

FILM

Shob Charitro Kalponik

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At the debut a little girl typing her first English poem ushers in the atmosphere of Rituparno Ghosh's "Shob Charitro Kalponik—All characters are Imaginary" (Bengali/English, 105 mins, colour). A voice over informs that the poem was not original, but translated from a Bengali poem. A train journey through fields and rivulets brings the view to husband Indraneel (Prosenjit Chatterjee) and wife Radhika/Radha's (Bipasha Basu) Kolkata apartment. The aged maid, Mandar-ma (Sohag Sen) runs household chores and looks after the residence. The scenario cuts to an in memoriam assembly for Indraneel, with larger than life speakers, reciters and singers in sombre backgrounds, showering eulogies on the deceased poet, Indraneel. More time twists follow, as Radha in red wedding attire marries Indraneel and touches a small live fish in a bowl, as part of Hindu rituals. Radha washes her hands and the condolence meeting reappears with Rabindrasangeet.

An old man reminisces on Indraneel and Radha visiting his house on a 'Saraswati Puja' day. As Indraneel reads the draft of his writings, he forgets his wife sitting in a taxi, downstairs on the road. A letter arrives for Mandar-ma from Priyabala, describing Lokenath-baba. While preparing to retire for the night, Radha tells husband Indraneel that she would be proceeding on a tour of business, with colleague Sekhar. Fissures in the domesticity do not take long to surface. Till marriage, Radha was a non-resident Bengali, exposed to the English language and liberal values. Indraneel is completely vernacular, writes in Bengali, and has a friendly disposition. Back at the condolence meeting, Indraneel's poetry is read out. Black and white footage recalls refugees walking on village roads, travelling on steam launches, and rushing in trains. Indraneel's poetry reverberates on the sounds of a train journey, with panned landscape. Names are lost on journeys. Maid Mandar-ma is a refugee from East Bengal. Office colleague Sekhar (Jisshu Sengupta) and Radha walk over a bridge across a stream, towards a village. They converse about a trip to New York. Mandar-ma serves tea to Indraneel, at home. A letter arrives from Radha. There are curiosities on Tussar and Benarashi sarees. Indraneel has composed a biographical poem on Mandar-ma. He has won a 'Krishi Purushkar' prize for a work on rural development.

Friends and visitors celebrate at Indraneel's apartment with food and drinks. Food runs out, and Radha has to borrow money from Sekhar. Indraneel is a civil engineer from BE College, who does not attend office, and has exhausted all leave. Radha is upset with the disorder in the house, and Indraneel's unshaven face. She is annoyed when he places her hands on the unshaven bristles. Indraneel cuts his face while shaving, and queries Radha, whether she loves him. After getting news of the literary award, he has quit his job. Radha cries, and Indraneel puts his head on her lap. He pulls out a gift wrap from Radha's bag. The condolence meeting reappears, with a speaker paying tributes before a full blown photo of Indraneel. Radha asks Indraneel as to who was Kajori, the heroine of Indraneel's earlier poems on Singur. Indraneel replies that it was not Radha. The poems reveal that Indraneel was fond of travels, though he was not much of a traveller and preferred to stay at home. All journeys were internal.

Indraneel is down with fever, and Radha consults a doctor. Poems around Kajori are read at the condolence assembly. There is a poem without a title, with references to Alkananda river. While preparing a project report in the jungles, Radha's feet is covered with mud on the banks of Haskiri river. She is lost in the woods, and tears up her written

poems to leave paper trails in the jungle. She rushes to Jamshedpur on receiving a telephone message, informing of a heart attack, suffered by her mother (Gopa Ghosh), Sekhar declines the loan money repayment with tenderness. When Radha returns to the Kolkata apartment, she finds Indraneel watching cricket on TV with friends. The neighborhood radios are blaring 'Chandipat/verses'. Radha admonishes Indraneel as incapable for taking responsibilities. It is Ashtami afternoon, and Radha's mother returns from hospital. No telephone calls have been exchanged between Radha and Indraneel for seven days. Radha feels tired and Sekhar puts his arms around her. She ponders divorce. Sekhar admires Indraneel, but wants to be involved with his wife. Radha could leave her husband, but not for Sekhar as a reason. Sekhar and Radha stroll in the moods. Radha has a nightmare of being caught in a stalled lift with a spider. Sekhar clicks photos of Radha.

Indraneel dies on Nabami day, following a massive heart attack. Hearing the message from her mother's servant, Ganesh, Radha returns back to the city by train. At the Kolkata residence, Indraneel lies motionless in bed. Radha is surprised to notice his face is shaven. Left alone with Indraneel's dead body, Radha's voice over states that while she had wanted to leave him, she never desired that he should leave her. In the balance of insults, she feels there was a pact between Indraneel and Sekhar. At night Mandar-ma finds Radha crying. Radha feels eerie in the flat. There are visions of Indraneel drowning in the waters of Alakananda river. Doctors, nurses and friends surround the open air bed of dead Indraneel. More reveries and the supernatural emerge with sunlight trickling into the flat. Radha touches Indraneel within the mosquito net, and he wakes up. Kajori (Paoli Dam) stands before Indraneel's large photo at the condolence meeting. A voice over reads Indraneel's poetry on Mandar-ma and her sister. Indraneel had transformed stories heard from Mandar-ma to poetry. Sekhar gifts photos of Indraneel at the memorial.

There is a long car drive to Kolkata. Meanwhile, Sekhar has cultivated a new lady friend Krishnakali. Mandar-ma suggests Indraneel's 'Pindi' rites in Gaya. On the deserted road to Gaya, besides a rail track, Radha encounters Kajori, in the sunflower fields. Kajori reads a madman's tale written by Indraneel, which makes Radha hysterical as she feels her husband had stolen from one of her compositions. From the sandbanks of a river, the scenario shifts to crowded streets, where Radha searches for a mad man in her husband's form. Radha could deal with madness, but not deceit. Sekhar offers opium to Radha. She tears up and throws Indraneel's poetry into a river. Indraneel's ghost returns and apologizes to Radha, promising to write another poem, after which the mad husband would die. A train journey concludes the film.

While words and gestures occasionally build up comic situations, a hallucinant air conceals an unquiet turbulence of internal chaos within Indraneel and Radha. Rituparno Ghosh's screenplay on the couple is splintered in flashbacks, which fails to make the couple's story any more distinctive or surprising. The manner of living within apartment walls or in vast field and woods is heavy, difficult and entrapped. Soliloquies, self hypnosis and ghosts lose out on historic reality, and scarcely provide access to the characters, life and universe. The protagonists are abandoned in a vast, vague terrain. Radha's side long glances catches everything and the viewer's attention. The ever present condolence meeting is an intrusion and a cliché. Relationships are depicted in time capsules, with disconnection from present reality. The narrative structure of "Shob Charitra Kalponik" releases a mobility without any certitude, and fails to build any graphic description. The protagonists indulge in concealment and deceptions, by turn. While the frame plans build a momentary materialization of illusions within electricity lit apartment or sun lit exteriors, the mental interiors are dramatically thin. Soumik Haider's mobile camera constructs captivating footage. Acting is low key. Absence of

dramatic focus, drives "Shob Charitro Kalponik" to contrivance and sentimentality. Rabindra sangeet and Joy Goswami's poetry merely echo in the disjointed scenario.□