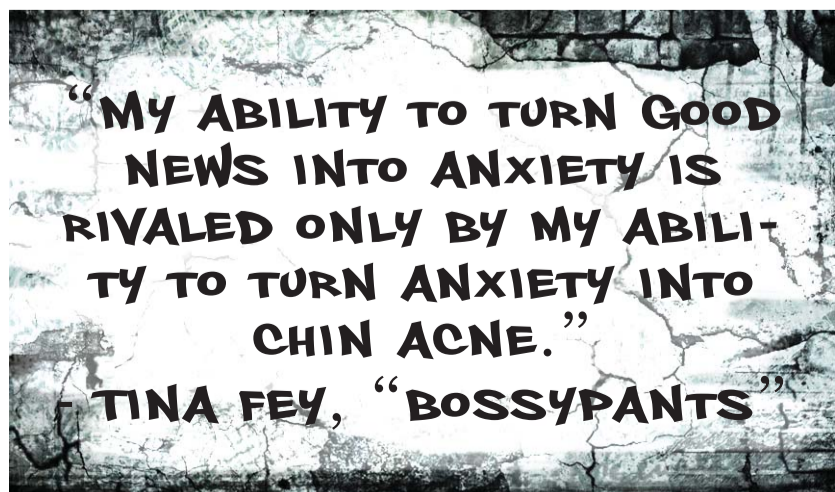
KABULIWALLA.

By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

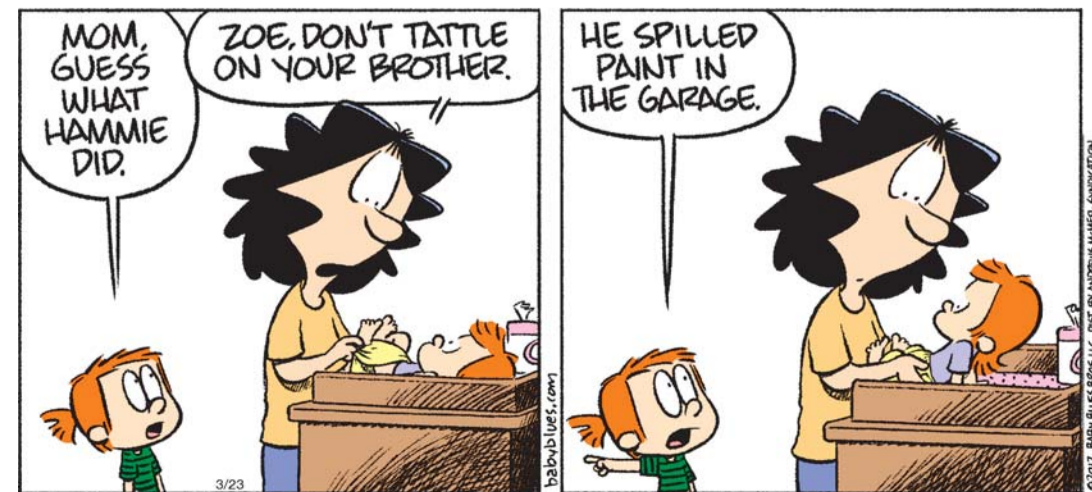
ZITS



THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman