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Bengali Cinema: Bengalis and Cinema

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Editorial

Bengal has a glorious history of performing arts. We find mentions of songs and dances in the performance of *Buddha Natak* in Charyapada (Chorjapod), we know Chaitanya himself used to perform in plays based on Krishna *Leela*, we are heirs to an ancient tradition of *Jatras*, we had our Kathak Thakurs (rhapsodes) who narrated epics in our villages, we inherit an enchanting art of dance and music of the Raas of Radha Krishna, we have been fortunate to have the tradition of a pictorial art of story telling in our *Pot Chitro* (Patachitra, an ancient form of graphic narrative) that has been traditionally done by our *Potuas* and puppet dances have been a regular feature of our *Melas* which in turn have historically delineated the forms of popular entertainment in Bengal. Bengali Cinema, when detached from these roots, loses its anchor and turns into non-art. The cinema issue of Journal of Bengali Studies (Vol. 1, No. 2) being published on the occasion of Janmashtami is a celebration of our performative traditions, and as a token gesture, our cover carries an image from Uday Shankar's 1923 ballet, *Radha Krishna*.

Cinema becomes an integral part of human life under modernity, but the tradition of mimetic performance is perhaps as old as the human civilization itself. In India, earliest instances of acting date back to the Vedic times or even earlier. During the Ashwamedha, Rajasuya and Vajapeya sacrifices, the achievements of ancient kings and sages were narrated with music and acting. This tradition was systematically expounded by Bharata, in his *Natya Shastra*. Perhaps it is this tradition of performative arts, so deep-rooted in our culture, that enables the Indians to produce the maximum number of films in the world in any given year. Tamil, Telugu and Hindi film industries inherit an ancient Indian tradition of entertainment through spectacular performance accompanied by songs and dances.

Bengali Film Industry that initially started far ahead of these industries eventually suffered a decline, during which it economically survived by mostly producing emotional and romantic films,

involving realistic depictions of character-oriented actions. A certain flow of emotion compensated our industry for the absence of finance, spectacular technology and marketing. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* by Ritwik Ghatak is a brilliant example of this flow of emotion. Interestingly, even Bharata's *Natya Shastra* put emphasis on the flow of emotion through the actor and the actress, so Bengali emotional films are not without a lineage.

Cinema is a marvel of modern technology and its birthplace is the west. Western influences and resistance to those influences run as common motifs in Bengali cinema which started with Hiralal Sen in the 1890s under western influences, but it soon found its unique Bengali expression. Greek influences in our art and culture once produced *Gandhara* Art in India, the subject of which was unmistakably Indian, but the style of the treatment of that subject was Greek. Likewise Bengali cinema in being influenced by Hollywood gives birth to a composite film culture that nevertheless remains Bengali to the core. A fertile process of cultural hybridity that encouraged innovation and discouraged blind imitation marked Bengali cinema in its early period.

The decline of Bengali film industry was a result of the absence of a Bengali nationalist politics, a vacuum that was filled by the presence of Communist influence. Lack of funding was another contributing factor. Overseas patronage coming from the Tamils settled abroad yielded certain concrete benefits for Tamil Film Industry, but Bengalis by and large lacked that communal bonding in an atmosphere heavily laden with left-liberal ideology. Partition and the constant flow of refugees and infiltrators from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh jeopardized Bengali economy. The absence of a Bengali trader class has been our bane throughout our history and our cinema suffers massively due to lack of Bengali capital.

However, contemporary Bengali cinema gives us a lot of hopes. Bengali cinema is turning around and is delivering commercial hits which are artistically noteworthy too. Bengali viewers are going to multiplexes to watch Bengali movies. Tollywood now supersedes Bollywood and Hollywood in terms of business in Bengal which stopped being the case since 1970s. Bengalis are

making a number of smart and brilliant movies these days and Bengali cinema can return to the glory days of New Theatres once more, armed with an intelligent story telling and an understanding of popular entertainment.

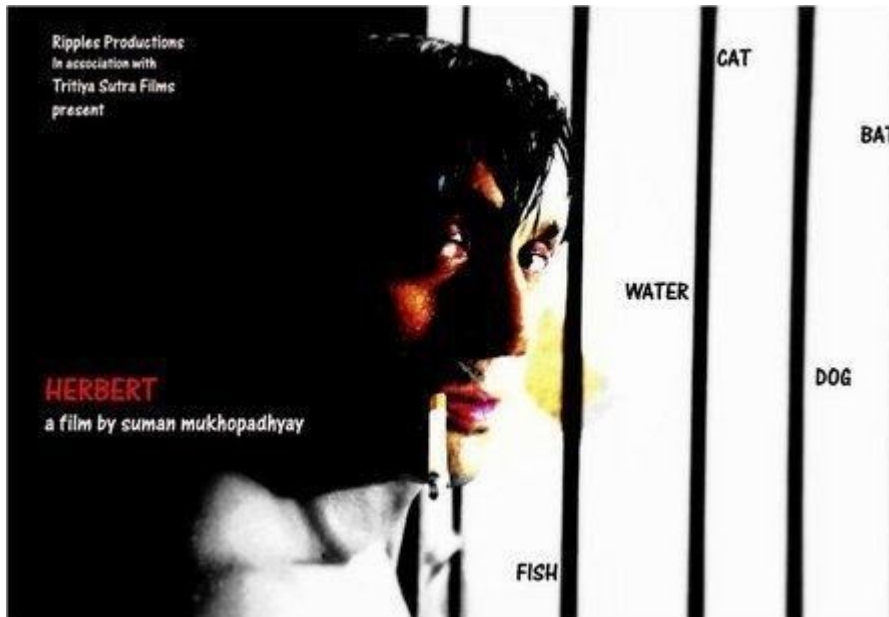
As a Bengali nationalistic endeavour, this journal remains committed to the study and analysis of Bengali culture, and continues to nurture that project in this current issue celebrating **Bengali Cinema: Bengalis and Cinema**. We congratulate our contributors whose sincere research works examining Bengali cinema and the Bengalis' relationship with cinema from different thought-provoking perspectives will not only continue to provide insights into the historical development for Bengali film industry for all future students of Bengali cinema, it will also make its permanent place in the historiography of Bengali cinema. It will be a collector's item for anyone who is interested in Bengali culture, we believe.

In this issue we have included a third section in our journal, in addition to articles and reviews, which is called 'Creative Workshop: Theory in Practice'. This section features a creative work related to the theme of this issue of JBS. This issue's creative workshop features a script adaptation of a poem, with a brief note from the scriptwriter.

The editorial board (and the contributors) can be reached at editjbs@gmail.com and shoptodina@gmail.com. Readers of JBS can find updates and call For Papers for the forthcoming issues and post comments and responses at <http://bengalistudies.blogspot.in/>.

**Towards a Historiography of Bengali Cinema
Or,
Everything You Enquired about Herbert Sarkar, but Were Dismissed by
the Coffee House Intellectual**

Tamal Dasgupta



This article attempts an against-the-grain reading of *Herbert* the book (1993) and *Herbert* the film (made in 2005, public release in Kolkata in 2006) and in the process of that reading, tries to establish a methodology for studying the historical trajectory of Bengali cinema, which is a part of the larger socio-economic-political trajectory of Bengali culture in the twentieth century). Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Herbert* (that won Sahitya Academy Award in 1997) is a deeply cinematic novel, going by the admission of Suman Mukhopadhyay (the director of *Herbert*) himself in an interview with Deepa Ganesh published in *The Hindu* on April 7 2006, where he says, “The first reading of the novel evoked cinematic images” (Ganesh, “The Outsider and His City”). Accordingly, the film made by Suman Mukhopadhyay is meta-cinematic; *Herbert* is a movie about movies. Nathan Lee, a film critic, speaks of *Herbert* the film in these terms in *New York Times* on 10 December 2008: “Movies are very much the point of this film: allusions to classic Hollywood and Indian cinema

abound” (Lee, “Storm Advisory: Cyclone of a Life on the Horizon”). In this article we shall see that *Herbert* can tell us a thing or two about Bengali Cinema, and reading of certain motifs from the text-film duo of *Herbert* will lead us into a corresponding study of certain trope from the history of Bengali cinema. The attempt is not just to read *Herbert* as a symbolic/allegorical history of Bengali culture/Cinema in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, there are simultaneous readings of the crisis of Bengali culture and the communist hegemony and the personal crisis and tragedy of Herbert Sarkar in this article. There have been two English translations of *Herbert* till date, but all references to the novel in this article are made to the original Bengali text, and excerpts from the novel, wherever they occur in this article, are translated by the present writer.

The literary cinematic exchange/transference economy that is at work between *Herbert* the movie and *Herbert* the novel needs to be looked at keeping in mind the nuances of textual transmission, determined by the physicality of a particular medium. Even a certain issue of the little magazine where *Herbert* was first published and the copy of a hard-bound edition of *Herbert* will differ from each other: though both might be carrying the same text, the novel will have different textual expressions and embodiments and sensual forms in each case. However, differences in mediums are as *valid* as the interactions among them. Instead of fetishizing the medium of cinema and the literary medium as two isolated and fortified domains, concretely separated by technology, strategy, registrar and history, we can look at the literary cinematic interaction that is at work in the text-film duo of *Herbert* as transaction of a text across mediums where each medium is coterminous with another, and they together exist within a complex matrix of interrelationship.

Herbert is an extraordinary character. When history hovers over an enchanted Kolkata shrouded in the mist of memory and oblivion, the surreal conditions of coexistence between past and present can be called Herbert Sarkar, the protagonist of the novel and film *Herbert*. *Herbert* is a cryptic history of the degeneration of Bengal in the later half of twentieth century, which is contrasted and compared in the novel with the (once celebrated but now forgotten) literature of

nineteenth century that witnessed Bengal renaissance (if spelt with a small r, we can perhaps do justice to some of its valid critiques). *Herbert* brings to the foreground the relationship between literature and cinema (*Herbert*, in all senses of the term, is a *boi*; the Bengali colloquial word for cinema is *boi* which also means book, and that reflects our deep rooted national desire for narratives as we expect to see a *boi* on screen), and also the connection of cinema to other discourses: like history, for example. The archeology of nineteenth century Bengali culture is a recurrent motif in *Herbert*.

The literature-cinema transaction is not unilateral, it works both ways. The novel by Nabarun Bhattacharya itself evokes cinematic imagery and employs cinematic technique repeatedly. Keith Cohen speaks of novel's deep indebtedness to cinema in the twentieth century, in terms of structure, narrative technique and use of language (79-104). *Herbert* the novel is a case in point. The cinematic technique of montage is integral to the author's design that produces a collage between past and present in this novel. There are multiple quotations from nineteenth century (and early twentieth century) Bengali poetry in this novel in regular intervals; they offer a carefully designed archaicism. They are strategically placed at the beginning of each chapter, and are sometimes placed inside the main body of text, too. They are quotations from obsolete, obscure and quaint sources (most contemporary Bengali readers have not even heard of these writers; some even might suspect them to be fictitious, but all these names of the poets and the lines of the poems are actually historical), hazily identifiable with the age of national awakening of Bengal; archaic and meaningless to the present times, at a first glance they are little more than hieroglyphic elements from a past the contexts of which were different and now they are hard to decipher, at least for the historically amnesiac generations growing up under communist hegemony (since these pre-communistic times constitute an equivalent to what is called *Jahiliyyah* in Islamic world-view; unregenerate and meant to be looked down upon, they preceded the establishment of true and chosen times, which begins in Bengal with the beginning of communist hegemony).

Chapter four of Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Herbert* contains the episode of Binu (the naxalite nephew of Herbert), and it begins with a quotation from Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, “Oi shuno! Oi shuno! Bheriro aaoyaj he Bheriro aaoyaj!” (Hark! Hark! The sound of the Drums of War, dear, the sound of the Drums of War!). This line is actually taken from Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's poem “Shadhinota Hinotay Ke Banchite Chay” (Who Wants to Live Without Freedom!), that became one of the greatest patriotic-revolutionary songs of nineteenth century, and as a great poetry of nationalism, was second only to Vande Mataram in terms of its impact on the people, though now very few Bengalis would be able to remember the entire poem beyond the title. Now, the parallels are too obvious to miss. The trajectory of Naxalite movement shares some uncanny similarities with that of our armed freedom struggle. *Herbert* takes place in a space time location that still has memories (perhaps deeply buried within the unconscious, like the memory of Binu's diary was buried within Herbert's unconscious and it returned to haunt Herbert in his dream) of Bengal renaissance and the revolutionary nationalist movement. The Central Kolkata residence of Herbert – Sahebpara (erstwhile white town) is 20 minutes walk from his residence, we are told in the novel (47) – has been the birthplace of the social, political and cultural awakening of Bengal, something that has been made obscure to the generations living in post-Independence Kolkata. The novel draws our attention to that obscurity while quotations from nineteenth century poetry are placed parallel to the actions that are taking place in contemporary Kolkata. Each quotation, acts like “a giant metaphor, or analogy” to a corresponding event in the novel in a strategy of montage, we can say following Keith Cohen (87). And in this analogy there is a heightened contrast between the coded past glory, and the contemporary pettiness: Herbert is to Bengal renaissance what the times of the house gecko is to the age of the great reptiles.

Unfortunately these quotations find no echo in the film. The film-maker probably could not find a way to represent these elements in an audio-visual medium; they are completely discarded in the movie. Thus Herbert Sarkar is even more historically impoverished in the film than he was in

the novel; apart from the nineteenth century books on ghosts and afterlife, *Herbert* the film does not have any other mention of any old works of Bengali literature. In the novel, these extracts at the beginning of each chapter constitute references to the glorious past of Bengal, as if ancestral voices are heard from afar in a dream. They appear like hieroglyphs: apparently unrelated to the main text, and difficult to comprehend, like rituals whose original meanings are now lost and are uttered by the authorial voice of the writer like esoteric mantras, which begin each chapter of Herbert's life-story. They are actually memories of our national awakening, which is deeply buried beneath the plot in Herbert's narrative. Who reads out these lines in the novel? The omnipresent narrator does. But does Herbert hear them? Certainly he does not. Do these lines influence his life in some way or other? They indeed do. Are these lines a part of the plot? They are, but only in magically foretelling the actions which take place in contemporary Kolkata. It seems the characters are not aware that they are repeating history (that is the inevitable fate of those who forget history), while the writer and the readers are aware of the presentiment offered by these excerpts from nineteenth century poetry. It is a pity that neither these elliptical extracts nor the gap/silence between the lines of these extracts and the events in Herbert's life in Nabarun's text find any cinematic representation in Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Herbert*.

Herbert's father, Lalitkumar (who is called Lalitmohan on page 73 of the novel, no doubt an act of lapse on the part of Nabarun Bhattacharya) has been a failed film-maker while alive; he and his wife continue to witness the events of Herbert's life after they are dead. The entire life-story of Herbert becomes a film that his late father, a ghost, captures in a movie camera (after his mother dies, she joins her husband in this cinematographic experience). Lalitkumar calls Herbert's life a movie, after Herbert has committed suicide, and wants his wife's opinion about whether it will be a hit or a flop (73). The novel ends with an assertion that the life/film of Herbert has been a flop one: there is no picture on the screen, and the only sound that is heard is “cat, bat, water, dog, fish” (80). The film explicitly shows Lalitkumar as the director-cinematographer who keeps filming Herbert's

life, and there are certain parts of the film which make the noise of an unedited rush and appear in the semblance of rush print of projection at the editing table.



The dead parents of Herbert filming his life's narrative

There are references to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* in the film: when Herbert visits Presidency College where Binu is taking admission, the stairways remind him of the famous Odessa steps from Eisenstein's movie which Herbert happened to watch with his communist elder brother Krishna. This is a meta-cinematic symbol in two different ways. First, Herbert whose life events constitute a film, remembers Eisenstein's movie. Secondly, Eisenstein has been integral to the 'progressive' Bengali understanding of cinema, so the spectators are aware of the revolutionary temperament of the times.

Herbert commits suicide in the beginning of the novel, and then the story of his life leading to this suicide is narrated using the strategy of flashback, and all along the visual imagination of the writer is noticeably cinematic. Different time zones come to coexist within a single frame in the film accordingly. The novel makes the historical-contemporaneous interface into a frequent motif. Different generation share the same screen space, the same frame in the cinematic strategy of the director Suman Mukhopadhyay. All of Herbert's ancestors come together to witness Herbert's cremation. The dead generations constitute a montage to the climax of explosion waiting to happen as Herbert's body will enter the furnace. While the past generations are witnessing and registering

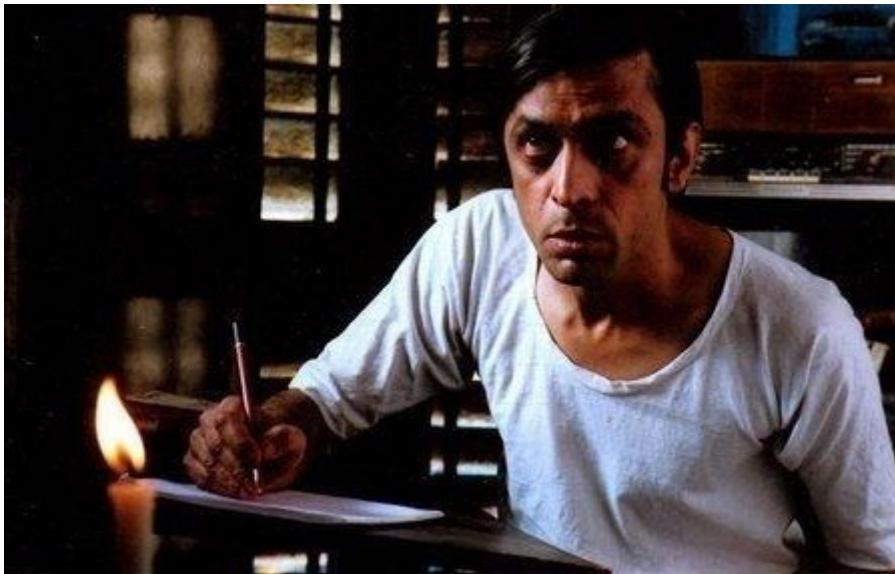
the life story of Herbert, we understand, he too is re-enacting the legacy of his forebears.

The suicide of Herbert Sarkar, which is a direct outcome of his encounter with the rationalists, is full of surreal squalor and wretchedness (something that characterizes the novel as a whole), something that reminds of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe's urban decadence. Nabarun Bhattacharya's short story "Steamroller" begins with a quotation from Baudelaire: "Je dis: Vive la Revolution! comme je dirais: Vive la Destruction! Vive la Mort!" (*Halaljhanda* 13). These words of Baudelaire can be translated as follows; "I say: Long Live Revolution! Like I say: Long Live Destruction! Long Live Death!" This theme recurs in Nabarun's works time and again. We can see that death and destruction constitute a montage with revolution in *Herbert* the novel, the atmosphere of which is dominated by an extraordinary gloom. It was written after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Empire which caused not just emotional and political trauma but financial strain for the writer as he lost his job that he did at a Soviet news agency. There are melancholic references to the collapse of the communist world in *Herbert* (61). After Herbert's death the novel laments: "Herbert is no more. Soviet Union is no more. Hippodrome Circus is no more. Dinu's Restaurant by the side of famous Gosain mansion on Shimla Street is no more" (29). The tone of this novel is so gloomy that it at times leads us into believing that the past of Bengal almost entirely consists of alcoholic, lecherous, selfish, superstitious, petty crooks who are now watching over Herbert in pervert pleasure and accompanying him into his death.

Herbert's death offers a rich multitude of significations. At one level, the cremation of Herbert leading to explosion offers a suitably communistic catharsis. However, the explosion does not signal a return to naxalism. The death of Herbert does not follow a resurrection: he does not return as a ghost like his ancestors. Herbert has just died like Soviet Union, Chairman's China and Charu Majumdar and like them he can not be recalled to life any more. A subversion against the ruling order has indeed occurred and Herbert's dead body has challenged the complacency of the state power. But the explosion takes place through a remnant of the past, not through the promise of

a revolutionary future (which might proverbially belong to socialism). Possibilities of a post-communist aesthetics and politics emerge from Herbert's death. The aesthetic (not in the sense of artistic qualities, but in the original sense of discourses pertaining to bodily sensations; it is from this original sense medical sciences have the antonym anaesthesia) versus logic conflict in *Herbert* is particularly interesting. The compulsions of the physical body we are born with are not malleable to cold reason, which always represents the case of power. Ghosts are no longer commensurate with a world dominated by the immediate urges of the present that is ruled by a vulgar materialism (represented by the rationalists). But paradoxically, ghosts are a material need: our body needs the memory of phylogeny. Human bodies are existentially conditioned to myths. Herbert invents stories of souls because that is a bodily desire to reach out to the dead, while this aesthetic longing of Herbert enters into deep conflict with the logic of a mechanical materialism that is championed by the rationalists. Terry Eagleton, who in recent years entered into heated debates with rationalists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (Eagleton took the side of theology, God and the human need for religion: those who are interested in further reading can study Eagleton's *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*) observed:

I think McCabe was right to see that the traditional Christian belief is in the resurrection of the body rather than the deeply non-Judaic notion of the immortality of the soul. As Thomas Aquinas might have said, if a renewed form of existence doesn't involve my body it doesn't involve me. He identified people with their bodies – as Wittgenstein did in that remark that if you want an image of the soul you should look at the human body. **Soul-language is just a way of accounting for what makes creative, historical, self-transformative bodies like human ones ontologically distinct from material bodies like CD players and pepercips.** Once one has a sufficiently phenomenological account of the body, such language can drop out of the picture. It's no longer useful in one's battle with the mechanical materialists. (Eagleton and Beaumont 310) (bold letters mine)



Herbert in dialogue with the dead

Herbert is not conscious that his dialogues with the dead are a response to his body's search for signification. From bits and pieces of a tortuous life experience, Herbert builds up myths, resorts to obscure books that deals with ghosts and invents a soul-language that alone can express his ontological crisis. Myths are all that can ever allay the deep wounds his life has sustained. If we read the following excerpt where Terry Eagleton discusses Walter Benjamin's formulation of the significance of the dead body in German baroque tragedy, it becomes evident that Herbert's past was released by his dead body into multiple symbolic readings:

The baroque flays and butchers the living flesh in order to inscribe some allegorical meaning there; since the living body presents itself as an inexpressible symbolic unity, it is only in its brutal undoing, its diffusion into so many torn, reified fragments, that some provisional meaning may be ripped from its organic closure. The body thus achieves its full revelation only as a corpse; it is by death alone that the *Trauerspiel* characters can enter into the realms of allegory, shedding their flesh so that the drama may scavenge for significance among its pieces. In a curious prefiguration of Freudian theory, it is only by dividing the body, grasping it as the decentred site of contradictions between this or that cathected organ, that some potentially redemptive meaning may be released from its delusive *Gestalt*.

Psychoanalysis, like *Trauerspiel* and carnival, is born at the juncture between signifier and somatic, and all three modes explore their strange inversions: organ as signifier, signifier as sensuous practice, desire as the hollowing of the body by language itself. In the *Trauerspiel*, as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that hollowing is carried to the point of death itself: if for Freud all desire speaks of the utterly unrepresentable silence of death, so for Benjamin the *Trauerspiel* body may speak only when it has been quelled to a corpse. And indeed what is this corpse, that heap of cryptic fragments, that ambiguous image whose image is always elsewhere, if not the very text of the *Trauerspiel* itself, in which meaning and the material letter, voice and writing, presence and absence are at once mutually involved and about to come apart at the seams? (WB 151)

Herbert is a suicide; he is called a martyr in the slogans of his friends when his funeral procession is out, and he is also a pharmakos like the character of Bhogi from Nabarun Bhattacharya's "Bhogi" (the blurb of *Auto O Bhogi* says that explicitly, that Bhogi is another face of Herbert), a novel where a person voluntarily offers himself to be slaughtered as a part of a mysterious cosmic design. Herbert's suicide is the denouement of his being torn between two worlds: the past and the present. Herbert's dynamites are from the past. The past coming back to haunt the present is a very familiar motif in Nabarun Bhattacharya's works. Like Herbert's dynamites, a bullet that remained dormant inside the barrel of a revolver (from the Naxalite period) for 30-35 years accidentally kills a man in Nabarun's short story, "Amar Kono Bhoy Nei To" ("I Don't Have Anything to Fear, Do I?", collected in his *Sreshtho Golpo*). *Mahanagar@Kolkata*, the third film of Suman Mukhopadhyay is made from three short stories of Nabarun Bhattacharya which include "Amar Kono Bhoy Nei To". Past is a major presence in most of Nabarun's works. And the present times are doomed to repeat the actions of the past in *Herbert*. Herbert's encounter with the rationalists in fact re-enacts one of the most massive and basic phenomenon of twentieth century Bengal: the rationalists versus Herbert conflict that ends in Herbert's suicide reminds us of the nationalism versus communism

conflict (among other fields of social life, it took place in Bengali cinema too), that ended in the tragic destruction of nationalism, which was primordial, mythical, and could not survive the arsenals of intellectually superior reasoning of communist thought.

Simultaneous readings into the trajectory of Bengal's general cultural and political degeneration and the predicament of Herbert Sarkar repeatedly remind us of this adage: those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Herbert repeats a past. In the film, the interrogation sequence at police headquarters is cut at specific junctures and flashbacks of Herbert's life begin. For instance the interrogation of Dhanna (Bratya Basu) is followed by flashbacks of Dhanna's past life. Quite significantly, when Krishna (Bimal Chakraborty) is asked by Police officer (Sabyasachi Chakraborty) whether he supports the “terroristic” and “violent” acts of his deceased son, and he replies that state violence was no less terroristic, what follows is a jump cut to the rationalists entering Herbert's house and charging him with fraud. One of the rationalists takes photographs of a hysterical Herbert on the verge of tears, and comments that Stalin would be the perfect remedy for such elements as Herbert, and we immediately associate the rationalists' terror on Herbert (for the crime that he relived some myths and resorted to the ghosts of past) with state violence.

The puritan zealotry with which the rationalists want to destroy Herbert finds its echo in the deep hostilities shown by the cultural bosses of the then Left Front Government in 2006 to the screening of *Herbert* at the Govt owned cinema hall, Nandan (called the 'Art Film Theatre' by its founders which included not just Party apparatchiks, but also the likes of Satyajit Ray), and according to a news report the film was shown only after signature campaigns were run in favour of *Herbert* as a rejoinder to the initial refusal of Nandan authorities to screen this film on the pretext that such a film would send “wrong signals to audiences”, and after running for three weeks (Shamik Bag, “Nandan's Litmus Test”), as another report puts it, the film was abruptly and unceremoniously “shown the door” (“Nandan Frowns on Gay Lover Story”, *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2010). The date on which *Herbert* was released at Nandan was March 3, 2006 (“An

Ordinary Man”, *The Telegraph*, 2 March 2006).

The charges of the rationalists/Cultural bosses (that must have included the then Left Front Government's Chief Minister who personally took an interest in Nandan) against Herbert/*Herbert* and the charges of the intellectual film movement against conventional Bengali cinema share some uncanny commonality. After the intellectual political space in Bengal started being taken over by the communists and their frontal organizations like IPTA, there came an internationalist revolt against nationalist art. Herbert is so odious because he represents a certain essence of traditional, unregenerate Bengali-ness that can not be accommodated into coffee houses and university corridors.

Now, let us look at the left-leaning, progressive reaction against our conventional cinema (that started in late 1940s and continued throughout 1950s), both Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak being on the forefront of that reaction, though, as we shall see, their attitude to the Bengali cinema that precedes them is not always that of unmixed hostility and is best summed up as ambivalent. If one reads Ray's *Bishoy Cholo-chitro* or *Our Films Their Films*, it becomes clear that he detested early Bengali cinema. The general attitude of apathy and ignoring prevails in Ray's article “Silent Films” written in 1970 that is entirely silent on the silent films made in Bengal and in spite of repeated references to silent film viewing experiences in Kolkata, silent films made in Kolkata find no mention and so it later conveniently features in his “Their Films” section in the collection of his film-related writings published under the title *Our Films Their Films*.

In *Bishoy Cholo-chitro* Satyajit Ray speaks of the horror of his first acquaintance with Bengali cinema in 1927: it was a silent film named *Kal Porinoy* (37). Elsewhere also in his childhood memoir *Jokhon Chhoto Chhilam* he repeats that his first impression of Bengali cinema – the viewing experience of *Kal Porinoy* – was negative, that watching this movie led him to develop a contempt, literally a sneering attitude (*nak shnitkono bhab*) towards Bengali films and that he continued to stay away from Bengali films because of his first experience (30). One may wonder if

it was the familiar 'progressive' attitude of bashing early Bengali cinema that led Satyajit to trust so much an immature judgment from his childhood. This film *Kal Porinoy* is very little known today, barring Satyajit's scathing criticism of it; no print survives as it was a Madan production (all of their early films were destroyed in a fire).

Anyway, the present writer's searches reveal that *Kal Porinoy* was the first film of Dhiraj Bhattacharya as a hero (may not be the one to be released first), who went on to become one of the most popular heroes in silent Bengali films and later on a renowned character artist as talkies arrived. In Dhiraj Bhattacharya's memoir *Jokhon Nayok Chhilam* we have detailed descriptions of the making of this film (4-17). It was not an average movie. The director, a certain Mr Ganguly (not the famous Dhiren Ganguly, who is referred to as DG in Dhiraj Bhattacharya's memoir; this Mr Ganguly, always called *Gangulymoshai* by Dhiraj could be P N Ganguly who also directed Durgadas in *Krishnokanter Will*), employed guerrilla strategy of shooting, even before the concept was thought of and the term was coined anywhere in the world. Mr Ganguly himself did not give any name to this practice of shooting on real locations without making the crowd aware that a shooting is going on. Such shooting was low-budget, was done with a very small crew of 3-4 people including the director, and did not procure any permissions from the authorities beforehand. Dhiraj while shooting in the lead role of *Kal Porinoy* was once about to be attacked by a mob who doubted him to be a *chheledhora* i.e., kidnapper of children (because of his make-up which made him look dirty and unkempt). In this film, there were on the location shootings where the crowd did not realize that they were being filmed. One such shot was taken while Dhiraj walked from Sealdah to College Street along the pavement of Harrison Road and the camera was hidden inside a moving car. Dhiraj was accidentally intercepted by a classmate of his who did not realize that a shooting was going on, and what followed was a hilarious event (the friend, after repeated pestering was shocked to be told by Dhiraj that he was going to his tyrant father-in-law's house who had forcibly taken away Dhiraj's wife and son; the friend was away to Allahabad for three months and he could

not understand how Dhiraj could be married and begot a son too in these three months) but it turned out to be an excellent instance of realistic shooting, as it was but natural that the college educated hero would be intercepted by a classmate near College Street. It was a silent film so all the spectators later grasped was absolutely realistic action and not the strange conversation which actually took place. Dhiraj Bhattacharya's memoir gives an interesting description of this incident (16-17).



Dhiraj Bhattacharya

One wonders whether Satyajit Ray watched *Kal Porinoy* carefully. All that Ray seems to remember from *Kal Porinoy* is the rubbing of two pairs of feet in a scene of nuptial night (*Bishoy Cholochochitro* 37). Thankfully, Dhiraj Bhattacharya was no more when Ray was writing this article in 1978 (later published in *Bishoy Cholochochitro*). Because, it would not be the first humiliation that he received at the hands of the makers of the revolutionary and progressive new cinema.

Dhiraj met with some traumatic experience of humiliation at a felicitation programme organized for Satyajit Ray after *Pather Panchali*'s success. Dhiraj was neglected and unceremoniously ignored by the assembled progressive intellectuals. There is a touching narration in Rabi Basu's *Shat Rong* of how Dhiraj was very much impressed by Satyajit's works on the rural details, and Satyajit's realistic treatments, and how he wanted to congratulate Satyajit as an ardent admirer. The humiliation (he was “elbowed out by the rising intellectuals”) brought tears to the old man's eyes. It is a temptation to quote the conversation he had with Rabi Basu on that occasion.

“We are now counted among old haggards, aren't we?”

I (Rabi Basu) said to console him, “No, no, why are even you thinking that?”

Dhirajda said, “But they've compelled me to think that. Don't they know that the road on

which they are walking with pomp and authority was made smooth with the blood from our bosoms? What days we had! Nobody rented a home to us because we acted in films. If walked on a street, the doors and windows of the houses were closed quickly to protect the honour of the maidens. Had to come to the place of close relative on any occasion at the dead of night lest other invitees got angry to see us and severed relations. Enduring all abuse and derision we nurtured and kept the art of cinema alive. Is this the reward for that?" (1: 22-24)

A deep disgust with the older form of cinema continued to be fostered by the film movement in Kolkata as a hallmark of progressive credentials, as the cultural intellectual academic scenario increasingly came to be dominated by communists and left-liberal intellectuals of various hues. Even such mindless charges were enthusiastically made by Bengali 'progressive' critics which are uncritically reproduced verbatim in an article by Subhajit Chatterjee who teaches Film Studies at Jadavpur University as to why early Bengali films (made in British India under British censorship) did not have depiction of "patriotic terrorism":

As eminent film critic Mriganka Sekhar Ray noted, " ...a feeling of disgust and distaste for the conventional Indian cinema became the arsenal for the film society enthusiasts." According to this narrative, the general malaise of the system owed largely to the middle class insensitivity towards contemporary socio-political milieu as well as their inability to develop an indigenous 'cinematic' sensibility, thereby encouraging passive emulation of Hollywood products. Reflecting on erstwhile decades of Bengali cinema, another noted film critic Suryo Bandyopadhyay complaints, " ...even the subject matters selected for making films were of inferior quality. In films such as *Dhooli*, *Achyutkanya* ...or *Bordidi* there was no image of patriotic terrorism, no agitation— in one word anything whatsoever pertaining to Indian politics. Lots of dull, lifeless films full of sentimentality (*nyaka nyaka*) ran in the halls and the middle class used to watch them. And got so engrossed in them that they even

used to forget the Famine [1943] ... (www.jmionline.org)

Most of the charges (and they are clichés) which are uttered against early cinema of Bengal are banal to the point of being ridiculous. For instance, the timid and non-experimental early Bengali film-makers were contrasted with the revolutionary film-makers of China who shot the legendary Long March by continuously traveling with Mao's army in film critic Partha Raha's *Cinemar Itibrittanto* (127). Interestingly, Susan Hayward speaks of the flourish of “nationalistic leftist” cinema in China during 1930s and 40s; the communists promptly effected a closure on such films after seizing power (416-17).

But even when not compared with the revolutionary Chinese film-makers who had a vast country where only bits and parts of it were colonized and who enjoyed a relative degree of freedom in choosing their subjects prior to Mao's take-over, this charge against early Bengali film-makers remains serious: why could not they obtain British government approved raw materials to film the battle of Bagha Jatin on the bank of Buribalam river, or shoot a documentary or two on the bomb-making laboratories at Maniktola, or capture into celluloid the valiant ambush of Binoy Badol Dinesh at Writers', or shoot some reels of Surjo Sen carrying out a raid on Chittagong armoury, or record the moving images of the advances of Subhash Bose's INA at Imphal? And hypothetically, once such films were made, why could not they subsequently devise some suitably revolutionary mechanism to get these films approved by the Censor Board? This is all beyond our understanding. Bengali Theatres often produced seditious plays, but why could not Bengali films? Partha Raha asks (127). Now of course cinema made in Bengal was a medium that depended on the government from start to finish, from procuring raw films to censorship clearance and subsequent release, and to our limited intellect it might appear that theatre required lesser capital and was less troublesome for government in not being visible beyond its immediate audience, but if the 'progressive' intellectuals conveniently found no difference between film and theatre in this particular instance to further their case, we should not argue. It is an entirely different matter that

theatricality was one of the main charges repeatedly made against early Bengali cinema by the 'progressive' intelligentsia, and it was repeatedly argued that early Bengali cinema – prior to the arrival of true, revolutionary, socialist realism inspired cinema – collapsed the difference between film and theatre, and this medium was treated like stage, a charge that Satyajit Ray himself repeats in *Bishoy Cholo chchitro* (40); but more of that later.

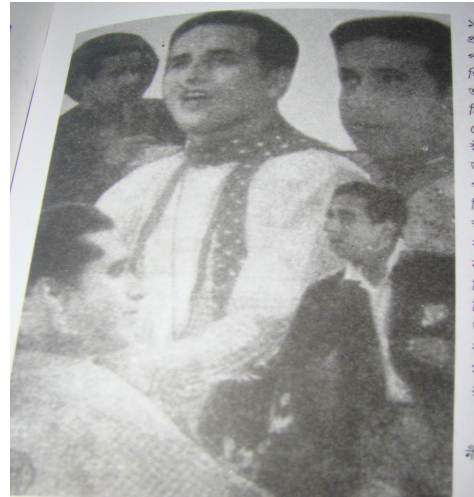
The result of these attacks on Bengal's cinematic tradition by the (communist party inspired and IPTA legacy-bearing) intellectuals has been disastrous. We were not only taught to ignore our history, but also to detest it. We were impoverished, intellectually and culturally, of the historical continuity of the Indic Bengali civilization, and the already given absence of a Bengali trader class meant that there could be very little resistance to the increasing left-liberal-internationalist hegemony. Our cinema began to lapse into a super-intellectual avant gardism (that in spite of churning out a lot of gibberish and rubbish, one has to admit, gave us some films which continue to yield an intellectual universal appeal to the elite educated urban classes). But quite disastrously, what remains the backbone of any thriving movie industry, that is, popular culture, customs, faith and tradition – they all took a back seat. We were denationalized. Necessity of preserving the past was forgotten. Bankim once lamented that Bengalis were without a history. It can not not have escaped the notice of the imperialists of different hues (Anglo-American-Soviet-Chinese) that it suits everybody's agenda if Bengalis are and will remain a people without history.

Bengal's film history has ever since remained in jeopardy. Recently re-published by Patra Bharati (April 2012), Kalish Mukhopadhyay's magnum opus *Bangla Cholo chchitroshilper Iti hash 1897-1947* has come with some additional images, many of them being rare photos. One such image on page 115 shows an image of the great actor of yesteryear (and master of comedy) Bhanu Bandyopadhyay (the caption says that it was *Dena Paona*, a 1931 talkie, directed by Premankur Atorthi). Now of course that cannot be the case, as the Bhanu Banerjee we are familiar with was not an actor in 1931 (born in 1920, he was only 11 years old in 1931; the image shows a familiar still of

Bhanu from 1960s). That 1931 film indeed had a Bhanu Bandyopadhyay in its cast, but it had to be someone else, it was another Bhanu Bandyopadhyay.



This image comes with a wrong caption
(Kalish Mukhopadhyay 115)



A collage of the images of the senior Bhanu Bandyopadhyay
(Kalish Mukhopadhyay 145)

A little research on the part of the present writer reveals that there indeed was another Bhanu Bandyopadhyay, who played the role of a friend of Pahari Sanyal and Pramathesh Barua, called Samir (a minor character with very little dialogues, but he shared ample screen space with the two lead characters) in *Rajat Jayanti*. IMDB (Internet Movie Data Base) page of *Rajat Jayanti* however, makes the same mistake again and hyperlinks the concerned actor's name with the profile of our familiar Bhanu Bandyopadhyay, the comedian. If that database was made by a Bengali after watching the movie, then it is an unfortunate mistake, but by no means an uncharacteristic one (absence of history normally paves way to such confusions: for example, as I am writing this article on 8/8/2012, the current Wikipedia entry on Dhiren Ganguly shows the image of Robin Majumdar, the actor-singer). Anyhow, further studies reveal that film historian Rabi Basu in his *Shat Rong* speaks of a “Bhanu Bandyopadhyay (elder)” in the cast of a double version film of New Theatres (made in both Bengali and Hindi) titled *Obhigyan* – the Hindi version was called *Abhagin* – that was made in 1938 (1: 127). In Kalish Mukhopadhyay's book, on page 145, there is indeed a collage of multiple images of this senior Bhanu Bandyopadhyay. It seems that he was a favourite actor of

New Theatres. Dhiraj Bhattacharya's memoir *Jokhon Nayok Chhilam* also mentions the elder Bhanu Bandyopadhyay (69), who worked in Madan Theatres as well (84).

The above example indicates two things. First, Bankim's well known lament about the Bengalis' lack of history and historical consciousness applies perfectly to the historiography of Bengali cinema. Secondly, absolute lack of support from establishments, institutions, academia and intellectual quarters (all dominated by left-liberal ideology) ensures that whatever little bits of the history of early Bengali cinema survives in the form of anecdotes, catalogues, personal memoirs, popular tabloid features and public relations, they are collected by individuals in mostly journalistic endeavours under the auspice of various magazines and newspapers patronized by common readers. There had never been any systematic writing down of the early history of Bengali film industry. As a result, a critical and scholarly query into early film history has never been undertaken. A serious historiography of Bengali cinema (prior to 1950s) has not been attempted. Quite expectedly, Kalish Mukhopadhyay's book too is journalistic in nature.

It is quite interesting to note that Kalish Mukhopadhyay, editor of the renowned Bengali film and theatre magazine *Rup-Moncho*, was involved with revolutionary nationalist movement and a close follower of Subhash Bose. In fact Kalish Mukhopadhyay started this film magazine in 1939 under the instruction of Subhash Bose himself who felt that such a magazine was needed in Bengal, and who instructed him to take an early retirement from revolutionary politics and devote his full time and energy to this magazine (*Bangla Cholo chchitroshilper Iti hash* 370-371).

There were fundamental reasons behind this decision of Subhash Bose. The great leader could not have failed to notice the tremendous import of this new marvel of modernity called cinema for the common people. The star system of cinema is a commonly shared currency of popular recognition and cultural symbolism. Common people love cinema and dote on the stars. A star is a symbol of the aspirations of a community, and in fact plays a huge role in the formation of a culturally coherent community of spectators. Thus Hollywood used its star system as a successful

method of cultural expansion. In Bengal, heroes like Dhiren Ganguly, Durgadas and P C Barua and heroines like Kanan Debi and Chandrabati Debi (and later the likes of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen) became the insignia of popular entertainment provided by cinema and cinema moulded popular culture through its commonly shared pool of narratives and commonly transmitted ideas.



Dhiren Ganguly



Pramathesh Barua and Chandrabati Debi



Durgadas Bandyopadhyay

Cinema, then, is a pivotal process of cultural standardization and is instrumental to the making of a *national language*, a language consisting of certain symbols (stars) and stories and visuals and music which build up a community. Cinema offers the language of cultural communication that gives birth to a collective community that through the commonly shared narratives (and in the Indian case music and lyrics as well) builds up its collective cognition, a commonly shared imagination that shapes popular cultural expressions. Cinema gives birth to a nation. Bengali cinema is one of the prime constituents of the national identity of the Indic Bengali people.

As an aside, one may wonder if the star system is as autocratic and undemocratic as a communist party hierarchy, and the answer will be that there are certain concrete differences. In a communist party (and all party inspired cultural organizations like IPTA etc), an individual who is a boss becomes not a symbol, but a substitute of collective will (Trotsky's concept of substitutionism

immediately coming to mind). A star is no longer a star when people don't consider him one, but the communist boss remains a boss so long as the party does not break into pieces or there is a coup. And early Bengali cinema did not just have stars; even the minor roles were portrayed to perfection by some great character artists. Extraordinary character artists were produced by the stage and cinema of Bengal in those days; ever since the communist take over, a loyal mediocrity enforced by the progressive circles gradually came to rule supreme, eventually canceling out true possibilities of great acting in the name of a partisan collective.

Let us come back to the question of the lost history of Bengali cinema. It is now globally recognized that Hiralal Sen of Kolkata was the first film maker in Indian film industry – whereas Phalke continues to be “credited” with the “making of the first Indian feature film” – as Susan Hayward records in her *Cinema Studies*:

However, if we are to be true to history, then Hiralal Sen is really India's first film-maker. He established the Royal Bioscope Company in Calcutta and filmed plays from the major theatres in that city. A first film of his (dating from 1903) *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* not only marks Sen out as the first film-maker in India, but, interestingly, also pre-dates by four years France's version of the same story (Pathé's *Ali Baba*, 1907). (Hayward 420)



Hiralal Sen

One significant question is, is there a single mention of Hiralal Sen in the works of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak? I failed to find any such mention in Satyajit's *Bishoy Cholochochitro*, *Our Films Their Films* and Ritwik Ghatak's *Cholochochitro Manush ebong Aro Kichu* (which is a complete collection of his writings about cinema, posthumously published). Most Bengalis themselves have been conveniently ignorant of the fact that Hiralal Sen was the first film-maker not just in Bengal but in India, as is noted by Kalish Mukhopadhyay (375-383), who worked relentlessly to establish this long forgotten fact of history among a people that found a pervert pleasure in its amnesia of its glorious past. Our film history is in a sorry state, and our acquaintance with our past is abysmal, thanks to the relentless efforts of the 'progressives'.

There are certain dominant tropes of the communist version of our cinema history which are repeated to the point of being cliché since the communists took over Bengali intelligentsia: the pre-communistic cinema of the past was generally unregenerate, as opposed to the chosen proletarian art approved by the Party that will one day occupy the world, according to the Marxist telos. It was reactionary, not revolutionary, avant-garde and experimental, like the cinema made by the progressive left-oriented film-makers. It was star-centric, individualist and profit-motivated, as opposed to the true collective art of people's cinema. It was theatrical and full of overacting, as opposed to the anti-professional doctrines of neo-realist cinema which believed with a puritan zealotry in the non-actors' ability to depict the truth of life.

Sadly, like most of the left-liberal clichés, the progressive fetish against professional actors too turns out to be hollow. Satyajit Ray recalls an incident where an admirer of his film (named Mrs Flaherty, who was the wife of renowned director Robert Flaherty) in United States refused to believe that there were professional actors – and not rustic villagers – in *Pather Panchali* (*Our Films Their Films* 55-56). There was an interesting encounter between Ritwik Ghatak and Chhabi Biswas (the former was directing the latter in a film titled *Koto Ojanare* that never got finished and released) where Ritwik began as sceptical of Chhabi's professional brand of acting and after a day's

shooting was over, became a huge admirer and exclaimed: “Baapre, aami kaake obhinoy shekhaate giye chhilaam” (My God, whom I did try to teach acting!) (Das 261).

Ahindra Choudhury happens to be one of the main accused who are counted among the practitioners of the *ancien regime* of an unregenerate theatricality, an oft-raised charge that is repeated in left-leaning critic Amitabha Dasgupta's article, “Nawo Shudhu Chhobi” (202). However, Ahindra was the maker, de facto director and main actor of a silent film produced in Kolkata in 1920, titled *Soul of a Slave*, which makes him one of the earliest pioneers of Bengali film industry, and this film was made even before he made it big on commercial stage. If one follows the conception and production of the film as detailed in his autobiography *Nijere Haraye Khnuji*, one will realize that Ahindra was keenly aware of the differences between film and theatre, even in 1920. Tapan Sinha recollects an event from the shooting of a film based on Sharat Chandra's novel *Datta* in his memoir *Mone Pore*, where Ahindra criticized the director's theatrical style “I have done Rashbehari a thousand times on stage. I know everyone's dialogue by heart. But is this cinema that is happening? This is just stage. I cannot take it anymore” (38). We indeed had a lot of badly made theatrical films in the early days, but we had masters of the craft at the same time. Painting the masters and the abusers in the same brush smacks of vested interests.

Ahindra accepted the offer to direct a Telugu movie titled *Vipranarayan* in 1937 though he did not know the language and all he could do was to look after acting and technicalities as he reminisced in his *Nijere Haraye Khnuji* (2: 130). The film was a success, and shortly after that, he was recognized by the common people in South India when he went to visit modern day Andhra Pradesh (2: 169), he was held in high esteem and was also given a public felicitation (2: 200). South Indian films were shot in Kolkata studios those days. Today while Bengali films are copying South Indian movies and are being made in South Indian studios, one can not help the feeling that it is a vengeance of history on the Bengalis who have failed to celebrate, promote and protect their cultural heritage.



Ahindra Choudhury

Ahindra was a master of the stage, and was given the title Notoshurjo (Sun among the actors) for his performance in *Shontan*, an adaptation from Bankim's *Anandamath*. This play was performed in spite of hostilities from a number of Islamic organizations who had the open support of the then Prime Minister of Bengal Government (led by Muslim League) Khaja Nazimuddin, as Rabi Basu points out, and also reports that Syamaprasad Mukherjee stepped in to ensure that the performance of the play takes place (2: 111). Ahindra was indeed the greatest actor of Bengali stage in those days (closely rivaled by Shishir Bhaduri). But to say that Ahindra did not understand the difference between stage and cinema is a gesture of gross ignorance and characterizes the sweeping left-liberal progressive generalization about the glorious period of early Bengali stage and cinema which they have denigrated to the best of their capacity.

Personalities like Ahindra Choudhury heralded a golden age in early Bengali cinema that culminated in the New Theatres, prior to the 'left-progressive' hegemony in Bengali art and culture. They were characteristically pragmatic about the popular pulse, they were masters of their craft, they nurtured their Bengaliness to the core and spoke truth in their memoir without caring for jargons of left-liberal political correctness. When Bengalis first ventured into moviemaking, the only cinema hall in north Kolkata, Cornwallis Cinema, were under the ownership of the non-Bengalis (Parsee owners Madan Theatres); they made it impossible for films made by Bengalis to be released, as Ahindra Choudhury recollects, and to cope up with this problem, a Bengali-owned

playhouse named Monomohon Theatre promptly changed to a cinema hall to show movies made by Bengalis (2: 60). Dhiraj Bhattacharya records in his memoir *Jokhon Nayok Chhilam* the dirty politics he suffered when he was offered a role as a hero in a Hindi/Urdu film to be made by the Madan Theatres; overnight there was an alliance of the non-Bengalis (mostly Muslims who dominated the fields of direction, music, script and dance) at Madan Theatres who did not want Hindi-Urdu cinema to be invaded by a Bengali hero, and he was unjustly shown the door (166-169). The candid confession of Dhiraj without caring for political correctness is a case in point: the past masters saw reality without the tinged glass of false liberal idealism that would later come to dominate Bengali intelligentsia.

This is not the case that idea of communistic excesses is unfamiliar with Bengalis, particularly since 2006-7 when mass opposition to the ruling Left Front Government began. But liberalism remains such a deep rooted doctrine in Bengali psyche, and the dividing line between left-wing politics and liberal politics is so blurred that that in a recent play of Bratya Basu, titled *Ruddhoshongeet* Ritwik Ghatak has been portrayed as an arch crusader for artistic freedom against Party's doctrinaire and dogmatic leadership, as a kind of liberal idol. But if one reads the collected non-fictional writings of Ghatak, *Cholochchitro*, *Manush ebong Aro Kichu* the impression one gets is that Ghatak was dogmatic in a charactersitically communistic way. Particularly, the “Principles of Ganantya Sangha” (the Bengal chapter of IPTA) that was penned by Ritwik, is a typical study of Communist Party's propaganda: full of jargons, propagating a cult of intolerance and mindless submission to Party slogans characterize this manifesto (Ghatak 42-55).

Nevertheless, Ritwik Ghatak had occasional praise for Pramathesh Barua, and urged others to study Bengali and Indian cinema in details before getting into Eisenstein and Pudovkin and the histories of Italian, Hungarian and Russian movies; he also comments that “we have been contemptuous about our own surrounding” (73). Ritwik Ghatak is an interesting study in contrasts. In spite of being considered the authority on partition centric movies, he actually lived in a denial of

the partition: instead of analysing it, he always simply thought that it should never have happened, he always refused to “accept” it (290), as if it did not become a reality till he accepted it, and commented that he did not have anything else to say about partition, except that this cutting of Bengal into two parts was a disaster (290). There is a touching melodrama in his attitude, but he fails abjectly to offer an artistic interpretation of partition: but then how could he interpret something that he always lived in denial of? Cultural clashes (just like religion, myth and faith) constituted a blind spot in the class only vision of the communists. His class conscious sympathy for the Muslims of Bangladesh notwithstanding, Ritwik had to go alone to Bangladesh for shooting *Titas Ekti Nodir Nam* as it was insisted by his Bangladeshi producers that his unit for *Titas* could not have in it a single Indian (296). It goes without saying that the tremendous oppression on the Hindus in East Pakistan/Bangladesh has never been a matter of concern for Ritwik. Interestingly, after he returned from Bangladesh, Ritwik Ghatak enthusiastically started addressing his interviewer in Kolkata (not a Muslim) as Mian (307). *Bilet Ferat* (England Returned) of 1921 was a comedy film by Dhiren Ganguly, one of the earliest films made in Bengal, and we think there could have been a *Bangladesh Ferat* with a character like Ritwik as its main protagonist.

Ritwik exhibited an unusual propensity of calling those he disagreed with CIA agents: a film-maker or two who could do something in India already sold themselves off to CIA, he thundered (88). All those who are making blockbuster movies with superior techniques at the investment of big capital are CIA agents too (30), and Delhi is full of CIA agents who do not allow revolutionary movies to be made (326), as Ritwik points out. About fellow film-makers and artists who fail to toe the world revolutionary line, he reserves some choicest abuses: Ritwik calls Bergman a “jochchor” (swindler) because he depicts myth, spirituality, religious symbols and ancient mythical times of the Vikings in his films (instead of showing some proper materialistic and atheist subjects in a suitably communistic outlook), and accuses that Bergman is taking the audience backward, instead of explaining the ancient times away in the terms of the present; Ritwik Ghatak's

typically communistic hatred against Bergman for failing to be suitably materialistic reveals a dogmatist and doctrinaire approach (274-6). Ritwik Ghatak calling Bergman a swindler for celebrating myth can not help reminding us of Herbert being called a swindler by the rationalists. However, the same Ritwik Ghatak later on makes a volte-face and talks animatedly about myth and Indian perspectives because by then the west's emphasis on spirituality became to potent a force not to reckon with, and Ritwik meanwhile becomes fashionably converted to the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, who, he thinks, complements Marxism (299-302). But there is no reason to believe that an attachment to myth might have mitigated his communistic materialism. On another occasion, Ritwik particularly praises the satire on religion in Buñuel's *Viridiana*; Buñuel, by showing that “entire Roman Catholic dogma is bogus”, has become the greatest artist of contemporary times (319).

Form and aesthetics are rooted in cultural consciousness worldwide, and religion is the most important popular culture. The local roots of a film makes it an authentic artefact: in other words, skilful use of myth, religion, spirituality, faith and popular memory is the hallmark of good cinema. There is always plenty of universalism in talks of cinematographic techniques, which are abstract, objective, scientific and are supposedly international, but this universalism is actually a liberal reification of cinema, because cinema attains the status of art only in its cultural specificity, its rootedness, its celebration of the local myth, tradition, popular faith and history. Therefore, Bengali cinema can aspire to the status of art only by becoming a Bengali nationalist art.

Most probably along the line of the Soviets, Ritwik also realized that film-making is a question of “the flourish of the inner soul of the country” and that cinema was not just international but it was a national art too, and called for the “nationalization” of Indian film industry (190); by this term he meant that film industry should be state owned. This is not to argue that communist party and left wing politics have any inherent opposition with a nationality's interests. Worldwide, in most of the countries, left politics has synchronized itself well with national traditions. However,

the left of India (not Indian left, as the communist parties always maintained that they are not Indian communist parties, but communist parties of India) has a long history of anti-national activities and has remained accomplices of British (later Soviet and still later Chinese) imperialism.

Ritwik's dogmatic, doctrinaire and intolerant side was again revealed when he attacked all poetry that was written after Sukanta (though he was ready to make an exception “sometimes for Subhash”) on the pretext of being incomprehensible and reactionary. Sunil Gangopadhyay and Shakti Chattopadhyay were named among those who drank liquor and recited poetry which was nothing but “outcome of constipation” (213).

At one level Ritwik talks of the masses, and at another level, admits that he has mostly failed to connect to them: the insurmountable difference between the radical jargons and reality of popular culture leads to this fallacy. Ritwik laments that the usual thing that always happens with his movies is that the ten penny and six penny seats remain empty while the educated *bhadraloks* are the only spectators (297). Bengali leftyism has actually been a spectacle of high-brow upper class upper caste people anxiously upholding their difference from the rest of ignorant, superstitious populace. The former stands for culture, while the rest stands for *oposhongshkriti* (bad culture). Ritwik was flabbergasted when a film distributor told him “Mister, make a film like *Kolitirtho Kalighat* (Kalighat, Pilgrimage of Kali Yuga), so that the spectators throw fistfuls of coins at the silver screen. We get a penny or two by selling those films” (185).

Because the experimental avant garde art championed by the 'progressives' failed to reach out to the masses, the 'progressives' consoled themselves by concocting a myth that the popular plays and films in Bengal which were commercially successful were artistically retrograde. It is an oft repeated charge that the commercial stage of Kolkata was deeply submerged within the quagmire of *ancien regime*, with no express contact with latest European experimentalism (unless the communists arrived on scene with *Nobanno*). Nothing could be further than the truth. For example, the play *P.W.D* where Durgadas Bandyopadhyay acted in the main role (first staged in

1940) made use of the *verfremdung* technique of Brecht, where actors drew the audience's attention to the constructed nature of the play. A self-conscious theatricality marked this play while the actors on stage acknowledged themselves as actors. Sudhiranjan Mukhopadhyay's book *Shei Nayok Durgadas* gives an interesting account of the performance of *P.W.D.*. The thespians did not make a cult of Brecht; they did not utter mouthful of theories and did not attempt to run after latest intellectual fashions; they did not even speak of alienation or *verfremdung*; without doing that they could be experimental, and immensely popular too, as they could connect to their masses and share their Bengaliness.

This play used to begin with Durgadas coming on stage with a list of actors, and he summoned them one by one. He called the real names of the actors and they all responded from within the auditorium: they came on to the stage from the spectators' seats. The play's end uses the *verfremdung* strategy again. The actors assume that the play is over and start taking off their costumes and props while still being on the stage and the curtain being still raised; someone starts humming a tune, and someone starts criticizing someone else's acting. In the midst of these, the prompter enters hurriedly with the script, a flute and a torch and exclaims, "what on earth are you people doing? The curtain has not dropped yet." Durgadas' character, Mr Sen inquires why, and he is told that he is yet to deliver his final dialogue. Durgadas: "Is it so? Give me ten rupees. No? Ha ha ha. Well, then P.W.D. Work is over. Good night ladies and gentlemen." Then all the actors sing in chorus: "This earthly world of Maya and illusion is our stage/ the way playmaster Mr Jolodhor makes one up, he plays that role" and the play comes to an end (Sudhiranjan Mukhopadhyay 99). This play attained legendary popularity and was also an example of collective acting, which according to the communist view did not exist prior to *Nobanno*.

We had a commercially successful and artistically innovative tradition of performing arts in Bengal for a long time, but what happens after the left-liberal intelligentsia came to dominate the scenario, was an assault on that tradition. Partition not just deprived us of an immense market, but

threw the domestic economy into deep jeopardy. Bengali cinema gradually became commercially sick, the industry began to dry up as the audiences were not getting the popular entertainment which characterized other prominent industries of India, most notably Hindi and Tamil. We can read Herbert as an allegory of our shrinking cultural production. One dominant theme of popular cinema is that of production and manufacturing of narrative. A look at Mumbai-based Bengali scriptwriter Sachin Bhowmik's *Collected Works* confirms that popular narratives are manufactured out of the already existing elements of popular imagination; popular cinema, in other words destroys the enlightenment derived Romanticism of an original auteur, the liberal humanist fantasy of a visionary film-maker. Popular cinema, like epic and ballad, comes out of the social cultural and political roots of a people. Surapati Marik is a producer who wants to manufacture a hit narrative out of Herbert's dialogues with the dead, as he is able to detect the elements of a popular formula in them. He calls Herbert “choubachhar telapia” (small fish from bath tub), whom he wants to promote and make big (55). The idea stuck to Herbert and it appeared in his suicide note. The small fish of bath tub now goes to the confluence of Ganga and Bay of Bengal, Herbert writes in his suicide note. His suicide was an avenue towards a bigger and unknown world, he hoped. He did not know that he would literally make a blast.

Satyajit Ray sings praise to the formula movie made in Bombay in his book *Bombaier Bombete* from the *Feluda* series. He comes back to the question of formula (for the commercial success of a film) in *Our Films Their Films* (90-91). Satyajit Ray himself celebrated popular imagination in films like *Parash Pathar* with Tulsi Chakraborty (who characterizes stage and cinema acting prior to arrival of leftists). Satyajit succeeded to make great movies because of actors like Chhabi Biswas, he exploited Jatra tradition in *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (a deeply operatic and fantastic movie). He explores the charm, fantasy and adventure of reincarnation in *Sonar Kella*. It is then self-contradictory on Satyajit's part that he continues to whip up 'progressive' clichés against early Bengali cinema for pandering to formulas of popular entertainment (in *Our Films Their Films*

and *Bishoy Cholochochitro*). The film society movement (Satyajit is reputed to be one of its founding fathers) in Bengal has practised a systematic politics of denigrating our past glories. As a typical example, we can take *Cholochochitrer Obhidhan* (Encyclopedia of Cinema) by Dhiman Dasgupta: this book is a characteristic product of film society movement, and is absolutely silent on Bengali cinema prior to Satyajit Ray.

A hatred for Bengal's glorious past, a distaste for the pagan *Jahiliyyah*, the heathendom of Bengali cinema characterized the progressive film-buffs produced by the film societies. Gaston Roberge's (a Jesuit teacher of films based in Kolkata, also one of the leading members of film society movement in Kolkata) *Cinemar Kotha* (Tale of Cinema) is another book that is totally silent on Bengali cinema. The title should have been 'the tale of cinema except Bengal'. It is interesting to note that the foreword to this book is written by Satyajit Ray who only mentions western cinema, European avant garde and the fashionably intellectual film movement as if Bengali cinema does not even exist. And this book was written in Kolkata meant to be read by the Bengalis. The attempt at the denationalization of the Bengalis started by the British was continued by the internationalizing drives of the communist party. International always meant aping the whites, Russian or American or any European ideal, depending on which end of the left-liberal spectrum one finds oneself.

Bengali cinema used to be thriving once. It was the first industry outside Hollywood that was called its semblance Tollywood. Madan Studio was renamed Tollywood Studio for a brief period (still later it became Indrapuri Studio), and since then the name stuck. (Dhiraj Bhattacharya 179). As the industry became sick and began to suffer because of poor commerce, Satyajit Ray complained that if a Bengali film was made at a cost of 150000, in nine out of ten cases it would not get its money back (*Our Films Their Films* 39). However, Ray's argument in the same vein that Bengali is understood by only 15% of Indian population, and therefore Bengali films yield poor commerce is hard to swallow. Tamil was understood by even lesser number of people, but that did not prevent them from having a gigantic blockbuster like *Chandralekha* (produced and directed by

legendary Tamil film-maker S S Vasan) in 1948 that was made at a cost of 600,000 USD and was released on 609 screens worldwide, according to the wikipedia article.

Bengali cinema gradually withdrew into an internationalist cocoon, if we are allowed the oxymoron. Films started being made for festivals, while mainstream movies suffered from lack of capital, lack of creative support from the ascendancy class (which was now too enchanted with revolutionary ideals to think about popular cinema), and lack of any social direction as Bengal came in the firm grip of the communist movement. Satyajit himself pioneered in festival-centric moviemaking:

With the second film I grew bolder, and the consequences were less happy. My mistake from a commercial point of view, was to take even bigger liberties with my source material than in *Pateh Panchali* which had at least retained the main contours of the original. As a result, the urban audience which was largely familiar with the plot of *Aparajito* was irritated by the deviations. As for the suburban audience, it was shocked by the portrayal of the mother and son relationship, so sharply at variance with the conventional notion of mutual sweetness and devotion.

Aparajito lost money. It was at this point that the European film festivals came into the picture. The awards won by the two films put a new complexion on the situation, and I realized that a Bengali film-maker did not have to depend on the home market alone. (*Our Films Their Films* 42)

The ascendancy's version of reality finds a dominant place in literature and art, and new realism in Bengali cinema was the dominant world view of the left-leaning middle classes. The ballad traditions of India, and folk conventions were looked down upon. Songs and dances were an anathema for left puritans who were passionate to see their version of reality being depicted on screen. As a result, Bengali intellectual films failed to connect to their masses, and Bengali film industry took its downward turn.

Kanu Bandyopadhyay (Who Played Harihar in *Pather Panchali*) went completely unnoticed and unappreciated in the role of Ramakrishna in the film *Bhagaban Sri Sri Ramkrishna* that released four months after *Pather Panchali* and the film went into oblivion ever since, a fact lamented by noted film historian Rabi Basu who considered the acting of Kanu Bandyopadhyay in the role of Ramakrishna at par with *Pather Panchali*; Basu complained that the film society movement inspired Bengali intellectual spectators did not give this film its due (2: 75).

Popular elements like religion and myth (not to speak of songs and dances) could ensure success of a film. But those elements were totally untouchable for the new regime. In 1958, Satyajit Ray castigates the familiar and well-trodden paths that a director may take to deliver a blockbuster:

There are three familiar and well-trodden path open to him. He can make mythological films, or he can make 'devotional' ones, or he can make 'socials' – preferably melodramas – which must have the adornment of the latest favourite star team. All three must have the usual concomitant of songs and dances and must not be below two and a half hours in length. This last proviso is so rigid, and so firm is the exhibitor's faith in it, that a film which dares to disregard it may never see the light of day.

Needless to say, these formulas do not work every time, but they are the ones that have had the longest and the most lucrative existence. They have evolved out of the producers' deliberate and sustained playing down to a vast body of unsophisticated audience on the simple tradition of the *Jatra*, a form of rural drama whose broad gestures, loud rhetoric and simple emotional patterns have been retained in the films to a degree unimaginable to those not familiar with this unique form of film making. The songs and dances too are a legacy of the theatrical-operatic tradition.

One can imagine a utopian situation where the spread of literacy might have gone hand in hand with an attempt on the part of the producers to come out of the groove and present the film-going public with something more worthwhile than tired reworking of

hackneyed old patterns. But this has not happened and is not likely to happen for some decades yet, unless some chance revolution should bring about the process. So the mythologicals and devotionals will stay and continue to provide the staple fare for the majority of Bengal's film public. What, then, should the serious film maker do? Should he accept the situation and apply himself to the making of *serious* mythologicals and *serious* devotionals, keeping the popular ingredients and clothing them in the semblance of art? This is obviously a way out of the impasse, but it raises an important question: can a serious film maker, working in India, afford to shut his eyes to the reality around him, the reality that is so poignant and so urgently in need of interpretation in terms of the cinema? I do not think so.

For the truly serious, socially conscious film maker, there can be no prolonged withdrawals into fantasy. He must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema. (*Our Films Their Films* 40-41)

Let us remember the days when Bengali films were successful, delivered hits in all those intellectually prohibited genres, and the industry was thriving (not just due to the black money flowing from war-contracts). Tapan Sinha joined New Theatres in 1946 as an assistant to the legendary sound recordist Bani Dutta. The first play back machine in India was manufactured in New Theatres studio by Bani Dutta and Mukul Bose, at a time when the rest of India simply used to import these machines from the West; Tapan Sinha recollects fondly in his memoir that some of the best talents from Calcutta University's science college used to join Bengali film industry as technical experts in those days (33). Tapan Sinha further draws our attention to the fact that New Theatres produced some of the best technicians in the Indian film industry (36), most of whom later had to migrate to Bombay while some went to Madras.

Now I shall turn to the memoir of Asit Sen: this book records both the height of Bengali film

industry's glory as well as its most pathetic downturns as the 'progressive' hegemony begins from the 1950s and is complete by the 1970s. By the mid 50s, as Asit Sen recalls in his memoir, Bimal Roy comes to a function in Kolkata and laments the poor technical quality of Bengali films which otherwise definitely came under the category of good cinema (9). Bengali films were unanimously considered to be models by the rest of India, and were reproduced and copied in Bombay and Madras, sometimes unauthorized copying took place too. Shammi Kapoor produced an unauthorized version of Asit Sen's *Deep Jwele Jaai* at a time when Asit Sen himself was directing the Hindi version (titled *Khamoshi*) of his Bengali blockbuster (141-2). Shammi's film, called *Pagla Kahin Ka* reversed the roles of hero and heroine. In this film the mental patient was the protagonist, not the lady doctor, while Shammi spoke all the dialogues which Suchitra mouthed in *Deep Jwele Jai*. This anecdotal history, funny no doubt, proves that Asit Sen, who was reputed to follow the *gharana* of New Theatres could deliver successful films and strike an intellectual balance too (the subject matter makes it sombre; no dance is possible, but wonderful songs and a romance make the day).

Shubhendu Roy (later one of the most renowned Art Directors of Bombay film industry) was running a wooden furniture shop at Lansdowne Road after New Theatres closed down. The shop did not run well and he actually decided to go back to his ancestral village in Pabna district in East Pakistan; Asit Sen and another friend forcibly made him disembark the train to East Pakistan from Sealdah (Sen 18). It was the dawn of the desperately diseased time that would since prevail in the Bengali film industry, the desperate times from which this industry never quite recovered. Asit Sen after delivering some very successful movies, almost all of them strongly woman centric, made *Uttar Phalguni* in 1963 and had to sit idle for a year during which he turned to agriculture after purchasing some farm land in Baruipur in 24 Parganas (26-27, 45, 61).

S. S. Vasan (who made *Chandralakha* in late 1940s which created a history in Indian movie Industry and was in fact the first stepping stone towards the eventual Southern Dominance in Indian

cinema) brought a number of Bengalis to his Gemini Studio in Madras which included the names like Nimai Ghosh and Ajoy Kar and P. K. Sen (now forgotten, he was a legend in film laboratory technology), and Vasan wanted Asit Sen to take over from him the director's mantle of Gemini Studio, as Asit Sen's memoir records (39). Asit Sen refused as he did not want to leave Kolkata. Irony is that later Asit Sen had to shift his base from Bengal to Bombay, as he could not survive in Kolkata. The great exodus of the Bengalis thus is a sorry tale of migration and must not be misread as a glorious and adventurous expansion. Sadly the migrated Bengalis lacked any sense of community and communal bond in sojourn (Sen 34). The legendary crab mentality ("a crab tries to escape the net while others pull him down") of the Bengalis is mentioned in an anecdote popular in Bombay film circles which Sen recollects, and laments that Bengalis eat the flesh of other Bengalis, which is against the practice of the entire animal kingdom (113-14).

There was a time when Uttam Kumar single-handedly gave this sick industry commercially successful films, most of them having the semblance of blockbusters, as here was an artist who was in constant touch with the national pulse of the Bengali people. Born in 1926, he still carries the memory of the glory of Bengal in art and politics. He was a product of the nationalist age. Little wonder that he mentioned Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin as his favourite idols; among the political icons, his only favourites were Subhash Bose and Syamaprasad Mukherjee (Ashishtaru Mukhopadhyay 143).

Nevertheless, the mainstream of Bengali movies continued to be dried up: of capital and of talents. Our best talents no longer joined our industry. Popular culture was to be looked down upon. The law of diminishing returns ensured that our industry will grow more and more anemic in appearance, just like Herbert Sarkar. It is interesting to note that Herbert's lapse into simplistic thoughts and the gradual loss of his poetic capacity run parallel to the retrogressive metamorphosis of Bengali cinema. This lapse notwithstanding, Herbert continues to nurture an inarticulate but organic nostalgia for the old, forgotten times which did not impose alienation. An atmosphere of

longing (*Taan, Maya*) dominates *Herbert*, a longing for the old world, a longing for what has gone away. In the movie, Sepia colour is used to convey a certain nostalgia, while technicolour represents the contemporary.

It reminds of the old world charm of the early school of cinema actors. The dialogue delivery was not casual like the neo realist cinema but had a rhythm in it: it had a core emotional appeal. Songs and dances too held a primitive charm for the common people of our land, but these were an anathema for our bhadralok ascendancy. The deliberate hatred for every tradition that is native born has been the world-view of a dominant section of Bengali society comprising of collaborator classes.

In Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Herbert*, the leader of the rationalists, Pronob Ghosh, while going away with his team after insulting, Herbert takes the names of some Europeans who claimed to practise occult (who are to be contrasted with Herbert who is a mere “Gopal Bhnr”). This episode is exactly reproduced in the film. It clearly establish the Eurocentric attitude of the rationalists. One process of history that took place in Bengal is that with the arrival of the communist party and its inspired intelligentsia on the scene, the self-hating Eurocentric Bengali collaborator classes now had a fashionably revolutionary way of hating their tradition, culture and past glories, and taking pride in affiliating themselves with the west, which is precisely the case of the Bengali torch-bearers of the International Rationalist movement in *Herbert*.

One interesting question about the rationalists can be raised: why they are not interrogated in the film, which shows elaborate interrogations done by the police involving the friends and family of Herbert. The rationalists could have been quite logically accused of being abettors in Herbert's suicide. Many naxalites and ex-communists as well as some practising leftists increasingly turned to rationalist movement (speaking from my own first hand experience of growing up in Bengal in the 1980s and 1990s) in an overall ambience of economic determinism, enlightenment rationality and progressivist triumphalism that came to rule Bengal since its intelligentsia and political classes

affiliated themselves with communist movement. The rationalist movement in Bengal, we could say, came to be dominated by a characteristically communistic spirit. There is no denying that Bengal's rationalists constitute a part of the larger left, liberal and progressive paradigm dominating a state that has seen the longest rule by an elected communist regime in the world, and also been the birthplace of naxalism. Many rationalists being naxalite radicals, a reader/viewer of Herbert might feel curious to know their response to the explosion at Herbert's cremation.



Herbert retorts to the rationalists

In many ways the Bengali continuum of compradorship reveals itself in the trajectory of Bengali cinema, and the life-movie of Herbert. Satyajit Ray accuses that most of the early Bengali cinema used to copy Hollywood, and even Pramathesh Barua's films had an overt appearance of hybridity, instead of pure Bengaliness (*Bishoy Cholo chitro* 39-40). There is substantial truth in this statement. Bengalis have long been captivated by the fascinating power of the west. The photo album of failed director-producer Lalitkumar Sarkar is a case in point in Nabarun's *Herbert* (20). It contained the colour images of the who's who from Hollywood. The very name of Herbert is borrowed from the west: it signifies a submission to the charm of the west. Herbert's father who made movies in Tollygunge was an ardent admirer of Hollywood movies. The name of Herbert derived from the name of Leslie Howard, as Lalitkumar thought that Herbert resembled that particular Hollywood actor (21).

Herbert was given a worn-out moth-eaten Ulster coat that originally belonged to his uncle, Girishkumar (27). Herbert wore that and stood in front of the mirror and uttered “Cat, Bat, Water, Dog, Fish” (47). There is a post-colonial angle in “Cat Bat Water Dog Fish”; these words may be the first line of any English primer. These words signify the charms of English for Herbert who otherwise does not know the language. The angel's statue at a Shahebpura curio shop, the fairy outside the window on the night of Herbert's suicide, the Ulster coat are core symbols of Kolkata's fascination with the its former rulers from the western hemisphere. Herbert takes a regular walk everyday during winter in his memorable attire of the Ulster coat (called “Olestar” in Bengali), and Suman Mukhopadhyay's visual imagination of these strolls is brilliant, though his Herbert wears a simple overcoat. Herbert stands apart from the crowd. His walks along the streets of Shahebpura constitute a melancholy signifier of a trapped past that is still powerless to be redeemed. While he takes solitary strolls in the white town of Kolkata, the janitors and ayahs suspect that Herbert may have European blood in his veins (47). In the film, Herbert in his black overcoat also foreshadows his own death, and I am reminded of Terry Eagleton's lines: “Peerlessly self-composed, resisting the dismembered crowd, the *flâneur* moves majestically against that historical grain that would decompose his body into an alien meaning, reduce his numinous presence to an allegory of loss” (*Walter Benjamin* 154).

There is a certain human difficulty in living without myths. The second film of Suman Mukhopadhyay, *Chaturanga*, based on Tagore's eponymous novel, traces a post-enlightenment, post-rationalist journey of two Presidency College educated friends, who find solace in Hinduism and become disciples of a spiritual Guru. Herbert never needed a Guru to access myths. A divine simpleton, he can directly approach certain raw and primordial spaces within human desire, in the unrepressed gesture of communicating with the dead. Herbert signals the arrival of post-enlightenment, post-rational, post-modern and most importantly post-communist consciousness. Significantly, *Herbert* is no dissident manifesto of a Foucauldian madman: saying so would be a

misreading of Herbert's predicament. The author Nabarun Bhattacharya tried (and quite successfully did so) to depict the classical tragedy of a circumstantially trapped protagonist, who needs to invent myths to make sense of the world around him, and just when he is capable of making sense of the world through myths, the world can no longer make any sense out of him, and can only torture him for being recalcitrantly resistant to the ways of the rational world. The film of Suman Mukhopadhyay dextrously transacts this tragedy to celluloid.



Shubhashish Mukhopadhyay (who plays Herbert) in conversation with director Suman Mukhopadhyay

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Utopias of Celluloid Love:

The Golden Era of the 1950s & Popular Culture in Bengali Cinema

Kaustav Kundu



Ei poth jodi na shesh hoi.....

The era of 'Uttam-Suchitra', the mid-1950s through the 1960s, is commonly designated as the 'golden period' of Bengali cinema, and has been reminisced and written about extensively. During these years, Bengali directors were able to produce a genre of film melodrama that became integral to a Bengali sense of self. Identification was rooted in the figures of an idealized female and an idealistic and ethical male, embodied respectively by Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, and their romantic love became the stuff of intense emotional identification among Bengalis of the post-independence generation. With her sophisticated looks, fiery and expressive eyes, strong personality, and bearing Suchitra Sen was an instant hit with the youth of Bengal in the 1960s. Uttam Kumar, with his famous smile and charming demeanor, too was a phenomenon to reckon with. And together, they were an unbeatable romantic pair: of the sixty films Suchitra Sen worked in, thirty were with Uttam Kumar. A whole generation of men and women, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, grew up on the Uttam-Suchitra magic. Coupled with astounding music and great scripts, it was the Uttam-Suchitra *juti* (pair) that became an unbeatable equation. The same prototypes were common in films of that era which did not actually feature Uttam Kumar and

Suchitra Sen together, and it has been unanimously suggested that ‘Uttam-Suchitra’ should be used as a *sign*, for the broader genre of the 1950s and 1960s popular melodrama. This article analyses the Bengali cinema of the 1950s through a study of the Uttam-Suchitra cult. It argues that by the end of the post-war decade the Bengal film industry was finally effective in securing its niche market against Bombay, and that it was able to do so through the creation of star texts that became integral to the Bengali middle class’s (re)fashioning of self. In the era of Uttam-Suchitra, the Bengali cinema became truly ‘Bengali’. The legendary star pair of Bengal, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen succeeded in establishing a tradition of romanticism in Bengal that has survived the social, national and political upheavals of almost half a century and more. The social significance of the star pair can be read from the fact that even today, almost several decades after the death of Uttam Kumar in 1980 and the voluntary retirement of Suchitra Sen in the mid-1970s, when otherwise the Bengali film industry is reeling under the onslaught of films from Bollywood, reruns of the bewitching tales starring Uttam-Suchitra/ Suchitra-Uttam recreate the glorious nostalgia of two classic star-crossed lovers striving to rise above their destiny. Most interestingly, even in these times of ‘remakes’, the timeless impact of the Uttam-Suchitra *juti* has been such that not a single filmmaker till date has dared to remake any of the films where they shared screen space as the evergreen *Mahanayak* and *Mahanayika*.

Though the Uttam-Suchitra films became the paradigm of romantic love for the 1950s generation, they were much more than simple love stories. Notwithstanding its Hollywood-inspired quality, this genre was able to create an affective space that gave Bengalis – and especially middle-class Bengalis – a sense of charm and grace, which they imagined to be their very own. It made for a self-image, which though somewhat insular was also profoundly positive, and inspired a sense of ‘feel-good’ ‘Bengaliness’. This sense of ‘Bengaliness’ derived from this genre’s referencing of the Bengali ideal of the ethical and good life which made its way into cinema with the emergence of the *bhadralok* culture. However, it was also fundamentally marked by the historical trajectory of post-

independence Bengal, and inflected by the transforming nature of the Bengali social and cultural milieu of the post-independence era.

Significantly, the ‘Uttam-Suchitra’ genre was characterized by a certain style of black and white cinematography, a defined mode of lighting, framing, camerawork and schematized tones to create a polarized, “morally legible” universe that melodrama essentially needs. The romantic couple was the arbiter of this ‘morally legible’ universe – empowered to make ethical choices, appropriating that role, as it were, from established figures of authority. In the world of Uttam and Suchitra, the conventional locus of authority, the family, is withered, leaving the romantic couple as the makers of their own destiny. In the films that constitute this oeuvre, parental figures of authority are either totally absent or, at most, present in the peripheries, rather conspicuously inactive so far as any expected assertion of authority is concerned. Withered family structures make space for a very important aura of loneliness in the films, wherein the family ceases to be a buffer for the romantic couple. This, it may be argued, deepens the strain within this world, for it is almost entirely left to the couple to legitimize their liaison and, therein, their ethical choices assume a greater significance. In truth, however, it was the relative laxity or non-existence of established structures of authority that made for the centrality of the couple form in this body of films, as also the powerful feminine persona of Suchitra Sen. In the world of Uttam-Suchitra, the couple is almost sovereign and supreme in contrast to the established genre of ‘socials’ or ‘family dramas’, where the couple form was mediated by the social and familial. Yet this sovereignty comes at a price, and the couple must pay that price before they can attain their love. In the absence of the legitimizing force of the patriarchal and familial, the love of Uttam-Suchitra must be tested on the altar of fire: love assumes a transcendent quality, and almost becomes a moral virtue before it can attain fruition.

The trauma produced by the couple’s need to make ethical choices before their love can be raised to the level of the sublime afflicts the world of Uttam-Suchitra with signs of paranoia and madness, and core films of the genre have themes revolving around mental illness, misrecognition,

the loss of memory and its recovery (*Harano Sur*). In fact, the world of Uttam-Suchitra was something of a psychic order, one that might be understood in relation to the psychic ordering of Bengal post-1947.

The displacement and degeneration of Bengali life after 1947 has been the subject of scholarly work, literature and art. In his essay ‘Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling’, Dipesh Chakrabarty indicates the sense of trauma that accompanied the relocation of Bengali Hindus from East Bengal to the city of Calcutta, and the psychological adjustments that such displacement and relocation entailed.¹ Hordes of refugees from East Bengal/ East Pakistan poured into Calcutta after the exacerbation of communal tensions in 1946-47, and transformed the city into a chaotic megalopolis. Vacant spaces were fast taken up by refugee colonies, which stood as testimony to the degenerating conditions of human life, and produced a deep anguish and moral anxiety at various levels of society – a society which had already experienced the phantasm of the famine of 1943. However, as Bhaskar Sarkar points out in his book *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, “Several comedies sought to accommodate and diffuse accentuated ‘*bangal-ghoti*’ tensions within humorous settings.”² The differences between the two groups and the two kinds of Bengalis were exploited to produce farcical situations that became occasions for conducting complex negotiations in a light vein. The most common strategy was to introduce a stereotypically bangal character in the proceedings, to produce good-natured conflict and a few laughs. By the end, of course, all dispute would be settled, and general camaraderie would prevail: audiences would feel secure in the knowledge that in spite of their difference, the bangal refugees could be assimilated within the mainstream population of West Bengal. As with all stereotypical representations, the minority was depicted as being different from the norm, and turned into objects of ridicule: on grounds of their accent, their deportment, their customs and food habits, even their disorientation in new surroundings. Consider, for instance, the caricatural character of Kedar (a role essayed by Bhanu Bandyopadhyay who was a real-life

bangal)³ in *Sharey Chuattar* (the first film starring the Uttam-Suchitra pair), a rollicking comedy set in a boarding house. Kedar embodies the stereotypical concept of a loud-mouthed, crass, and ultimately absurd bangal who seems forever famished: as soon as his friend returns home from a vacation, he hastens to see if he brought back homemade ghee; he frequently visits people who serve good quality tea; smelling freshly made dessert, he runs around looking for the source. He is the jocular friend of the hero Rampriti (Uttam Kumar); but once they start wooing the same girl, Ramola (Suchitra Sen in her screen debut), he turns into a scheming fiend. Of course, he is too inept to cause any serious damage: his pathetic attempts at winning Ramola's affections produce mere hilarity. Failing both in romance and in villainy, the bangal is reduced to a harmless clown – a comic plot device. Bandyopadhyay also appeared in *Ora Thake Odhare* (They Live on the Other Side, 1954), another comedy featuring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, which could well be the most explicit comic depiction of the ghoti-bangal rift. While the film is about the interactions of two families, one ghoti, the other bangal, that happen to be neighbors, the title – which translates as “They live on the other side” – clearly alludes to the other Bengal across the new political border; it engages contemporary social sentiments, locating the comedy as a microcosm of a larger reality.



Communal violence remained one component of the partition experience that could not be easily sublimated by fantasy or by comedy. Violence terrorizes; it hurts, humiliates, and leaves deep scars both on the body and the psyche. Violence in cinema, unfolding with a mimetic potency, raises

particularly charged ethico-political questions. Not surprisingly, much like its Hindi counterpart, popular Bengali cinema of the 1950s shied away from direct representations of the trauma. And yet, as with Hindi films of the period, it is possible to locate indices of communal aggression and victimization in Bengali films. In many ways, the violation of women became the focal center of the entire experience: it was the source of misbegotten triumph, and of the most abject humiliation. Since members of both Hindu and Muslim communities were involved in the brutalities, and since the victimized women were not the only ones to be tormented by their memories, a sense of shame transcended all facile distinctions between aggressor and victim to engulf the entire Bengali society. Thus the rare reference to the atrocities comes in passing, as a shameful acknowledgment of an experience that did occur (a realist gesture, aimed at establishing a historical milieu), but is too painful to be dwelled upon. Thus, in the film *Sabar Uparey* (Above All, 1955), the heroine, Rita (Suchitra Sen), tells the hero, Shankar (Uttam Kumar), that she is a “tormented” (*nigrihita*) woman from East Bengal. But the admission becomes a romantic gesture, occurring in the narrative at a point where the two are getting closer. As a matter of fact, *Alo Amar Alo* (Light O my Light, 1972), which turned out to be Uttam and Suchitra’s penultimate film together, evoked painful memories of Partition violence to establish the persistence of certain conflicts and structures of exploitation. Sen plays Atashi, the eldest daughter of a poor family living in an illegal refugee settlement called ‘Nabajiban Colony’: the name, which signifies a “new life”, registers the optimism of these displaced people.



In cinema, the avant-garde films of Ritwik Ghatak, made in the early 1960s, are generally regarded as the most prolific expressions of the angst of a society that had experienced a weakening of community life and intense ethical crisis in the wake of political turmoil. It may be noted here that the tropes for signifying ethical crisis were not dissimilar in Ghatak's work and the Uttam-Suchitra films, remarkably distinct contemporary genres. In both genres, ethical crisis was signified through crises of masculinity, and principally countered in forms of female resilience. In left-intellectual Ghatak's Partition trilogy – *Meghey Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960), *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line, 1962), and *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titash, 1973) – which looked at refugee lives in post-1947 Calcutta, this crisis was a disease that afflicted a deprived society; in the Uttam-Suchitra films, ethical crisis was related to personal dilemmas, and was encountered and resolved within the world of the romantic couple – in the classic melodramatic mode. The actualization of the couple in the Uttam-Suchitra films is therefore a symbolic ethical win – a vindication of choices that would perhaps not be thus vindicated in real life, or in the case of realist genres, such as Ghatak's oeuvre. The standardized plots of these films meant that maximum energy was concentrated on the playing out of ethical dilemmas and their ethical resolution, as in the case of the Hollywood musical, where the standardized plots meant that energy was focused on making the music of love. The musical, a genre that emerged in the early 1930s, at a time when America was in the throes of the Great Depression, offered the blithe vision of life as spontaneous music making, and its immense popularity has been analysed in terms of the genre's ability to offer a way of coping with the starkness of everyday life. Following this analysis, it may thus be argued that the schema of the vindication of ethical choices in the Uttam-Suchitra films – which end in the proverbial embrace of love – offered, in effect, a way of contending with the contemporary vision of moral crisis. The moral dilemmas in these love stories are often played out in terms of the tropes of tradition and modernity – permanence and change, which become perfectly balanced in the end to signify a seamless social fabric. Unlike in Ghatak's films, where the

characters afflicted by ethical dilemmas embody the trauma of Partition, in the world of Uttam-Suchitra, they are phenomenon unto themselves – original prototypes of the Bengali cinema of this period, and embodied in the personas of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, producing star texts which re-inscribed the Bengali film. In these films, the *star* emerges with such potency that the star text operates to restrict any larger implications of the ethical subtext.



Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen first appeared together in the hit comedy *Sharey Chuattar* (Seventy-Four and a Half, 1953), and worked together for the last time in *Priya Bandhabhi* (Lady Friend, 1975). Though both were successfully paired with other co-stars during their respective careers, spanning roughly a quarter of a century, their iconic screen personas were, for the most part, constituted by a series of films in which they appeared together between 1954 and 1961: *Agnipariksha* (Trial by Fire, 1954), *Shapmochan* (Reversing the Curse, 1955), *Sagarika* (1956), *Harano Sur* (The Lost Tune, 1957), *Pothe Holo Deri* (Lost on the Way, 1957), *Indrani* (1958), *Chaoa Paoa* (Desire and Attainment, 1959) and *Saptapadi* (The Ritual of the Seven Steps, 1961).

With these films, Uttam-Suchitra became the ultimate ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’ of Bengali cinema, most overtly in terms of their screen chemistry, which defined romantic love for Bengali men and women of their generation, but perhaps more intrinsically through a redefinition of gender relations and their embodiment of a contemporary Bengali modernity.

The original Uttam-Suchitra film, *Sharey Chuattar*, was a comedy of errors, with some of the leading ‘character’ actors of the day, among them the likes of Molina Devi and Padma Devi, who had been top actresses of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, though known as the first Uttam-Suchitra film, this film’s lead pair were the not-so-young Tulsi Chakraborty and Molina Devi, who played a much-married couple who rediscover their romance of old after a series of comic blunders. Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen appeared as the lovers Rampriti and Ramola in a subplot, with a host of comedians, including the young Bhanu Bandopadhyay, who would become a star in his own right during the 1950s and 1960s. *Sharey Chuattar* was a commercial success, but it did not immediately set up Uttam-Suchitra as the ultimate screen duo, nor is this a film known for their famous chemistry that would redefine romantic love on the Bengali screen. Yet, it is important as the original film of this oeuvre, which had in place the key elements that made the star texts of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. *Sharey Chuattar*’s Rampriti and Ramola, the man-next-door and the self-assured ‘modern’ woman, were relatively novel prototypes of the Bengali cinema, who made for the distinctive texts of the 1950s Bengali film.

Rampriti and Ramola are prototypes emblematic of the 1950s Bengali youth, the middle-class male wage earner who made his home in the working men’s mess-house and his female counterpart, the college-going ‘miss’, and possibly the working lady to be, who symbolized the overturned gender rules of Bengali society. This new woman was a palpable presence in Bengali society of the period, visible in offices and schools, and by the 1960s in coffee houses and the ‘*addas*’ that Dipesh Chakrabarty has written about in his book *Provincializing Europe*.⁴ Thus the ‘modern’ girl was now an inevitable part of middle-class Bengali life. However, *Sare Chuattar*’s

Ramola was distinctly different from the emblematic misguided ‘modern’ woman of earlier films such as *Mukti* (1937), *Grihadaha* (1936) and *Darpachurna* (1952), who necessarily suffered the outcome of being ‘liberated’. Significantly, intrinsic to the emergence of the new female prototype of *Sharey Chuattar* was a male counterpart. *Sharey Chuattar*’s Rampriti stands apart from his duplicitous fellow boarders; and it is the earnest Rampriti who is the most able match for the liberated Ramola, but who also anticipates the intense and ethical male of the more emblematic films of the genre.

However, as women's education became an indisputable part of the liberal modernist agenda of nationalism, in 20th century Bengal, nationalist patriarchy faced a dilemma in placing her within its own confines, for the agenda of modernism and that of nationalism, were at odds with each other when it came to the ‘educated women’. The nationalist agenda was of developing the nation through the gradual strengthening, on the cultural front, of a national middle class educated in the rational-scientific sense, affiliated with modern institutions, while retaining a consciousness of an authentic cultural identity. Cultural authenticity was sought to be protected by the ideology of the family and the feminine spirit therein, while the project of development and modernity was to be carried out in the public sphere, generally imagined to be controlled by the spirit of masculinity. Since education was the prerequisite for participation in the public sphere, the educated woman came to occupy a culturally ambiguous position of embodying both masculinity and femininity in her dual capacity as a participant in a public sphere and as a repository of cultural authenticity. The narratives of the Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar starrers in the Bengali popular cinema of the 1950s, particularly their first major success, *Agnipariksha* address this very dilemma. On the one hand, the popular image of a desirable woman in their films subverts the elite nationalist construction of a woman as the repository of cultural authenticity, but on the other, the transgressive libidinal energy of the heroine-acting-as-subject is ploughed back into the structuring order of the Bengali middle class family, thus maintaining the patriarchal boundaries.

Agnipariksha, according to me, would be the signature film for the romantic genre of this period because the film established the marker characteristics of the image of the star pair that survived all through their career as a pair. Though Uttam Kumar tried, and succeeded to some extent, to change his stereotypical image in his later films where he did not star opposite Suchitra Sen [most importantly, Ray's 1966 film *Nayak* (The Hero)], Suchitra Sen never really grew out of her basic image. The most significant feature of the duo was that while Suchitra Sen always played a modern, educated and urbane young woman, Uttam Kumar provided the counterforce, often though not always in the form of a person with a rural/traditional background, that ultimately, through a marital union, domesticated the threatening modernity of the educated woman. The modern-educated status of Suchitra Sen was what the narratives turned on as they depicted the psychological struggles of the two characters in a social context of a contest between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

The films fall into the melodramatic genre which as a rule emphasizes women's agency, albeit within the parameters of patriarchy. The centrality accorded to the character of Suchitra Sen in these films is therefore no exception within the genre. Moreover, in the Calcutta of the mid-1950s all these films were made with an eye to a female audience, the middle class Bengali housewife, as the mainstay for the afternoon shows. The historical specificity and uniqueness of Suchitra Sen's image, however, derive from the contradictory logic of nationalist patriarchy that deconstructs itself in trying to enforce its rule of law.

Sananda brought out a special issue devoted to this legendary pair ('Shedin Dujoney', August 5, 1994). While *Sananda* is by no means a very representative magazine for women in the highly stratified middle class society of Calcutta,⁵ it does enjoy a legitimacy among a cross-section of women and an authority to speak on different dimensions of women's lives, a representational plurality unthinkable earlier. A representation of the Suchitra-Uttam pair in *Sananda* therefore grants a different kind of respectability to what was earlier seen as merely, though quite formidably,

'popular'. *Sananda* writes it into a different discourse of cinematic gendering and the history of Bengal, thereby constructing it as an object of more serious intellectual inquiry.

The article concludes on the note that Suchitra Sen was “that woman whom one loves, desires, but cannot possess”. This memory of her image sums up the undecidability and ambivalence that marked popular response to her image. It is to be attributed to an ‘excess’ in her characters which always eluded a narrative closure.

The title of the article is ‘Shedin Dujoney’ (On That Day the Two of Us), evoking a widely known love song by Rabindranath Tagore and thereby situating the text within the tradition of romanticism in Bengal. The romance was sought to be located partly in some “extra-professional ... intimately personal ... mystical relation” between the pair and partly in the history of social and cultural upheaval the Bengal middle class society was going through in the wake of the great Bengal famine and the partition of Bengal:

The two came exactly at that time when the collective memory of the ‘jati’⁶ was still raw with the gaping wounds from the nightmarish visions of trainloads of refugees, uprooted families and the plaintive calls of the starving for some starch-off-the-rice (‘fan’).⁷

I want to argue that locating the attraction of the star pair in the realm of mystery and mysticism is to contain the excess of libido, the erotic energy that the narratives could never quite contain in the characters played by Suchitra Sen. In its historical context, the romantic mystery of the Suchitra-Uttam starrers presented a fictional resolution to the crisis of the Bengali striving to be a middle class, i.e., trying to survive in an urban context with a rural past still alive in memory and in a network of social relations.

Suchitra Sen, the heroine, as our text describes her, was “a graceful, somber and intense woman with a modern-educated look”. This description of her image as ‘modern-educated’ holds the key to our understanding of the structuring and undoing of the narratives within the parameters

of a modernist-nationalist ideology through a splitting of the woman's image. She is marked out as a pioneering cinematic model for urbane modernity in its feminine form in Bengal. Earlier heroines such as Kanan Devi, Padma Devi, Chandrabati Devi and the like are thereby relegated to a pre-modern time in Bengali films.



Her modern-educated status permits the text to locate her intertextually with reference to Arati, the heroine of Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar* (The Metropolis, 1963)) and Bimala, the heroine of Rabindranath's novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), later made into a film (in 1984) by Ray. *Mahanagar* tells the story of a middle class joint family in the city struggling to make ends meet. At one point the wife of the man is compelled to take up a job to keep the family afloat. The film is a sensitive depiction of the process of re-evaluation of cultural-familial norms as a middle class family tries to cope with forces they cannot fully fathom. Bimala in *Ghare Baire* was caught between two men, each espousing a different relation of the woman with her home and the world. *Ghare Baire* ends with Bimala standing on the brink of an unknown with both her home and her world as she knew them, shattered.

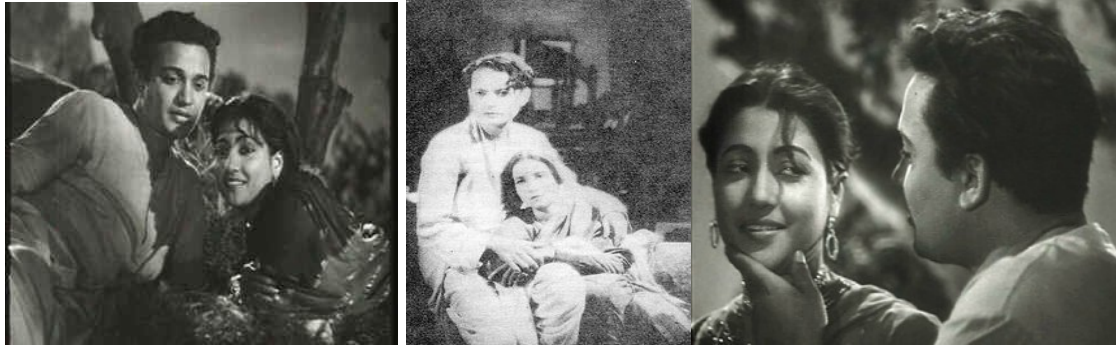
To remember the 'mysterious' Suchitra Sen with reference to Arati and Bimala, characters strongly identified with their respective creators, Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore, can be read as a cultural strategy for creating Suchitra Sen as the representative of 'popular high culture' for the Bengali middle class, just as Arati and Bimala represent high culture for the Bengali elite. The conflicts and dilemmas of modernity and urbanity, inherited by the aspiring middle class of Bengal

from their elite predecessors (Bankimchandra, Rabindranath, Satyajit), went into constituting the narratives and the character of Suchitra Sen to come to terms with that legacy at a popular level.

Since education was the prerequisite for participation in the public sphere, the educated woman came to occupy a culturally ambiguous position of embodying both masculinity and femininity in her dual capacity as a participant in a public sphere and as a repository of cultural authenticity [Chatterjee: 1990]. Though androgyny is a part of the repertoire of Indian cultural traditions [Nandy: 1980], the dilemma of the educated woman could not be handled by invoking cultural authenticity. Though a duality of the spirit is an important part of Indian cultural symbology – the image of the ‘ardhanarishwar’ being one of the well known of such symbols – the social fields for their expression are quite clearly defined and demarcated. A woman with predominantly masculine tendencies would be accepted for expressing herself accordingly within the familial bounds, but such behaviour would not have any definition if enacted in an extra-familial context. Cultural androgyny could not provide a solution to the problem called educated woman because she straddled two social spaces, the integrity of each opposed to the other. The narratives of the Suchitra-Uttam starrers sought to resolve this dilemma at a popular level.

The centrality of the female figure in these narratives can now be understood in a context different from the universal tradition of the melodramatic genre or the functional necessity of catering to a predominantly female audience. To the extent that popular films present a collectively desirable image as a dream resolution to some real social-cultural crisis, the image of Suchitra Sen offers such a resolution to the crisis of nationalism, caught between the contradictory demands of the familial and the public sphere, in defining gender roles. The centrality of the female figure is doubly determined within this schema. She is an agent of modernity for her educated status, she is also the focal point of the family drama. My contention is that this popular image of a desirable woman subverts the elite nationalist construction of a woman as the repository of cultural authenticity. **Popular cinema, as Ashis Nandy (2006) points out, is “only a distorted history of**

our own desires, lived out by others”. Bengali popular cinema shows up the desires of Bengali elites in a convex mirror, producing an image the elites have always hastened to disown.



The Bengali cinematic tradition that produced the pair of Suchitra-Uttam was started by Pramathesh Barua, the only one among the preceding generation of actor-filmmakers whose films can be said to match the phenomenal success of Suchitra-Uttam. The tradition is one of narrativising nationalist modernity in terms of a man's journey from the village to the city.⁸ While Pramathesh portrayed the transitional journey as one of “betrayal, loneliness, unrequited love” and a gradual wasting away with the romantic-horrific disease of tuberculosis (his magnum opus *Devdas* carried this image to its perfection), the 1950s version of this journey has a different slant to it. While for Pramathesh the woman was always an image of the sexually inaccessible but nurturant mother (hence the whole narrative of unrequited love followed by tuberculosis), for Uttam Kumar she rather fulfilled the lack of a father figure, a protective father he had lost in leaving the village. (In almost all their successful films including *Agnipariksha*, the death or loss of a father figure for Uttam Kumar precedes his union with Suchitra Sen. In other cases the father is simply absent from the narrative.) Suchitra Sen, on the other hand, while most of the time seen with a loving father figure, has either an extremely strained relation with her mother (*Agnipariksha*) or is marked by the absence of one (*Shanjher Pradeep*, *Chaoa Paoa*, *Surja Toran*). Their eventual union in a marriage seeks to correct this imbalance in their respective psychic order.

Agnipariksha was a super-hit in its time. Desirability in a feminine image came to be defined by the image of Taposhi (Suchitra Sen). But one will miss the point of the meaning of the

desirability if one focuses only on the end product of the narrative. For at that moment there is no difference between Suchitra Sen and earlier heroines like Chandrabati Devi or Padma Devi or Nibhanoni Devi. That the image of Suchitra Sen came to sweep the popular audience off its feet to rule over the market of Bengali cinema for about two decades is because Suchitra Sen *made a difference*, and that difference lay in the contradiction, expressed in a hysterical form in this film, inherent in the characters she played. The narrative invited investment of spectatorial pleasure through engendering a crisis in the heroine by playing upon her contradictions.

However, considering the element of “melodramatic masochism”⁹ in *Agnipariksha*, Bhaskar Sarkar argues that this film like most other Uttam-Suchitra films, presents a rather limited vision of the modern woman: her “liberation” is achieved in primarily consumerist mass cultural terms, heavily inflected by upper-class tastes (fashionable clothing, cars, jewelry, houses, pianos and organs, parties, drinking, Western music). This iconographically modern woman is made to suffer the contradictions, without much promise of transformation. On the one hand, Tapashi’s grandmother reiterates that *dharma* is far more important than one’s desires, that love (*priya*) is secondary to what is morally desirable (*shreya*); on the other hand, her mother constantly harangues her about the imperative of finding an accomplished mate. The title of the film, which translates as “Trial by Fire”, alludes to an episode in the epic *Ramayana*, which provides a framework for the subordination of Indian women: Sita’s subjection to a test of her purity, after her return from captivity, by entering a blazing fire. The reference does not challenge the subjection so much as it reiterates Sita as a model of Indian womanhood. The name ‘Tapashi’ also refers back to Indian antiquity, to women who would undertake vows and meditate steadfastly to achieve a goal that, frequently, would be an ideal husband.

Discourses around the two stars also reveal a certain gendered differentiation. Contemporary critics commented on the couple’s acting competencies, and on their good looks; while they lauded Suchitra Sen’s graceful demeanor, sweet speaking style, and felicity of expressions, they pointed to

Uttam Kumar’s natural flair for broad-minded, unselfconscious, and lively characters. The focus, clearly, was on Sen’s feminine grace, and on Uttam’s self-assured masculinity. Their offscreen mythologies, elaborated upon on fanzine hagiographic accounts, further strengthened such impressions. Uttam Kumar became the most influential persona in the Bengali film industry: for a major part of the sixties and the seventies, he was a virtual one-man industry, as the fortunes of Bengali cinema became crucially dependent on his box-office draw. Meanwhile, Suchitra Sen left acting after bouts of illness, which apparently affected her looks. Even at the peak of her career, she was constantly worried about how she would look on-screen, trying to be photographed from her “better side”, thus belying popular impressions about her self-possessed nature.



Saptapadi was a film which brought an unparalleled sexuality to the Bengali screen, not least on account of Suchitra Sen’s rendition of the uninhibited Anglo-Indian girl, whose companionship unleashes the greatest charms of the otherwise modest Bengali man. Rina Brown was the farthest one could get from the regular conceptions of a Bengali heroine. In this film, Suchitra Sen donned a skirt-blouse ensemble, trimmed her long tresses and changed her hairstyle from a womanly bun to a girlish ponytail. Her lines are interspersed with English phrases and she speaks an accented Bengali – at least in the film’s first part, where she is the haughty Anglo-Indian ‘miss’ who treats Bengali Krishnendu (Uttam Kumar) with considerable disdain (which included calling him ‘blackie’ and ‘buffoon’). She has men friends, plays tennis and holds dances in her house. Unlike Suchitra Sen’s earlier portrayals, which marked her out as the epitome of the genteel lady, the Bengali ‘*bhadramahila*’, her Rina carries few of the markers of middle-class

respectability; indeed, middle-class Bengalis considered Calcutta's Anglo-Indian society to be fairly dubious, most evidently on account of the liberated presence of Anglo-Indian women.

Saptapadi's Rina Brown is not only too undomesticated for middle-class comfort, but she also finds out that she is her father's illegitimate daughter by his Indian maid who has been her 'ayah'. Her 'mother' is shot dead during her altercation with her father, and by the time Krishnendu finds her again, Rina is an alcoholic. She tells him that she has lost everything – her faith, love and convictions. Her angst makes her bitter and derisive – a melancholic figure as opposed to a stoic Krishnendu, who has learnt to suffer in silence. The character of Rina Brown affirmed most Bengali misgivings about the Anglo-Indian 'other', and yet she also epitomized the rootlessness and tragic loss which had become so central to Bengali life in its experience of a social flux. Simultaneously, Rina's deviance and derisiveness is mediated by that ethical subtext which is so central to the genre. Rina sacrifices her love for Krishnendu so as not to take him away from an old father (Chhabi Biswas) who tells her that Krishnendu is all that he has, the dream of his life. Even when they meet again some years later – in the film's opening sequence where a drunken and unconscious Rina is brought into the army hospital – she runs away after discovering that Krishnendu is the doctor who has saved her life. Though she comes back to him the same night, 'overtaken by momentary weakness' she tries to prevail on him to forget her and go back to his old life, even hinting that she is now a woman of compromised morality, who is 'too expensive for him'. The ethical subtext of Rina's character is validated by an authority figure no other than Krishnendu's father, who tells him in a letter towards the film's end that he had been wrong to oppose Krishnendu's marriage to Rina. For Rina, though belonging to another faith, had, through her immense sacrifice and integrity, become a '*devi*' in his eyes.

Re-imagining the woman to redefine the boundaries of the public and the private, the domestic and the civil - to serve both functional and affective needs - was indeed one of the primary agendas of the nationalist ideology. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the 19th century

construction of gender took place primarily within the elite community of Bengal which still lacked a consolidated middle class. With the turn of the century and intensifying urbanisation and professionalisation, a rapidly growing middle class started to form a culture of its own by drawing upon the pre-existing elite ideology of nationalism and in the process re-working some of the ideas. As we have seen, the popular nationalist image of gender in Bengal subverts the elite version of it. Suchitra Sen in *Agnipariksha* is a reworking of the classical heroines of the elites, Arati in *Mahanagar* and Bimala in *Ghare Baire* to provide a resolution to the dilemmas of the new middle class. Popular films are the best registers of the shifts in the cultural imageries for they formulate and address social imaginaries which make social communications possible in the highly heterogeneous and constantly shifting experiential world of an urban existence. **“Cinematic experiences”, as Sharon Willis (1989) puts it, “is, in many ways, the most eminently social form of consumption”.** It is in this sense that these romantic melodramas give us a sense of how a space of popular urban subaltern culture, autonomous of the elite nationalist discourse of the 19th century, was gradually forming in Calcutta.

The elite nationalist discourse and later historiographies¹⁰ have produced the “woman” as a static image at a moment in history. But the spectator's gaze introduces a different time into this historical time – that of the woman's own in becoming ‘herself’ by going through a process of being in love. Simultaneously, it should be pointed out that my arguments have been intended to track the evolution of a particular body of generic romantic melodramas over the years, as well as to demonstrate how a fantasy of plenitude associated with a pair of stars, once invoked as an antidote to Partition blues, is refigured for subsequent critical purposes. Thus the same discursive trope gets deployed over time for the very divergent purposes of both obfuscating and interrogating conflicts. This shift shows us, once again, that a genre or a mode does not, by itself, constitute an ideological cover-up or an act of revelation, that its function changes with the context in which it is mobilized. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the Uttam-Suchitra *juti* became the very embodiment of a

million amorous fantasies; and theirs was indeed an ethereal journey that Bengali movie audiences and critics could never get enough of. Uttam-Suchitra's incandescence lit up Bengali cinema once and forever.

NOTES

1. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling', 'The In-Human and the Ethical in Communal Violence', in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002).
2. See Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 159.
3. Bhanu Bandyopadhyay was a real-life bangal who made an entire career out of his bangalness, on stage, screen, radio, and comedy recordings. In spite of all the stereotyping, he managed to infuse his early comic roles with a certain pathos that confronted audiences with a sense of the real contradictions of post-partition West Bengal: his characterizations, marked by a poignant excess, obliged spectators to bear witness to the material and psychic tribulations of the displaced.
4. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). *Adda* became very popular in 19th Century Bengal when the British ruled India, and it would not be an overstatement to argue that its popularity was both enabled by and a reaction to westernization, because English and world politics were always tied to *adda*. The introduction of western print media had also influenced the content of *adda*. It was always in the public sphere, and was mostly engaged in by men, because they were the ones first to be exposed to westernization and English language. Many people participating in,

or commenting on *adda* have also noted that after 1850 when women started gaining literacy there were instances of them participating in *adda*. The word *adda* exists in many Indian languages, but in Indian public discourse it has become synonymous with Bengali identity and culture. In his celebrated book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, famous historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2001: 183) writes:

The tradition of men and women gathering in social spaces to enjoy company and conviviality is surely no monopoly of any particular region. Nor is the word only a Bengali word; it exists in Hindi and Urdu and means a ‘place of gathering’ (bus terminals in north India are called "bus-*addas*"). What is peculiar, if anything, in twentieth-century Bengali discussions of the practice of *adda* is the claim that the practice is peculiarly Bengali and that it marks a primary national characteristic of the Bengali people to such a degree that the ‘Bengali character’ could not be thought without it.

College Street Coffee House is the most famous café associated with the rise and dissemination of *adda*. It was the hub of famous writers, nationalist leaders, politicians, film makers and still is though not at the same level. Emulating Coffee House many others sprang up. In the modern context the practice of *adda* evokes nostalgia about Bengal’s illustrious intellectual past, and the dearth of time to indulge in *adda* in late modern capitalism where work is valorized over leisure. About *adda*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2001: 181) writes:

... its perceived gradual disappearance from the urban life of Calcutta over the last three or four decades – related no doubt to the changes in the political economy of the city – has produced an impressive amount of mourning and nostalgia. It is as if with the slow death of *adda* will die the identity of being a Bengali.

Historians like Chakrabarty have commented on the significance of *adda* for the formation

of Bengali identity, but he has not engaged with the language ideologies pertaining to it, or its performative or emergent aspect in contemporary society. Also, cf. Ray's *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife, 1964) and *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1984) to reference the historical time when *adda* was becoming popular in Bengal; simultaneously, Ray's *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991) includes a significant scene where this whole topic of '*Bangalir Adda*' has been taken up elaborately.

5. The rather special position enjoyed by *Sananda* is due to the fact that it is the first proclaimed Bengali language women's magazine in Calcutta. "Proclaimed", because there were quite a few Bengali literary and film magazines (*Ultorath*, *Proshad*, *Nabokallol*, *Boshumoti*) which, though never defined as women's magazines, chose their texts with a view to the female readership – understood to be housewives who read them for entertainment and inducing sleep after their midday meal. *Sananda* was the first to break out of this stereotype to announce itself as a magazine for "women", thereby openly accommodating different dimensions and stages of Bengali women's lives in Calcutta in the late 20th century. The popularity and success of *Sananda* derive more from the culturally upwardly mobile aspirations of the stratified Bengali middle class than from any populist position of the magazine.

6. One should note the strategic use of the word 'jati' here. The word has been used in many different contexts in the Indian languages, but always to delineate the boundaries of some unified community. "Nationalism" has been translated as 'jatiyatabad', thereby including all Indians under one umbrella notion of a jati. The orientalist discourse on India reserves the word to refer to the Indian "caste", where each caste is a different jati. Renaissance period writings in Bengali language generally referred to the Bengalis as a jati, thereby making a cultural-linguistic commonality the basis for a jati identity. In this text, this polysemic word has been used to bypass the political-ideological issues of the unity of an Indian nation presupposed by the newly established nation-state in 1947. The contradiction between a political-evil identity and a cultural-linguistic identity was

traumatically experienced by the Punjabis and the Bengalis, the two communities whose psychological, social and economic world came apart with the partition of India into two nations. An invocation of the word *jati* in a Bengali context and language thus reactivates, and simultaneously represses, the deeply painful ambivalence built into their identity as a community.

7. 'Fan' is the Bengali for the starch of the cooked rice. At the time of the famine in 1940, the starving beggars, knowing that rice was too precious a commodity to ask for would ask for the starch instead which, conventionally in Bengal, is thrown out after the rice is cooked.

8. Ashis Nandy has made a psycho-social analysis of Barua's cinematic oeuvre using details from Barua's biography to show how the nationalist agenda was implicit in his work. See Nandy (2006), 'Notes of an Antique Death: Pramathesh Barua and the Origins of the Terribly Effeminate, Maudlin, Self-destructive Heroes of Indian Cinema'.

9. See Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 154.

10. I have in mind particularly the works of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakarabarty, from whose writings we indeed get some good insights into how a primarily elite Bengali community – which does not exclude the women of the community – of 19th century Calcutta produced certain images of the domestic and the feminine within it that effectively reconstructed Bengali femininity as the repository of authentic cultural values as a means of safeguarding the domain of the nation. See Chatterjee's (1990).

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Adivasi Women in the Bengali Literature and Cinema

Debasree De

Abstract:

History is a portrayal of a mobile life cycle. But inspection of archive is not always enough to pursue the history in its entirety, especially when it is the history of human being. Then we should have to quest for the knowledge in the literature and films. But unfortunately there are neither many nor in-depth literary or cinematic creations of adivasi women of Bengal. History and imagination both have been employed in the characterization of the adivasi women in Bengali literatures and cinemas. But these characters have some biases and prejudices when it comes to the authenticity of the characters and the reality of the tribal societies. The female characters have been portrayed with unnecessary sexual extravaganza. The only exceptions are Mahasweta Devi and Rabindranath Tagore, who not only realised the inner feelings of an adivasi woman but also portrayed her the way she actually is, with full dignity and honour.

Introduction:

The concept of history, as the story of the traditions and culture of the people, was intimately associated with an ethnographic dimension: that is, there is an indigenous Bengali view, rooted in the culture of Bengal, and was therefore distinctively different and unique from several other concepts of history. The celebration of the 'peoples' culture' was an integral feature of the Swadeshi movement. But the limitations inherent in the romantic celebration of 'peoples' history' need to be kept in mind. The masses were eulogised as the custodians of the region's history and customs. It required urban, upper-class, often upper-caste, and educated scholars to speak up for and represent village traditions in a bourgeois public sphere shaped by print. It was perhaps inevitable too that the perception of what was considered to be peoples' culture would be coloured by caste, class and other cultural considerations unique to the urban Bengali literati (Sarkar: 22-24). It automatically

raises the question that why does the figure of the dancing and singing tribals, specifically tribal women, appear so frequently in Bengali literature and films? Rajnarayan Basu's Deoghar diary thus proceeds without any reference to Santhals, except one description of a Santhal dance staged by a local Bengali. This is undoubtedly a kind of cultural silencing.

One of the big problems of writing tribal women's history is that there is not a single account written by the tribal women themselves, which is quite available among the upper caste women or *bhadramahila*, dalits and Muslims. The only account that we find about a Santhal girl is, Sona. We know Sona's life better than that of any other convert, since P.O. Bodding wrote her biography. The book is the most complete biography we have of any Santhal woman during the colonial period. Here Sona herself wrote some reminiscences of her childhood (See Bodding). But that is completely a personal account.

Adivasi Women in Bengali Literature:

In the construction of tribal identity as 'primitive', there were two attempts on the part of the Bengali literati that were made during colonial and post-colonial period. These were, firstly to integrate the tribals into the so-called mainstream caste society which can be regarded as an integral part of the nation building process, and the other tendency was portraying the tribal woman as a sexual object. Though the literatures are not replete with the life stories of the tribal women, yet it is based on a very biased view of their sexual objectification.

Let us discuss the first event first. It was with the railways that the Bengali *bhadralok* began visiting places like Santhal Pargana, using them as holiday retreats. Bengali travel-imperative drew its competence from the project of the colonial 'penetration' of interiors. In this paradigm of travel as penetration – of interior – spaces as well as of the depths of time – the land and the people of the land were equated. The penetrative competence staged the first-ever visualisation of the 'primitive' as a discovery of a people who appeared not to exist prior to observation. The 'primitive' was thus

denied his/her definitional antecedence, which could dislocate history itself by making the ‘primitive’ more originary to the nation than the ‘historical’. In Santhal Parganas, for example, the colonial administration denied the right of some Bengali settlers precisely on the ground that the ‘primitive’ Santhals were more ‘original’ to this land than Hindus. And the politics of Bengalis in Deoghar became that of actively reclaiming the Hindu’s tenancy rights over that space of the nation, which colonial administrative discourse had classified as purely ‘primitive’ (See Ray). This discourse of discovery also implied that there were lands within the nation which were as yet untouched by the stir of passing events to mainstream Indian society. This undid to an extent the claim of nationalism itself. If the strategy of spatial gathering was indispensable to the nation so that the ‘primitive’ could be integrated without disrupting the unitary narrative of history, it was this very strategy which also reproduced the nation in the colonial image of a fractured and stratified terrain (Banerjee: 91). The question whether tribes should unconditionally be integrated to modernising mainstream society or should be protectively confined within spatialised and bounded ‘culture gardens’, thus, became an irresolvable problem for nationalism and is still remained a disputed one.

Now, the second issued needs to be discussed. As colonial modernity sought to commodify the tribals by making them pure bodies, they seemed to become increasingly larger than life, muscular (tribal men) and sensuous (tribal women) and desirable to the middle-class Bengalis, as if he/she possessed that secret of unabstracted passion, which the *bhadralok* was incapable of enjoying unconditionally. This produced the Bengali aesthetic imagination of tribals as sensuous and uninhibited figures – to be painted, sculpted, filmed, and desired. For example Sanjivchandra Chattopadhyay wrote about the Kol women of Palamau in his memoirs of Palamau, which was published as a serial between 1880 and 1882 in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Bangadarshan*. He said that the Kol women appeared to him as unbearably beautiful and sensuous. He believed that even in old age, Kol women remained young (Chattopadhyay: 381). And that no women could

laugh and dance as much as a ‘primitive’ Kol woman:

All of the same height, the same black colour of stone, bare-bodied, on their naked breasts mirrors sparkle in the moonlight. Wild flowers in their hair and ears, smile on their lips. ... restless with pleasure, like a quivering, impatient mare, straining their bodies against the reins. ... If there can be a clamour of the body, then in the bodies of these young women [I truly saw] an outbreak of tumult (Chattopadhyay: 393).

In contrast to this ‘free’ sensuality of Kol women, the limits of the authors own body became apparent.

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s *Aranyak* reflects similar kind of romanticisation of a tribal woman, *Bhanumati*. We can have a clear notion of a tribal woman imagined by a *bhadralok* intelligentsia (*Babuji*, as Bhanumati used to call Satyacharan) in the portrayal of Bhanumati.

Bhanumati was a slim and healthy young girl. Her face was endearing and full of warmth. However, the garments she wore would not have been considered modest in civilised society. Also, her hair was dry and unruly, and she wore a garland of shells and beads around her neck. ...she had a certain natural poise and an inherent sense of dignity (Bhattacharya: 151-54).

Satyacharan further thinks that,

...nothing could be compared with the experience of Bhanumati sitting near me and putting the pieces of fruit into my hands. For the first time in my life, I experienced a great pleasure – the sweetness of a woman’s frank behaviour. When she is affectionate and loving, it is as if the gates of heaven are opened on our earth. The dictates of refinement and the pressures of the civilised world had erased in her sisters the eternal woman that resided in Bhanumati (Bhattacharya: 181-82).

Again it is reflected in the imaginations of Satyacharan,

If I could have lived here ... married Bhanumati ... in the moonlit verandah of this very mud

house, the innocent forest maid would tell me her childish tales as she cooked, and I would sit and listen to her. ... Bhanumati was dark, but in all of Bengal, you would not find such a healthy lissom slip of a girl or such a vibrant innocent being. She was compassionate, kind and affectionate – how many times had I proof of it... Even thinking about it gave me pleasure. A beautiful vision! What was the point in progress? ... Once more, we took the path through the dark forest. By the side of the road Princess Bhanumati seemed to be standing – not a girl, but a youthful Bhanumati – one I had never seen before. (Bhattacharya: 251-52).

In the above mentioned descriptions of Bhanumati we find a stereotypical picture of a tribal woman replete with an unbound sexuality and passion. Though tribal history in British India was always a history of violent movements and protests, yet there are no such reflections found in the mentality or imagination of Bengali intelligentsia and their writing. They rather preferred to confine the valour and courage of the tribal women either into eroticism or into festivals.

But with the appearance of the landmark character of *Draupadi (Dopdi)* the imagination of a tribal woman achieved a new horizon. In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi invites us to begin effacing the image in an inextricably mingling historico-political specificity with the sexual differential in a literary discourse. ‘Draupadi’ first appeared in *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire), a collection of loosely connected, short political narratives. Here she begins putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, Bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals. The Naxalite movement and the severe state repression are the background of the story and it is the killing of this mistress’s husband that sets going the events of the story. Dopdi was first apprehended and then brutally tormented by the police since she denied revealing the whereabouts of her comrades.

Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only

the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven – then Draupadi had passed out (Spivak: 34-35).

Draupadi of *Mahabharata* provides the only example of polyandry and thereby exceptional. But Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi got also exceptional when she was placed first in a comradesly, activist, guerrilla warrior, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape.

The strongest characterisation of a tribal woman, Draupadi, comes out through the way she protested against the army officer who captured and degraded her.

... Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind. ... Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. ... Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? ... Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me –?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Spivak: 36-37).

Thus, Dopdi crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful ‘subject’, who, still using the language of sexual honour, can derisively call herself ‘the object of your search’, whom the author can describe as a terrifying superobject – ‘an unarmed target’. But the most important thing that should be borne in mind is, being a tribal woman Dopdi is not romanticised by Mahasweta Devi. There is a long tradition of writing on tribals as is evident from the work of famous writers such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay and Satinath Bhaduri. But there is a remarkable difference in their outlook and that of Mahasweta Devi. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she tells:

The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. ... The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel. ... They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities ... they are denied everything. ... That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal world. ... I repay them their honour (Satyanarayana: 19).

Regarding the gendered politics, Colin Mac Cabe's comment appears to be closer to the heart of the matter, when he says:

The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in its grounding in the gendered subaltern's body, in that female body which is never questioned and only exploited. The bodies of Jashoda and Dopdi figure forth the unutterable ugliness and cruelty which cooks in Third World kitchen to produce the First World feast that we daily enjoy (Cabe: xvi)

Adivasi Women in Bengali Cinema:

New histories have been popularised as a way of demystifying the world of appearances, where

media plays a very crucial part. In independent India, the major thrust of cultural policy is documentation and dissemination. Documentation of communities and process of change and transformation calls for a serious thinking and meticulous planning. Such an approach also calls for the rejection of certain stereotypes. But unfortunately media itself is stereotyping the gender dimensions of the tribal society and it can rightly be called as the poverty of empiricism, because the reading or deciphering myth regarding tribal way of life is a new way of legitimising the bourgeois readership and bourgeois conceptualization.

Photography may show perhaps the original of what is today the faster growing area of 'alternative' critical practice of cultural studies. If properly used, it may create a space, too, for the study of the tribal society. But here also the role of the photography and audio-visual media is not satisfactory at all in upholding their worldview. The movies made on tribal life portray a wrong image of its womenfolk. For example, the tribals have been portrayed as exploited people, as militants, as simple, gullible folk in the film *Mrigaya* (The Royal Hunt) of 1976 directed by Mrinal Sen. In this award-winning film the central female character is *Dungri*. She happens to be abducted by a local money lender in lieu for the debt of ten rupees owed by her father to the Mahajan. Santhal women have been shown dancing and singing. Portraying a hunter-gatherer tribal society somewhere in the Santhal Pargana, the character of *Dungri* fails to recognise the courage and the freedom inherent to a tribal woman. Her character suffers from vulnerability and a relatively masculine bias.

The film *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest) of 1970 directed by Satyajit Ray, which is based upon the Bengali novel of the same name by Sunil Gangopadhyay, describes the escapades of four urban young men in tribal areas of Palamau and their attitude to Santhal women, which is deplorable. The entire sequence is interspersed with shots of tribal women dancing to primitive rhythm as the central characters are engaged in their primitive pursuits. The four young men from the city are not unlikable, but their treatment of the local tribal people reveals an

unthinking arrogance that at times verges on brutality. One of them, Hari, gets close to a Santhal girl *Duli* when she approaches the group for extra drink. When Hari sees the rustic and attractive *Duli*, the tribal key to rev up his self-esteem, he jumps at it. He does not like when Shekhar pays the tribal women money for sweeping and swabbing for them. *Duli* has an untamed quality that enhances her appeal. Hari takes her into the forest and makes love with her. Though the film masterly juxtaposes the urban and tribal, yet the character of *Duli* gives a very negative idea about a tribal woman. There is a constant physical tension between Hari and *Duli*.

Tagore on Adivasi Women:

As suggested by these divergent visual and textual accounts the bourgeois objectification of the tribal women indicates dehumanization in capturing the ethnic identities. Rabindranath Tagore, however, realised that the Indian intelligentsia needed to destabilize social prejudices, to allow India to flourish as a pluralistic postcolonial democracy (Rycroft: 150-74). He wrote,

The Santal woman hurries up and down the graveled path under

The shimool tree

A course grey sari closely twined her slender limbs, dark and

compact

... Some absent-minded divine designer

...must have improvised unawares this woman's form

... I sit on my terrace watching the young woman toiling at her

task [of building Rabindranath's mud house: Shymali] hour after

hour.

My heart is touched with shame when I feel that the woman's

service,

*sacredly ordained for her loved ones, its dignity soiled by the
market price,
Should have been robbed by me with the help of a few pieces of
copper* (Tagore: 71-72).

At Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath instituted a new perception vis-à-vis India's indigenous peoples, which attempted, through hegemonic inter-cultural relations, to subvert the colonial separation of 'aboriginals' from mainstream Hindu India. As is evident in his poem, 'The Santal', comprehended both as a malleable concept and as a community, became a primary focus for this cultural intervention. In this poem, unlike the 'progressive' intelligentsia who have engendered a vibrant intellectual legacy and thus tended to take representations of the adivasis, the agency of the subaltern is less easy to identify because Tagore positions adivasis and modernists on an equal footing, producing a new dynamic between 'real' and 'positional' subalterns.

Conclusion:

In all these accounts the uniqueness of tribes, of their social structure and their world view, their sense of harmony with nature and with one another, does not come through either. The tribes are not doomed to suffer for eternity. They have lost out to, but have not been totally destroyed by, the forces of exploitation. There is something in their society and their culture that has survived and endured and held them together in many parts of India. This story is also needed to be told. The study on tribal women, who constitute the most major portion of the tribal culture, is a relatively neglected area of historical study and should be brought to the fore.

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Writing a Biography of Bengali Film Publicity: the Logic of Differentiation, and a Journey of Desire

Spandan Bhattacharya

Abstract:

This article aims to travel around the publicity scenario of Bengali Cinema and attempts to write a cultural biography of it. The film-related bulletins, publicity booklets, news paper advertisements, studio publications, posters and lobby cards of Bengali films provide me an entry point to this cultural biography of Bengali film publicity starting from the silent era towards the changes in later decades. My narrative starts with the literary trait of early years followed by its logic of transformation with the emergence of new technology and newer production system and here I've tried to explore how the idea of *bhadralok* self and the pleasure of *bhadralok* world in its appeal and denial played a significant role in this fascinating journey. In relation to that I've attempted to trace the moral economy behind it that determines the cultural logic of that transformation.

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The narrative of film publicity and film promotion run a fascinating journey in the history of cinema across the world. The world history of film publicity not only tells a tale of evolution of a new medium called Cinema but also reflects on this medium's numerous aspects beyond its narrative economy and its visual regime. In the early film advertisements first the movies were a novelty that promoted themselves and the actual content of the films mattered little. Early cinema researchers have shown that the film industry did not advertise its movies directly to the general public until around 1913. When films first emerged as a scientific innovation in the late nineteenth century, pioneering companies like Edison, Biograph, Lumière and Pathé were more interested in selling machines that produced films. The earliest posters advertised the act of moviegoing itself. For

instance in France, the Lumière Brothers advertised their “[Cinématographe Lumière](#),” while in the United States, posters promoted “Edison’s Greatest Marvel: The [Vitascope](#).” The emergence of the nickelodeon around 1905 in the west changed the film industry and its advertising strategies to a great extent. During the nickelodeon boom around 1905–1908, exhibitors started advertising their films, used homemade posters outside their theater facades, hired people to shout about their show, distributed homemade flyers, and borrowed publicity stunts. From about 1908, exhibitors produced their own weekly or monthly bulletins, listing forthcoming movies and providing information about their theaters, films, and promotions, alongside some other local news and advertisements.

Cinema came to Bengal and all over the India as a mass entertainment medium from the west and in the early period it were the foreign film companies either European or American that used to exhibit films in cities like Bombay, Madras or Calcutta. When the indigenous film production began in India the biggest challenge was perhaps to make a distinct “Indian” film in contents, sets, and stylizations. And it was equally important to promote these films as “made in India” and hence different from the regular foreign releases. In this context this article attempts to time travel in the film publicity scenario of Bengal and aims to write a cultural biography of Bengali film publicity. 1 But discussing the entire publicity network of Bengali cinema, its narrative of ‘evolution’ and its material significance would have been too ambitious an attempt for this article. Primarily because of the difficulties in accessing all the material, and secondly since this article is not a survey of Bengali cinema’s publicity discourse, I’ll limit myself to some observations that I would like to make and the materiality of its procedures and will try to comment on them relationally. The film-related bulletin, publicity booklets, news paper advertisements, studio publications and lobby cards of early Bengali films may provide me an entry point to this cultural biography. In my article I will attempt to trace the process of transformation in publicity pattern, and its economy of desire that determines the cultural logic of Bengali film promotion.

If we look at the early period of Bengali film publicity the literary ness of the publicity discourse was a significant aspect of it. 2 The advertisement rhetoric followed generally the *Sadhu* Bengali or English to generate a sensation in the targeted mass of these films. The publicity booklets of these films almost narrated a scene by scene plot development synopsis, used still photographs and provided captions with them. In each of these booklets the name of the theaters and the logos of the production houses (especially if it's a renowned name) were mentioned. The first page introduced the cast and crew of the film and the brief synopsis of the film plot were provided in rest of the pages. After the emergence of talkie the publicity booklets started adding the lyrics of the film songs used in those films. For example publicity booklets of films like *Chandidas* (1932), *Sita* (1933), *Bidyapati* (1938) and many others had the list of songs and their lyrics in it. Sometimes the booklets used hand drawn images of some motives from the films or images of the writer like Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay or Rabintranath Tagore if the film is an adaptation of their literary works. Here I would like to quote from a film advertisement of a silent film *Aparadhi* (Pramathesh Chandra Barua, 1931)

Night in the lonely laboratory- the experiment has given every promise of success- the professor is jubilant- but his assistant seems pensive. Jamuna, the maid servant entering with dinner- Niranjan (the assistant) departs, promising to be back soon. 10.30 p.m. the professor is quite alone.

It is interesting to observe how the advertisement mode used to generate a literary feel and pleasure and use literary tropes in their publicity stylizations. It is important to note when the literary ness of Bengali cinema yet to flourish in its full fledged form and Bengalis has just started to call movies affectionately 'boi' ('book') , the publicity mode utilized this fascination and appeal of literature to that extent. While the latter half of early cinema of Bengal would channelize and idealize itself towards the 'boi' mode of cinema in becoming an alternative pleasure of reading literature, the

publicity approach signaled this desire much before. And from the publicity narrative the idea of motivating class' self differentiation is also quite evident in these examples. The literary trait which later would become one of the important aspects of Bengali cinema made its entry as early as in this period. The *bhadralok* self and the economy of *bhadralok* pleasure that would emerge on the centre stage of Bengali narrative cinema also signaled its arrival in the publicity narrative of early Bengali films.

In the later period of black and white era of the Bengali cinema this tradition of film publicity more or less continues in the same manner with occasional changes in the advertisement rhetoric and photographic stylizations. In the Bengali film posters and lobby cards of this period we can see the use of still photographs from film stills on show cards or hand drawn banner size two sheet posters of those film stills as in films like *Basu Paribar* (1952), *Sare Chuattor* (1953), *Abhayer Biye* (1957), *Chaoa Paoa* (1959) etc. Most of the publicity for these films used a scene from an important film sequence that matched with the mood of the film, for instance if it was a comedy like *Sare Chuattor* the film still used conveyed the light, comic mood of the film, or if it was a social drama like *Kankabatir Ghaat* (1957) the poster captured intense moments featuring Anubha Gupta and Uttam Kumar in sentimental postures and with their anxiety ridden faces. Some film show cards like those of *Ekti Raat* (1956) or *Khelaghar* (1959) added colors on black and white stills to make them attractive, the curtains in the background, the heroine's sari or sometimes the faces of the hero-heroines were hand painted. Sometimes along with still photographs of a particular film scene, additional hand drawn motifs or pictures were used, like in the *Haat Baralei Bandhu* poster a hand drawn picture of a hand holding the Bengali word "Bandhu" (/friend) was used. Satyajit Ray's hand designed film posters are famous for their innovative use of fonts and the punning. And it was Ray's own ideas and styles that were materialized in his film posters and publicities. Apart from Ray, there are films like *Chouranghee* (1978) or *Sanyasi Raja* (1975) that used stylized fonts in

accordance with the film plot and its theme. The *Chouranghee* poster fonts stylistically foregrounded the mood of Chouranghee's locational and thematic significances- the letters organized as if four roads were intersecting each other evoking chaos and hurry and *Sanyasi Raja* poster fonts were shaped and organized like a crown situated just above Uttam Kumar's large figure dressed according to his attire in this film. The informations conveyed in most posters are names of the director, producer and actor-actress, and if it's a literary adaptation, also the name of the original literary source; writers were also highlighted in the posters, as in the cases of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Saptapadi* (1961), or Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's *Jhinder Bandi* (1961).

After the arrival of color, for some years black and white still photographs continued to be used for film publicity. For example, in film posters of *Pratishodh* or *Ogo Badhu Sundari* black and white star images were used in colored backgrounds and the term 'colored film' was highlighted. This tradition changed after colored film posters became the dominant mode of publicity primarily from the late 1970s. Another major change that happened later in Bengali film publicity was the change in printing technology: a shift from silk screen printing to offset printing. ³ In silk screen posters, colors were applied to line drawing and half tones did not develop properly, whereas in offset printing this problem is not there. There were other changes as well, as for example, a shift from hand drawn method to PTS (photo typesetting) and from PTS to digital setting. Along with technological changes a professional approach to film publicity also came about. In earlier years individual designers like Dhiren Mallik, Shree Panchanan, Nirmal Roy, Shishir Karmakar worked on poster design and producers directly gave them contracts. Then the film publicity firm "A Square" was formed by Shailen Sur and Samaresh Basu for Bengali film publicity for different sectors. Then in the mid 1970s "Cine Media" entered the Bengali film publicity scenario. Uttam Kumar Basu, the present PRO of the firm claims "Cine Media" to be the first complete entertainment firm in Bengali cinema. Swapan Kumar Ghosh and Chanchal Brahma created this

firm and it has continued its significant presence working for diverse genres of Bengali cinema until now in Bengali film publicity.

The late 1970s is also a period when with technological advancement, poster designing went through an overall transformation with a stylization of fonts and changes in the patterns in which the star images were used. And along with it the language of film publicity and posters in terms of its nature and usage experienced a new phase in the 1980s to address a class that the Bengali film industry had just recognized as its target audience. Film posters went through a transformation that was manifested in the use of loud colors, the emphasis of hyper (melo) dramatic moments, in the very naming of the films and the fonts used. It's interesting to observe the kind of titles and the way they were written in posters and publicity materials with clear resemblances to the *jatra pala* posters popular in suburban and rural Bengal. 4 In many cases the names of the films were in curved bright yellow fonts representing *jatra* poster aesthetics quite directly. More importantly they were published in the Bengali newspaper pages used for theater and *jatra* advertisement. Printed in adjacent columns, these film posters resonated directly with the *jatra* posters in the stylization of the titles and the general aesthetics of the representation. Usually the image of the star figure was used to cover the entire surface of the poster; for example the use of the images of the hero Ranjit Mallik, Chiranjeet or in later years in most of the cases, the star Prasenjeet in his moments of action emphasizing high drama in his facial expression and action in his aggressive postures. Sometimes the poster also used faces of the antagonists and female leads, and sometimes a scene from the film promising a song and dance sequence. Often if the represented figures and the frozen images were not enough to convey the sense of moral drama of the film, the posters would literally use words like Anugatyā (Obedience), Tyag (Sacrifice), Samman (Respect), Kartabya (Responsibility) etc as in case of *Dadathakur* (Haranath Chakraborty, December, 2001). Additionally references to Hindu religious figures and their blessings were used in posters that had largely been absent in earlier

decades. The posters and newspaper publicity in many cases started with lines like “Ma Tarar kripay” or “Ma Kaalir Kripay” (with the blessings from Goddess Tara or Goddess Kali).

In this way the 1980s film publicity of mainstream Bengali cinema brought a kind of ‘interruption’ in the history of Bengali film publicity. This is also a period when Bengali cinema in the hands of a new group of film maker-producer chain, witnessed the emergence of a new film aesthetics in Bengali film industry. These alleged copies of southern or Hindi film hits or remakes of Bangladeshi films had a strong negative impact on the Bengali *bhadralok* public sphere and one of the primary reasons that this sphere could not ‘bear’ with the popular narrative scheme of Bengali films was their use of dialogue, and the way they spoke Bengali language in those ‘jatra marka chhobi’ (/jatra typed film). They spoke a language that the *bhadra* sphere clearly understood, but one that they could not, or to be precise, were not ready to ‘identify’ with. Noted film journalists in Bengali and English newspapers did not hide their feelings of discomfort while listening to this unidentifiable, ‘rowdy’ Bengali in their review columns. This is possibly the reason why many film journalists of this period did not consider these films as Bengali films at all and described the Bengali film star Prasenjeet who has acted in many of these films as a Hindi film star. This specific use of the Bengali language whether scripted intentionally or unknowingly is a different issue to discuss here. If on the one hand filmmaker Haranath Chakraborty sees it as a part of their project to speak in a simple, colloquial Bangla dialogue addressing the common Bengali mass and that there was nothing ‘unconventional’ or ‘unusual’ in using that language, on the other hand journalists in their columns felt that this language was a conscious ‘rejection’ of the *bhadra* cultural code. For instance in a personal interview with a film journalist of a reputed English daily she discussed naming strategies of these films and sites an interesting example of this particular film *Baba keno chakor*. According to her instead of this direct and crude approach, the film could go for some title like “pitar asamman” (Disrespect to the father) that would not hamper the sense of the theme that the film wanted to convey and the film would also have a ‘presentable’ name that was suitable for

the *bhadra* tongue. But the makers did not use that name deliberately because they wanted to express that rejection of *bhadra* cultural code and any kind of *bhadrata* in their populist strategy. An imagination of a new class of audience became important in their publicity approach and if we carefully observe the poster aesthetics of this period we can sense that break, that rupture, and the appeal of rejection of *bhadralok* cultural hegemony. Perhaps this new film culture offered not just a new kind of folk entertainment and celebration of *Jatra* aesthetics in films which were unconventional compared to earlier Bengali cinema, but also these films constructed the pleasure through a strong denial of the conventional ‘*bhadralok* pleasure’ of Bengali cinema. This was a denial of what was considered to be gentle, decent (literally the *bhadra* part of *bhadralok* culture) and sensible and targeted towards a ‘better’ cinema going class, and on the whole a denial of the Bengali literary and cultural tradition and the importance of education for the cinema going class.

This model of ‘rejection’ needs to be understood in terms of a newly privileged class which is obvious when we consider the appeal and also the politics of these films that often goes beyond the language used within the film texts to the publicity logic in the language of circulation of these films. As historians who have worked on the social and cultural history of late twentieth century Bengal pointed out a shift in the profile of Calcutta as a city since in this period a new section of the rural population increasingly started visiting the city as a source of work and created a new domain of urbanity. This historical narrative of this new city based emergent class might be useful in the narrative of the significant path breaking changes of Bengali Cinema. Along with the ‘emergence’ of a lower middle labouring class in the expanded city, a rural and suburban population also became important in the imagination of the target film audience of Bengali ‘mainstream’ films. Even in their press interviews mainstream filmmakers acknowledged the presence of this class as the ideal target audience of Bengali cinema from the mid 1980s. And the posters signaled that presence prior to these films release and mobilized that appeal. This newly gained access to the city and city bred culture by an emergent lower middle class which in turn generated new cultural needs of this class

was seen as a serious threat in the *bhadralok* media and by the urban educated public sphere. Furthermore, this resulted in a serious engagement with the ‘crisis narrative’ of Bengali cinema and a need to (re)claim the ‘better class’ of cinema going crowd through an ‘alternative’ cinematic practice. This ‘alternative’/ ‘parallel’ filmic practice constructed its worlds of pleasure in its attempt to reclaim the ‘golden era’ of Bengali cinema.

In an interview film director Subrata Sen speaks of how the urban audiences of Bengali cinema became tired of the titles of contemporary Bengali films, that according to him for years had continued using moral binaries like *Nyay Anyay*/ Virtue and vice, *Sadhu Shaytan* /the pure and the evil etc. So when he as a film maker worked on films that have titles like *Ek Je Achhe Kanya*/ *Swapner Feriwal*a/ *Nil Nirjane* perhaps he had this equation in his mind. For example the very name *Unishe April* that signified the emergence of Rituparno Ghosh and also a new genre of *bhadralok* relationship film, in its title carried the idea of a ‘different film’ and generated an interest before its release. Along with the naming, the representation style of this film poster (of *Unishe April*) attracted a crowd that was reluctant to watch a mainstream Bengali film; it used the Bengali numerical one and nine and put images of Debashree Roy and Aparna Sen in two corners indicating the distance between them via the use of the space in between. In the newspaper advertisements, using phrase like “ma o meyer jatil samparko niye ek asadharon paribarik chhabi” (‘an extraordinary family film exploring relationship complexity between a mother and a daughter’), the poster promised something other than what the usual family melodrama of a Swapan Saha or a Haranath Chakraborty film could provide. Firstly the ‘realist’ nature of the characters’ photographs differentiated it from the usual family melodramas of that time. Darkly lit spaces, characters’ faces with restrained emotion tried to convey that ‘difference’ and it went well with the sense of the reality of relationships in the middle class belief system. And the poster highlighted the film’s national award recognition, especially Debashree Roy as a national award winning actress for this film. Additional information that the newspaper advertisements of *Unishe April* provided, was that

the night show would be over by 10.30 pm. Though this simple information might sound like just a necessary detail, it had its significance beyond just information. An interview with Uttam Kr. Basu who was in charge of publicity for *Unishe April* on behalf of the publicity organization Cine Media, reveals that this detail about the show timing had been provided out of safety concerns so that the middle class *bhadralok* could go to the film theater without worrying about transport. It's important to note the manner in which this film imagined a class who might be bothered about their security and available transport facilities in order to watch this film.

Rituparno Ghosh's *Titli* in a similar vein in its publicity brought up a comparison between Aparna Sen and Konkona Sensharma in different registers. The film magazine columns and press entertainment news section during that period focused on the comparison between the two actresses dealing with the question of who is a better actress, who is more beautiful etc. Both *Titli* and Konkona's first feature film *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* used a star discourse about Konkona Sensharma in their respective publicity programmes. When Subrata Sen and Sandip Sen the director and the producer of this film respectively planned *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* as the first Bengali "urban youth film" they felt it was necessary to establish Konkona Sensharma as the face of urban Bengali youth. And the subsidiary discourse on Konkona Sensharma highlighted this factor during this period when the actor debuted as the central character of the film. Press columns highlighted her college life spent in Delhi as a St. Stephen's College English honors graduate, her preference for English Television serials on Star World etc. Similar publicity was done for Subrata Sen's next film *Swapner Feriwala* (the hawker of dreams) in which Nilanjana Bhoomik, the daughter of another early Bengali film heroine Anjana Bhoomik, debuted.

Contrary to the flat, bright title fonts of the 'mainstream' model, these film posters used fonts of a 'different' style. In many cases going against uniform typed words they consciously used fonts of the asymmetrical hand writing style. The fonts of *Ek Je Ache Kanya*, *Titli*, *Utsab*, *Iti Shrikanta*, *Shubho Mahurat* or *Hothat Nirar Janye* were in this mode. Apart from that, the names of

the films themselves were closer to the literary use of Bengali names as opposed to the names resembling popular *jatra* titles of the ‘mainstream’ model. There are instances when professional painters worked for the publicity or font design of ‘parallel’ films, for example, the artist Anup Roy designed the letter type and overall style of the title for *Titli*, the hand written red colored word and an idle butterfly sitting on it visually signifying the meaning of *Titli*. On the other hand, the films that were based on direct literary adaptations created a literary flavor in the use of their fonts as that of films like *Chokher Bali* or *Antarmahal*. Along with font style there are strategic uses of captions that also helped to differentiate these films from the mainstream model. In Subrata Sen’s *Hothat Nirar Janye* (Suddenly for Nira, 2004) lines from Sunil Gangopadhyay’s poetry were used for publicity. This film had a one week delayed release on censorship grounds with reference to one scene, and this ‘news’ had already been leaked to the public to generate curiosity. And when the publicity lines used a sentence like “Sharir jakhan maner kotha bole” (/when the body speaks of mind’s words) it increased an interest in the film quite effectively. Moreover, the *Hothat Nirar Janye* publicity poster used a minimalist style, unique to the Bengali film poster tradition: it just had a close up of Jaya Seal who played the title role of Nira against a white background with Sunil Gangopadhyay’s lines used above. With her face and that line, the capital ‘A’ in a circle connotative of its adult certification was highlighted. The film is an adaptation of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s short story *Rani o Abinash* (Rani and Abinash), but it intentionally uses the name Nira in its title. Nira is an imagined muse that Sunil Gangopadhyay had written about in a number of poems and thus the figure had already been in *bhadralok* popular parlance and the cultural imagination from much earlier. Sen in this way generated an interest regarding his film using a name from a *bhadralok* literary imagination that had a wide appeal.

Rituparno Ghosh’s *Titli* used two interesting captions: the first one “pahare premer galpo” (/love story in hillside) sounded like the title of a travelogue, and the second one “jibane kauke valobese hariyechhen? Titli dekhun” (/have you lost someone in your life whom you loved? *Titli* is

a must watch) seemed to evoke a personal resonance with the pleasure of memory and nostalgia . In Abhijit Dasgupta's *Dwitiyo Basanto* poster a line that is used is "There are lots of secrets. In this life nothing would be spoken of". Kausik Ganguly's line in *Warish* is "Valobasa kakhano abaidha noi" (/ love is never illegitimate), and Bratya Basu's *Teesta*'s caption uses "Amar kona Shabda nei, shudhui naishabda...." (/ I don't have any words, only silence). These sentences on the one hand capture the theme of the film and in a line give an idea of what the film is all about; on the other hand they establish their closeness to certain kind of Bengali *bhadralok* rhetoric and culture, a kind of literariness of the *bhadra* cultural code. It is because a body of films rejecting the *bhadra* code and belief system used a different language pattern unauthorized and criticized by the 'better' cinema going class that Subrata Sen, Rituparno Ghosh or Anjan Das as also some other directors' films claimed that 'lost' taste discourse in their publicity strategy and in this reclaiming developed a taste discourse attached to their films and their closeness to Bengali literary practice.

Along with literary closeness and the mobilization of materials relating to the star, the marketing logic of post 1990s *bhadralok* cinema resulted in giving shape to its wider appeal by subsidiary media and brand endorsements. Large scale advertisements of *Chokher Bali* brought brand association to a new dimension hitherto unexplored in Bengali cinema. Venkatesh Films until *Chokher Bali* happened was known as a big budget producer of Bengali commercial films. With Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* they started associating themselves with 'quality' Bengali films, and this film on the other hand started a new pattern of film publicity in poster aesthetics and the logic of circulation. The sponsorship logic made the primary banners of this film advertisement look like brand endorsements of a Jewellery house. The main posters, print advertisements and kiosks presented Aisharya Rai dressed up in jewelry. The poster focused on Rai's stardom, her jewelry and used a caption that went as "biyer saje Binodini" (/Binodini in Bridal wear) or "Anjalir Alankare Aparupa Binodini" (/Beautiful Binodini in Anjali's Ornaments). Post *Chokher Bali* this jewelry brand and some other brands as well saw a new phase in their association with a number of

Bengali films. Starting from Raja Sen's *Krishnakanter Will*, to Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Mahanagar @ Kolkata* or Sandip Ray's *Kailashe Kelenkari*, this trend of placing jewelry houses' advertisement within the films was established and jewelry houses used these films as a platform for brand endorsement. The use of Peerless brand in *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* can also be mentioned in this regard.

The use of subsidiary media is another significant intervention in the press based publicity of Bengali films. When *Titli* was planned as a big budget film with star casts like Aparna Sen, Mithun Chakraborty and Konkona Sen Sharma, The producer thought of its publicity on a large scale and they planned to shoot a 'making of *Titli*'. They proposed to a Bengali television channel to telecast this video before the film's release and they agreed. Of course, nowadays this is a part of regular publicity for almost all big banner Bengali films; however, at that point, the telecasting of the 'Making of *Titli*' was the first attempt of this kind in the Bengali film publicity scenario. If the 'Making of *Titli*' started a new phase in the involvement of new media in film publicity, Anjan Das' *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* extended it to a new scale altogether. The *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* team organized a TV show prior to its release, the *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara quiz* from 4th November to 8th November between 6.45 p.m. and 7 p.m. and offered "exciting prizes". A radio station also organized a Shanjhbatir debate competition and offered prizes for the winner. Apart from that, the film organized another competition "pujar Shanjhbatir" with a local organization and announced a prize money of Rs. 11,000 /- . Along with this "Shanjhbatir letter writing contest" was also announced. There was another announcement that if one bought a block ticket of ten the 'lucky number' could win a family tour of Darjeeling. In this manner, the *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* publicity worked to promote interest in the film to new levels through lucky draws, the film debate and the letter writing competition involving mediums like radio, television etc. Thus with the help of subsidiary media and brand sponsorship these body of films attempted to highlight their 'difference' from the mainstream. But utilizations of this wide range of media and branding also

gives rise to complex scenario of the contemporary Bengali film publicity.

In post-liberalization period television became a major site to publicize and promote Bengali films. In this period Bengali films even acknowledged the importance of television not just as a publicity medium but also as a strong connection to the ‘majority’ of the audience. Rituparno Ghosh’s *Khela* (2008) is an interesting case in point. The publicity caption for this film prior to release on kiosks and two sheet and six sheet banners read “baro parda r “Khela” (“Khela” of the big screen) . *Khela* was a popular television serial around that time period directed by Ravi Ojha. And this film by Ghosh, though it did not have any kind of similarity in terms of narrative or star cast logic with this mega soap, mentioned its title to use its popularity to generate an interest regarding the film. At the same time the so called mainstream Bengali film publicity in the last four/five years has also become largely dependent on television and TV ness. Especially after the shows like “Film Star” on *Star Ananda* and others, television has become a crucial medium to circulate the ‘filmi *khabar*’ of Bengali cinema.

Newer publicity mediums like film websites, Orkut communities or Face book pages also joined to publicize and promote Bengali films. And what is more important in new media publicity is that, these advertisements are equally enthusiastic about giving information and personal reviews about a Haranath Chakraborty film and a Rituparno Ghosh film. The question of the new media public is important here. For instance, when I asked Haranath Chakraborty what he thought about the media’s changed approach towards Bengali popular cinema, that they did not even recognize him as a film director fifteen years ago, and now the media is so concerned about his films, he pointed to the ‘truthful’ quality of electronic media of the contemporary that was missing earlier for the attitude of the press was faulty with a partial vision. He said now the press cannot fool an audience if they have the awareness. However, here the question I think is not so much about ‘truth’ or of the audience being fooled, but what we believe to be appropriate for the audience and how we think of the nature of the audience. The electronic media cannot function according to the exclusive

imagination of an ideal educated middleclass public as its consumer. It has to target or imagine a wider base. And Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali's* Jewelry house endorsement or the TV ness of *Khela* publicity is no exception in following that logic. On the one hand, the electronic media blurs the differentiating line between the Bengali mainstream and the parallel cinema. On the other hand, this change in approach also raises some questions on changing class hierarchy, social system, imagination of class desire and how they reflect on our publicity medium and our cinema. Perhaps the politics of differentiation that was crucial to publicize any cultural objects of the past and especially our cinema also moulds itself accordingly to the journey of new media and pleasure of (Bengali) cinema.

Igor Kopytoff in his essay "The cultural biography of things" looks at "the moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions" of cultural objects and their biographies.⁵ In this article I have attempted to explore that moral economy acting behind the Bengali film publicity narrative and its process of transformations. The objective economy of change of publicity scenario of Bengali cinema might point towards a number of issues like the technological advancement, emergence of publicity farm, proliferation of new media and other transformations but the moral economy that stands behind tells us a story of social changes, labor, intellect, creativity, class politics, changing belief system of Bengal's cultural psyche and a journey of desire. Sometimes the transformation is not directly determined within the structure of change. Instead, the aesthetics or the morality behind that transformation played the role of justifying a particular value order of that change or a desire for that change. This narrative of change I believe revealed the belief system and collective understanding of cinema and its existence in West Bengal. Kopytoff reminds us that in complex biographies of things an object's cultural values are determined on numerous planes and sometimes even the hierarchy between them is not clear. Time travel in the film publicity scenario of Bengali cinema reveals that inner drama of numerous determining spheres of control and reflects the simultaneous construction of society and objects and

their intersecting planes of selfhood, autonomy and desire.

End notes

1. This method of observing the narrative of Bengali film publicity is deeply inspired by Ranjani Mazumdar's study of the Bombay film poster. See "The Bombay Film Poster" *Seminar 525: Unsettling Cinema*, May 2003, 33-41.
2. Most of the research for this article was done at the Jawaharlal Nehru University library, New Delhi, National Library, Kolkata and Nandan Library and Archive, Kolkata. I appreciate the support I received from the staff there.
3. I am indebted to Mr. Abhijit Goswami and Mr. Ashis Banerjee for their help in providing contacts of industry persons and publicity materials. Thanks are due to those who took out their valuable time, talked to me and enriched my article: Mr. Subrata Sen, Mr. Swapan Saha, Mr. Haranath Chakraborty, Mr. Tapan Biswas, Mr. Sandip Sen, Mrs. Ratnottoma Sengupta, Dr. Parimal Ghosh, and Mr. Uttam Kumar Basu,
4. The term 'jatra marka chhobi' was used in Bengali print media in 1980s and 1990s to refer to some Bengali films' closeness to popular jatra form instead of a 'true' cinematic form.
5. In his essay "The Cultural Biography of Things" Igor Kopytoff studies goods and cultural objects in a process of exchange that commoditizes within a logic of cultural value as well as individual value. This essay traces the shifts that a commodity undergoes in both uncommercialized and complex societies and reveals how anomalies and contradictions appear in this framework. For detail see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process" in Arjun Appadurai ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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Adaptation of Films from Plays: A Selective Study in Post-Colonial Bengali

Cinema

Sourav Gupta

Introduction:

Right from the moment ancient man learned to express his hunting endeavor to his fellows, *mime* was born. Language had not developed and he had to express through body language and the language of silence. With the advent of language a wide range of communication opened up. Poetry, prose, songs and of course, theatre was born to give expression to words. The silent expression of mime, value added with dialogues, music and dance developed into theatre. With the advancement of technology, theatre was idiomized from the theatre stage onto a big silver screen and cinema was born.

In its inception stage, cinema did not have any sound and was basically 'silent movie'. It sounded finally and became a 'talkie'. Sounds familiar? Yes, the same opening that theatre had. It is a strange relationship this, theatre and cinema, so different yet so similar! Though cinema is a purely technological media, content wise it has resorted time & again to theatre. Films have been made from plays but the shift is not an easy task. There are technical and aesthetic tasks that have to be performed. The present discussion highlights the transformation of a subject from the stage to the screen tracing its history and a special focus on post colonial Bengali cinema as case study.

International Perspective: Shakespeare-Eisenstein-Kurosawa

Both in Europe and the Soviet, two of the most important hubs of world cinema, film makers were heavily influenced by theatre, both in terms of content as well as form. Their essential skills, conceptual framework of the medium developed from the experience of theatre. It may be kept in mind here, that for cinema to develop, the closest reference point had to be theatre. The famous

Sergei Eisenstein himself had a theatrical background before he went on to become one of the finest exponents of cinema.

In 1915 Eisenstein entered the Institute for Civil Engineering in Petrograd, where he saw his first Meyerhold productions in the theatre. After the Revolution he abandoned his courses and joined the Red Army. He was assigned to a theatrical troupe, where he worked as a director, designer, and actor. In 1920 he was demobilized to Moscow and rapidly became head of design at the First Proletkult Workers Theatre. His first sets were for a production of *The Mexican*, written by Jack London, Lenin's favourite writer. In 1921 he joined Meyerhold's theatre workshop (he was later to describe Meyerhold as his "spiritual father") and worked on designs for *Puss in Boots*. Eisenstein's first stage production, a version of Ostrovsky's *Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man* in 1923, included his first venture into cinema, *Glumov's Diary*. This was inspired by the use of a short film in the Kozintsev and Trauberg production of Gogol's *The Wedding*, which he had seen the year before. His production of Tretyakov's *Gas Masks* in 1924 staged in the Moscow gasworks was an attempt to bridge the gap between stage "realism" and the reality of everyday life. It failed and, as Eisenstein himself put it, he "fell into cinema."

And probably, later in his career, when Eisenstein felt the need to record his thought on the medium, he had to acknowledge how theatre had influenced him in filming. He deftly explained the interrelation between the two in his 1939 book, ***Through Theatre To Cinema***, and there revealed the source of his much discussed concept of *mise-en-cadre*:-

The technique of genuine mise-en-scene composition was being mastered and approaching its limits. It was already threatened in becoming the Knight's move in chess, the shift of purely plastic contours in the already non theatrical outlines of detailed drawings.

Sculptural details seen through the frame of the cadre, or shot, transitions from shot

*to shot, appeared to be the logical way out for the threatened hypertrophy of the mise-en-scene. Theoretically it established our dependence on mise-en-scene and montage. Pedagogically, it determined, for the future, the approaches to montage and cinema, arrived at through the mastering of **theatrical construction** and through the art of mise-en-scene. Thus was born the concept of mise-en-cadre. As the mise-en-scene is an interrelation of people in action so the mise-en-cadre is the pictorial composition of mutually dependant cadres(shots) in a montage sequence.*

This much for technique but even in terms of content, right from its inception till date, Hollywood movies have been prolific in turning plays to films, specially that of **William Shakespeare's**. There have been many and varied versions of William Shakespeare's plays. Some set in the correct period, some present day. Some use the original dialogue, others modernize the language. Some succeed. Some fail.

Film adaptations of Shakespeare span a variety of periods. In **Kenneth Branagh's 'Henry V'**, the film is set precisely during the reign of King Henry V. This is an example of one of the greatest translations of Shakespeare to film. The play itself is possibly one of the least accessible for today's audiences. However, Branagh masterfully gives it the passion, action and humour that was originally intended. Henry V is one of the most beautifully shot pieces of cinema. The long tracking shot after the battle of Agincourt is, in my opinion, the best single shot in film history. So much has to be synchronized perfectly as King Henry walks the devastated battlefield, littered with the dead and dying. I do not envy Branagh having to set up that shot for however many times he had to do it. Branagh's direction is exemplary but, his lead performance is equally as impressive. I don't care how much of a pacifist you are, when he says "Once more unto the breach, dear friends", you want to go with him.

The best example of Shakespeare brought into modern times is **Baz Luhrmann's** '*Romeo + Juliet*'. The use of original dialogue in a modern setting, also using Shakespearean language to fill billboards and signs was a masterstroke. The leads: Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, perfectly cast, brilliantly performed. The supporting cast: Particularly Harold Perrineau's cross-dressing Mercutio; heartbreaking, frightening and completely compelling. Finally, the incredible production design: Quite possibly the best looking, most creative look of any film.

There are other notable films like **Roman Polanski's** '*Macbeth*' that completely captured the spirit of the play while appealing to audiences of its own time. Branagh's '*Much Ado About Nothing*' was funny, sensual, moving and full of fascinating characters played by brilliant actors like Branagh, Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington and Robert Sean Leonard as Claudio. Ian McKellan as '*Richard III*' was a performance of true genius.

Moving onto Asia in this context, the Japanese film titled "*Ran*" (1985) written by Akira Kurosawa and Hideo Oguni, directed by **Akira Kurosawa** is an adaptation of the play *Macbeth* written by William Shakespeare. The film won an Oscar and won twenty-five other awards and was nominated for fifteen others in both the U.S. and in Japan. It is not a literal translation of the original script and yet manages handily to stay true the original scripts theme and intent. It is both stunning in it's direction and beautiful to the eye while at the same time it is packed with an amazing amount script justified violence and gore. It succeeds in covering every cinematic and literary base with aplomb. It is, by far, the best film made to date of Shakespeare's work.

The film has at it's helm an extremely accomplished director and writer in the person of Mr. Kurosawa. He cast the film perfectly with very talented actors and actresses and he achieved excellent performances from each of them. At every level of the film be it art direction, costume design, set construction or continuity Mr. Kurosawa hits a home run.

What is most fascinating about what *Ran* offers to its audience is the seamless mix of samurai legends and the work of Shakespeare. It not only mixes cultures but manages to do so in a way that is highly entertaining and easy to comprehend albeit the film relies exclusively on English subtitles as the original dialog is totally in Japanese. Adding to the fantastic achievements of *Ran* is the fact that Mr. Kurosawa was nearly blind at the time he made the film and he relied heavily on his staff to frame shots based on his storyboards. As though that wasn't handicap enough to work under, Mr. Kurosawa lost his wife during production of *Ran* and took only one day away from filming in order to attend her funeral before returning to the set. The word "Ran" in Japanese roughly translates to the English word "chaos". How perfectly does the title of this gem sum up what William Shakespeare had in mind when writing *Macbeth*? How perfect is the title for the subject matter of avarice, war, deception and murder? Finally, it is quite the accomplishment indeed that Mr. Kurosawa and Hideo Oguni manage to stay true to the play and the theme while using virtually none of the original words. The script is not written in iambic pentameter yet still uses language as an art form.

The theatre connection of Bengali cinema-A sparing trend:

No discussion on the historical perspective of Indian cinema is possible without mentioning **Hiralal Sen**, who in 1898 set up the Royal Bioscope Company and shot all by himself with a camera. He had imported a cinematograph from London and started a show in Classic Theatre on 9th February 1901 under the inspiration of Amarendra Nath Dutta, the famous theatrician of the time. Apart from scenes taken from real life like Ganges, Cock fight, roads etc. he showed scenes from plays like '*Bhramar*', '*Alibaba*', '*Dolyatra*', '*Sarala*', '*Buddha*', '*Sitaram*'. Though these were not feature films in its true sense but it was made in India, by an Indian and for the first time in the country. He was followed up by Debi Ghosh who shot scenes from the play '*Bishabrikkha*' in 1915.

It is a pity that Hiralal Sen did not get the credit for being the pioneer he was in Indian cinema. He himself destroyed all his creations out of despair and frustration and consequently lost into obscurity. This gave way to Dhundiraj Govind Phalke's "Raja Harishchandra"(1913) claiming fame to be the first Indian film.

Since inception, Cinema in India grew with major developments in Bengal and Maharashtra. In both the states the content of films hovered around three categories-religious, mythological and adaptation from social novels. The last one became the dominant trend in Bengali cinema in subsequent years. As the medium developed and became more & more popular in India, famous actor-director Sisir Kumar Bhaduri filmed his highly acclaimed play '*Sita*'.

Transformation of plays into cinema continued but as a one off and sparing trend. Pre-independence, directors working under studio system like Debaki Kumar Basu, Nitin Basu, Madhu Basu preferred mythology or popular novels to be filmed for sure commercial success. Post independence, directors with new thoughts at par with international trends expressed their individuality in a completely different way. While Satyajit Ray chose novels by Bibhutibhusan or Tarashankar, Ritwik Ghatak expressed pangs of partition and individual crisis in original screenplays like *Nagarik* or *Komal Gandhar*.

It may be mentioned here that partition of India and refugee problem, which has off late become a much addressed topic in mainstream Indian cinema was treated very early in Bengali cinema beginning with '*Chinnamul*'(1951). Among other notable efforts, remain '*Natun Ihudi*'(1953), directed by Salil Sen who transcreated his own play by the same name into a film.

Interestingly, all Bengali directors who dwelled in the subject, Nema Ghosh, Ritwik Ghatak, Salil Sen hailed from theatre background. They were associated with the communist cultural wing Indian People's Theatre Association.

Technicalities of transformation from a play to film- A study of ‘Banchharamer Bagan’:

Banchharamer Bagan, a play written and directed by Manoj Mitra was produced on stage by Kolkata based theatre group, ‘Sundaram’ in the year 1977. Film director Tapan Sinha transcreated the play into an award winning film.

The plot centers round Banchharam, an old haggard, basically a poor farmer who has spent his entire life in developing a piece of garden which yields good crop. With a wrecked spine and in the doors of death the old man cannot but stop longing to live and serve his garden. The evil Zamindar or the landlord tries to capture Banchha’s little garden through various crooked means but fails to do so. Subsequent to his death, his son too, tries the same and strikes a deal with Banchha that he would give up the garden as soon as he dies. But the old Banchha cannot die to be separated from his beloved garden and in spite of the conspiracies of the Zamindar he manages to live on. The story highlights the fact that Banchha as an entity may be marginal but his struggle for existence is not.

The film, released in 1980, went on to be both popularly and critically acclaimed. Manoj Mitra, who played the part of the main protagonist, Banchharam, accounted his experience in the book ‘Banchharam: Theatre-e Cinemai’ (2000) where the transformation of a play to a film, its technicalities, challenges was discussed.

Acting:

Mitra, who was experienced in stage acting was relatively novice in films. But shooting for the same role which he had already played on stage helped him to draw comparative analysis between stage acting and film acting. He draws inferences from conversations with his director Tapan Sinha and other co-actors and technicians. In his words, Mitra opines about acting -

I have never felt that there are two types of acting, one for theatre and the other for films.

Neither do I think that acting changes for the change in medium. As an actor my duty is to make the character convincing and for that I shall leave no stone unturned.....theatre, cinema, radio, Yatra-different media imposes conditions on the actor but they are negligible. They cannot trouble an alert actor. Its like petty mathematical exercise. Any one can tackle them if he has his senses wide open. Tapanda had assured me to replicate my stage act.....

(Mitra, 2000)

Tapan Sinha had assured Mitra that he would add to and subtract from his acting the requisite output in interest of cinema. This may be exemplified by the incident with cameraman Bimal Mukherjee. After a shot as Sinha shouted ‘Excellent!’, Mukherjee informed him that the shot has to be re taken as Mitra had given the entire shot outside the camera zone. It was a tight frame of 70 lense and Mitra’s head fell outside it. Sinha, the veteran that he was atonce instructed Mukherjee to widen the lense with the information that Mitra was basically a theatre artist who is habituated to have space around him while acting. Mukherjee oblinded but maintained that Mitra should learn to act in accordance with the camera positioning.

Screenplay:

There are a lot of similarities as well as dissimilarities between the script of a play and that of a film. It is largely due to the fact that cinema is a technical medium largely dependent on camera lights and location where a plot is laid out in terms of endless frames in minutes details and at length. Whereas a play is unified and compact in terms of location and happenings. Characteristically, film is more real interms of flesh and blood whereas drama is a journey into a world of flashy surprises.

This is precisely what Satyajit Ray had said to Mitra while explaining why he backed out from filming Mitra’s play “Chaak Bhanga Madhu”. Ray felt that the concluding part of the play

where the moneylender, after being given life by the snake charmer, salivates to satiate his physical desires with the girl of the latter, is a dramatic element for the play but an improbable event for the cinema. The sheer speed, with which events turn may add to the strength of the drama but is not practical for a film. In Ray's words, *"implication of space and time is different for theatre and cinema. The truth and beauty of theatre lies in the unique use of its space and time."* (Mitra, page 127)

It is, therefore more challenging for a writer to prepare a screenplay from a play. As Sinha observed in his interaction with Mitra before the shooting of *Banchharam er Bagan* started that, *"it is indeed a problem, you know, to make a screenplay from a play as easily it can be from a story or a novel. The layout of scenes and entry exit of characters is so well organized and attributed, it is difficult to break that discipline.....another major problem is the dialogue. In the play it is written with a specific rhythm and magic, aimed to hypnotize the gallery of audience. The same dialogues, if kept unchanged in the film shall sound artificial."*

Interestingly, in the same piece of conversation, Sinha commented that there had been very few good films based on plays in India as well as world. In this context, he mentioned two plays of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, 'Kalindi' & 'Dui Purush', both of which did not turn out to be good films. While making the screenplay of 'Banchharamer Bagaan', Sinha had understandably made several big and small changes to the sequence and layout of the original play of Mitra's. Notable among that is the time period. The original play shows a nanogenerian haggard Banchharam from start to finish but the film starts with an ageing Banchharam in his middle age and continues upto his senility. The senior zamindar is already dead when the play starts but in the film he dies in mid way.

Make up:

The importance of make up in both cinema and theatre is extreme, albeit in a different way. While shooting for ‘Banchharamer Bagan’, it once so happened that Mitra had to rush onto the stage right from the shooting floor and he did not get time to change his makeup. The makeup artist in stage expressed dissent which was sort of an eye opener for him. The conversation between Mitra and Ajai Ghosh subtly brings out a comparative analysis of the role of make up in theatre and cinema which are different as their respective media is different and their demands from makeup are also different.

In theatre everything is larger than life style. The stage magnifies life for the audience. The degree of naturalness is also different for stage and films. The audience of theatre watch from a distance and actually misses many details unlike film audience whose eyes are served with minute details by the all powerful camera lense.

The wig used in the play was a bigger one and made of strong fibre. It was out of proportion unlike the one used in the film which was more in shape and made of hair. It seemed more original than the one used in theatre. But Ajai Ghosh rightly argued that the filmy wig shall not be able to capture the sight of the audience of the last row which his inflated unnatural fibre wig would.

Even for the face, to produce wrinkles of a death approaching haggard, Shakti Sen, the makeup man of the film needed about 150 pencil marks and a couple of hours. The same effect, as per the requirement of the play, was brought about by Ghosh in 10 blotting rays on the face. The fineness of cinema has its roots in the all powerful machine called camera. As Mitra observes, *“there is not a worse fault finder and eye-opener than the camera. It can expose your false and dishonest acting. It is possible to portray sadness on stage by pretending to cry without crying or without being actually sad. But the camera will start screaming that the actor is not at all sad and is pretending to cry!”* It is therefore that Sen took such a long period of time to ensure that the efforts of makeup

remain concealed to the camera.

How to adapt a play? A study of Satyajit Ray's 'Ganashatru':

The film is an adaptation of a play by Henrik Ibsen: An Enemy of the People. It is set in a small town in Bengal. Dr. Ashoke Gupta ([Soumitra Chatterjee](#)) is the head of a town hospital. Gupta's younger brother, Nisith (Dhritiman Chatterjee), is the head of the committees running the hospital and a temple. Both were built by a local Industrialist. The temple is also a big tourist attraction. Dr. Gupta is convinced that the holy water of the temple is contaminated due to faulty pipe-laying. It is causing an epidemic in the town. He warns his brother Nisith. But he along with the Industrialist and other town officials reject the idea that holy water might be the cause of the epidemic. They refuse to close the temple to carry out the repairs. Dr. Gupta wants to write an article in the newspaper to warn people, but giving-in to the pressure from the powerful people, the editor refuses to publish it. Left with no alternative, Dr. Gupta organises a public meeting that is also sabotaged. And Dr. Gupta is proclaimed an enemy of the people.

Due to his medical condition after a heart-attack during making of [Ghare-Baire](#), Satyajit Ray was told by the doctors not to do any location work. He was forced to make a film totally in studio. For this, he thought a play would be more suitable rather than a story or a novel. Unfortunately, this constraint of shooting only in studio does mar the film as a whole. Ironically, when he began making films, Ray himself had said that he wanted to remove "the last trace of theatricality" from his work. In fact, [Pather Panchali](#) was so refreshingly fresh due to its location sequences.

Having said that, Ganashatru has its merits. As Ray commented in an interview with Andrew Robinson, his biographer: *"I found that for once one could play with human faces and human reactions, rather than landscapes, Nature in its moods, which I have done a lot in my films. Here I think it is the human face, the human character which is predominant."*

When it came to adapting a play for a film, Ray was rather conservative. While he was respectful of theatre actors in Bengali, many of whom he used in his films, starting from Kanu Bandyopadhyay to Chhabi Biswas and of course his favourite, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Ray was not quite sure about the possibilities of an inter-media activity of transcreating a play into a film.

In an interview given to *Bert Cardullo* for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Ray expressed interesting notions about the relation of films and theatre. Relevant excerpts from the interview is cited as follows:

“

Q. To get back to the subject of writing dialogue, may I ask you if you have ever thought of writing or directing a play? You used to read a lot of plays, I know, and you still do; you also are an avid theatergoer, I've learned. I ask this question as someone who himself received much of his formal college education in drama.

A. Well, there are so many wonderfully talented people working in the theater today, so what's the use of swelling the crowd? In the cinema, I must say, there isn't so much artistic talent — perhaps because it's such a technological medium. In any event, I felt quite early on that film was my province, not theater. Maybe because the cinema was in such a backward state in India, but perhaps I shouldn't put the matter so negatively. I've just never thought of writing or directing a play; it's the writing of screenplays that comes to me straightaway, and then of course the filming of them.

Q. Hadn't you ever thought of making a film out of a play?

*A. Until **Ganashatru**, not really, because then the film depends too much on speech — and I am not interested. To me the peak moments of a film should be wordless, whereas in a play the words are of primary importance. At times the situation in a play can be film-like or adaptable to the screen, but there also one should see exactly how far one can go without words — as I trust I have done in **Ganashatru**. The best source for an adaptation, however, is not a play and not even a novel, but*

rather a long short story. For a film of two hours or so, the long short story is the most suitable form. You simply cannot do justice to a novel that contains 400 to 500 pages with a film that is less than four or five hours, even if you run it in two or three parts.

Q. *What do you think of the filmed plays of Shakespeare?*

A. Whatever else Laurence Olivier may have achieved in his adaptations, his Shakespeare films were never filmic. Grigori Kozintsev is the only director who has ever brought a different kind of vitality to a Shakespeare film with his use of backgrounds, peasants, etc. But apart from him, I don't think anyone else has been able to do this; it's very difficult, you know.

Q. *I find it interesting that, time and again, you draw from the non-professional or amateur theater for your actors. Do you find any extra advantage in using such performers?*

A. Not really, because those who act in the theater, be they professional or non-professional, sometimes don't feel comfortable acting in films, where they don't get instant feedback or appreciation from a live audience. Theater actors also dislike the discontinuity of film acting; they have to do a role in small parts, over a relatively long period of time, with the continuity between shots left to the editing table.

.....”

Prior to the release of *Ganashatru* in 1989, Ray gave another detailed interview to his biographer Andrew Robinson where he dwelled at length about his experiences in transforming Ibsen's 'Enemy of the people' into a film. Mentioning the plays earlier adaptation by Bengali theatre group 'Bahurupi', he made it clear that he wanted to incorporate his own ideas into the script rather than just following what Ibsen had written. As he had not seen the play anywhere before he had no point of reference except the information that Ibsen himself had expressed the desire to Arthur Miller that the Doctor should be the elder brother of the Mayor and not younger, as is written in the play. Ray also did not completely conform to the idea of democracy that Ibsen opined through the dialogue of the doctor. However, his tryst with Ibsen was indeed a challenging

task specially in writing the screenplay which he candidly confesses in the following excerpts from the said interview with Robinson:

Q. Do you recall a questionnaire to film directors in the 1950s which you answered by saying that your aim as a film director was to 'banish the last trace of theatricality' from your work?

A. Yes. I'm not doing that in the present case (laughs)....those are youthful remarks.

Q. So how did it differ-adapting your first play instead of a short story or a novel?

A. One problem which cropped up again & again was the entry of characters. for instance, in the first act, five different people enter at five different points. There's a door bell and somebody goes and opens it, and in comes a character. That is a very theatrical device. It is not a filmic device at all. So, I have done something to remove that impression: the sound of bell comes in the middle of the conversation and we have a glimpse of the servant going to open the door. The conversation goes on and at one point it stops because the person has already come in-so that it's not a theatrical entrance.

Q. But did the fact that a play is all dialogue help you, or hinder you, or neither?

A. I thought the dialogue was very interesting. It became more & more interesting as I was doing my treatment. I found that for once one could play with human faces and human reactions, rather than landscapes, Nature in its various moods which I have done a lot in my films. Here I think it is the human face, the human character which is predominant.

Q. So, would you say the play was easier to adapt than, say, Days & Nights or Charulata?

A. It was easier to start with, because I always had a structure which was fairly strong one. That's why the film is in 5 acts, instead of my usual 10 sequences-because the structure of the play was so tight. The difficulty came in transplanting it to Bengal. But it became easy the moment I thought of the temple. That helped enormously and gave it a completely new aspect. I felt I had it.

.....”

Conclusion-A difficult proposition & further research scopes:

Both Tapan Sinha and Satyajit Ray did experiment with plays and converted them to films but it is clear from their accounts that it is indeed a difficult proposition. They would prefer adapting a novel or story anyway. The reason for that may be attributed to the scene arrangement and entry-exit of characters which is so integral to the grammar of a theatre performance that it becomes difficult for a creative director to improvise and experiment. The dialogues which are asset of a play may actually turn out to be liability for a filmmaker!

It would have been interesting to study such trends in Bangladesh as it remains a parallel and potent Bengali language industry post colonization. It would also be interesting to study adaptation of plays to films in recent times, in post globalization India with quality efforts like Rituparna Ghosh's 'The Last Lear' (adapted from Utpal Dutt's play, 'Aajker Shajahan') and Feroz Abbas Khan's 'Gandhi, My Father' adapted from his own written play. And a food for thought-why not go the reverse way and find out the technicalities of plays being made out of films?

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From Tollygunge to Tollywood¹: The Transformation of Bengali Film

Industry between 1980 and the Present

Anugyan Nag

Background

The Bengali film industry in the 1980s was perhaps the most complex in terms of its composition and identity. The period was marked by a transformation that categorically changed the cinematic practices and traditions of Bengali cinema, making way for the emergence of a mainstream cinema that remained in prominence for a long period of time. This transition was marked by a change in the style and content of films commonly referred to as the incorporation of ‘masala’ or ‘formula’ elements borrowed from Bombay cinema, such as racy dialogues, stereotypical villainous characters, stylized fights and song-and-dance sequences. The 60s and 70s were a period when West Bengal’s social and political scenario underwent drastic changes, with a shift in political power from the Left to the Congress. Bengali cinema alongside Bengali society experienced a loss in its idealism and adapted to new ideologies and paradigms. The 1980s seemed marked by the event that inaugurated the decade - the death of matinee idol Uttam Kumar - that triggered the overall metamorphosis of the Tollygunge film industry, and the filmic imaginary of the *bhadralok* or ‘a cultured Bengalianness’ that seemed to give way to a crass and unimaginable imitation of Bombay cinema.

¹Madhava Prasad says: “The origin of the term being obscure, there have been many claimants to the credit for coining it, and many theories as to its first usage. But now we may actually be in a position to settle this issue, at the risk of offending some claimants. In 1932, Wilford E. Deming, an American engineer who claims that ‘under my supervision was produced India’s first sound and talking picture’, writing in *American Cinematographer* (12.11, March 1932), mentions a telegram he received as he was leaving India after his assignment: Tollywood sends best wishes happy new year to Lubill film doing wonderfully records broken. In explanation, he adds, ‘In passing it might be explained that our Calcutta studio was located in the suburb of Tollygunge... Tolly being a proper name and Gunge- meaning locality. After studying the advantages of Hollygunge we decided on Tollywood. There being two studios at present in that locality, and several more projected, the name seems appropriate.’ Thus it was Hollywood itself, in a manner of speaking that, with the confidence that comes from global supremacy, renamed a concentration of production facilities to make it look like its own baby. Deming is renaming the locality, but there is no suggestion here that the name will also serve as an adjective to describe Indian cinema in general (although Calcutta in those days was still a strong centre of production). This gells very well with what I seem to remember from occasionally glancing at a Kolkata based youth magazine called JS (or Junior Statesman, a publication of *The Statesman* group which, long before satellite television and MTV, was addressed to what must have been a very small elite Indian youth segment) which referred to the Bengali film industry as Tollywood. - “This Thing called Bollywood” in *seminar 525: Unsettling Cinema*, May 2003, 18.

Another factor for the shift in cinematic practices was the entry of television into middle-class homes in Bengal. Until the mid 1970s Bengali cinema was identified by its close association with Bengali literature, with an idea of realism, naturalistic acting styles and being driven by the notion of a world view that was deeply ‘Bengali’ (Gooptu, 2008: 150-51). The late 70s brought in a severe economic crisis in the film industry that was caused by several factors, the primary reason being the shift of Bengali audiences towards television, due to the persistently unsatisfactory experience of watching films in deteriorating cinema halls, furthered by the proliferation of Hindi films into Bengali middle class homes via television and VCRs, and also the audiences’ preferential leaning towards Hindi films for their superior visual quality and novelty factors, in comparison to their counterparts in Bengal. Post 1970s and the death of super star Uttam Kumar, Bengali cinema underwent changes. The financial crisis reduced the number of films made in Tollygunge to a handful of twenty to twenty five a year. The films of this period (1980s-1990s) that were made mostly by Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty gradually began to lose their city or *bhadralok* audiences to television. Single screen theatres began to pull down their shutters in and around Calcutta due to heavy financial losses, with films being released mostly in *mofussil* areas. Thus, in this chapter I attempt to lay out in detail, the complex journey of the Tollygunge film industry from the 1980s leading to the post liberalization period of resurgence of the industry and the formation of a more organized entertainment industry now popularly known as Tollywood. I shall map the changes chronologically following the demise of super star Uttam Kumar and analyze how a complex cinematic practice emerged even in the lowest period of Tollygunge cinema

Films directed by Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty were made on extremely low budgets. The camera and editing techniques were shoddy without an awareness of the aesthetics of filmmaking. Marketing was conspicuous by its absence; stories and plot lines revolved around family issues and domesticity. During this phase, the industry reached out to the

lesser sectors of the film market and targeted the rural hinterlands. Film releases in Calcutta began to shrink whereas districts around West Bengal had more releases bringing back the much needed revenues for the producers. The directors either produced the films themselves or got non-Bengali producers to back their projects who had other business interests away from the industry. This resulted in a qualitative decline in the films that was traced back to producers who could not grasp the mindset of the Bengali audience and chose to copy from Hindi *masala* films.

The study of directors like Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty is relevant here for the kind of films they made, catering to a different segment of the audience and making way for a re-organization of the film industry post liberalization, leading to the formation of Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd., one of the most formalized and powerful production houses of the Tollywood industry at present that dominates the new cinematic idioms of Bengali cinema.

The Changing Contexts:

Another dull year for the Bengali cinema is over. However, 1984 may not be termed a bad year as such. Because at least four films made in Kolkata has proved that Bengali cinema can still be successful and there is a viewership for present day Bengali cinema (Reporter 1985)

Comments and views like the above were common in newspaper headlines in the 1980s. The research into English and Bengali newspapers that I did at the National Library, Kolkata revealed that there was a constant lament voiced by the press and the industry. The press repeatedly reiterated the vacuum that Uttam Kumar's demise had created in the Tollygunge film industry. Studios had almost stopped functioning having failed to earn the minimum revenue required to pay salaries to the permanent staff. Established filmmakers like Tapan Sinha and Mrinal Sen did not make films that could have absorbed the idle labour force of the Bengali film industry in

Tollygunge. Interestingly, the press raised some relevant questions as follows:

- (a) Was the death of Uttam Kumar the sole reason for the industry's downfall?
- (b) What was the socio-economic and political scenario that sustained West Bengal during the late 1970s and early 1980s?

However, around 1984-85 there was a ray of hope that filtered into the darkness with the release of Anjan Choudhury's *Shatru* that proved to be a big hit.

The decades spanning the 1980s and 1990s brought in changes through the continuous negotiation and struggle the industry people went through to cope with and resolve the reasons of its successes and failures. In this chapter, I will study the ushering in of a film tradition by a handful of new directors who survived severe criticism from the 'bhadralok'² class while at the same time that they consolidated the tremendous popularity of their films amongst semi-urban and rural audiences. The end of the 1990s saw new developments in terms of production, distribution and film aesthetics, possibly making way for a new beginning.

By the late 1970s, the golden era of Bengali cinema was almost over; the Uttam-Suchitra³ pair was still a rage, but unfortunately, failed to generate colossal hits, as they used to earlier. Other actors, namely, Supriya Chowdhury, Sabitri Chatterjee and Basanta Chowdhury were seen in

² See Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2010) where she explains "*bhadralok* to indicate those social classes among the Bengalis who, since the nineteenth century, had been the recipients of some kind of English/western education, were mainly engaged in the professions and services, and found in the cinema a 'modern' form which could encapsulate the movement of their lives....This *bhadralok* middle class, a varied social group, was the Bengali Film industry's mainstay for the greater part of the period ...", 14-16.

³ "The era of 'Uttam-Suchitra', the mid 1950s through the '60s, is commonly designated as the 'golden period' of Bengali cinema, and has been written and reminisced about pervasively. During these years Bengali directors were able to produce a genre of film melodrama that became integral to a Bengali sense of self. Identification was rooted in the figures of an idealized female and an idealistic and ethical male, embodied respectively by Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, and their romantic love became the stuff of intense emotional identification among Bengalis of the post-independence generation. The same prototypes were common in films of that era which did not actually feature Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen together, and it has been suggested that 'Uttam-Suchitra...be used as a sign'. See Moinak Biswas, 'The Couple and Their Spaces: Harono sur as Melodrama Now' in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan (New Delhi: OUP, 2000). p.122 for the broader genre of the 1950s and '60s popular melodrama. Also see Sharmistha Gooptu, "Bengali Love-Stories: Uttam-Suchitra And The Golden Era of Bengali Cinema," 2010, 157.

selective films while Uttam Kumar was trying his luck in Bombay. It was Shakti Samanta, who made a few bilingual films with Uttam Kumar in the lead. In fact, Samanta's films introduced into Bengali cinema -action, romance and fantasy, so far identified quintessentially with Bombay cinema. The Bombay films, targeting a pan-Indian audience, were a remarkable departure from the kind of cinema that the Tollygunge industry had produced till date. The trend of making films like the ones in Bombay that were popular with audiences robbed Bengali cinema of its uniqueness. Films such as *Anusandhan* (Sakti Samanta, 1981), (the Bengali version of *Barsaat Ki Raat*), and later *Teen Murti* (Pramod Chakraborty, 1984) (starring a host of Bombay stars) set the box-office bell ringing quite piercingly, but the industry barely benefited from these few films, in terms of benefiting the overall condition of the Tollygunge film industry. This was also the time when Bengali cinema had gradually begun to lose its urban *bhadralok* audiences. Although film production in Tollygunge was in a disappointing state, in 1979 around thirty two films⁴ were produced and released; but the biggest challenge that emerged was not related to scripts, actors, stars or budget— it was “where to watch films?” The state desperately required good cinema halls.

Problems of Distribution and Exhibition:

In 1979, while the number of films released was thirty two, the biggest challenge that threatened the Tollygunge industry was the lack of adequate number of cinema halls where these films could be exhibited. It wasn't enough to have good films, the state most urgently required good cinema theaters. The then finance minister had called for a press meet along with the Information and Broadcasting Minister of State-Buddhadev Bhattacharya, to announce a package that would encourage more entrepreneurs to build / create cinema halls. The government was ready to help the industry in the following ways:

⁴ Bengali Film Directory, Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre – 185-89.

- a) It was willing to giving loans at minimum rates of interest, along with incentives, subsidies and tax rebates. Theatre owners who screened a Bengali film produced and financed by the West Bengal Film Finance Corporation for more than 75% of their total show-time were to be fully exempted from any tax.
- b) If they devoted 25% to 50% of their total screening time to Bengali films, the government would provide 25 to 40 thousand rupees for the purchase of projection equipments and accessories.
- c) The government's plan was to increase the number of cinema halls to a total of 1000 in the state (Bureau 1981, 41).
- d) In the city of Calcutta, cinema halls ran in 'chains'; the five popular chains were: Uttara-Purabi-Ujjwala, Minar-Bijolee-Chobighar, Rupobani-Aruna-Bharati, Sree-Indira-Prachi, Radha-Purna-Prachi.
- e) Earlier even halls like Basushree-Bina-Mitra would screen Bengali films, but due to the audiences' preferences shifting towards Bombay cinema, they began screening Hindi films.

The government failed to understand that though thirty two films were produced in 1979, only five Bengali films could be screened simultaneously in Calcutta in the five chains that were functioning. Many films remained unreleased due to a lack of exhibition halls. Reputed film distributors of that period like *Chandimata films* had five films, *Piyali films* and RB films had three films each kept in cold storage for lack of cinema halls that could screen these films (Bureau 1981, 43).

The fact that films also flopped one after another during this period forced the distributors to advance the release dates of many films which resulted in huge losses for the cinema hall owners. A leading distributor (who insists on remaining unnamed) of that period says that there were more than thirty films that were stopped in the middle of production, due to reasons like lack of halls, no

advance money from hall owners, and non-availability of chains in Calcutta. The only way out for a few distributors was to enter the rural territory where they did not have to depend on the chains. At least two more such chains were needed in the city targeting the Bengali speaking areas. But even with the government's announcement of incentives and interest free loans, no one wished to enter into cinema exhibition. The possible reasons were: (i) Land rates in and around Calcutta had reached unimaginable heights; (ii) Huge amounts had to be paid as Entertainment tax to the government, which in turn impacted the prices of tickets that were valid factors that discouraged entrepreneurs; (iii) The 'black marketing' of tickets was another reason that drew less crowds to the halls specially on week-ends; (iv) Since tickets were never available across the counter and all tickets were sold to 'blacksters' who sold a rupees three ticket for rupees ten, sometimes even fifteen, families avoided visiting cinema halls on weekends; (v) It was impossible to construct halls within the estimated budget bracket of Rs.12 lakhs that the government had provided; (vi) Even after more than a week of 'housefull' shows, the hall owners did not make enough profit to pay their employees and manage the maintenance cost of the hall (Chatterjee, 1979: 25).

The demise of Uttam Kumar: The Lowest period of the Tollygunge industry and the 'crisis narrative':

In a situation of crisis mainly provoked by the lack of proper distribution and exhibition, Tollygunge was grappling with issues of improving the business and overall condition of the Bengali film industry, when the sudden demise of Bengali cinema's most coveted super star-Uttam Kumar brought in one of the biggest set backs that could have happened. He passed away in July 1980 leaving more than six films incomplete and lakhs of rupees at stake, since it was Uttam Kumar whose films for the longest period of time had single-handedly ensured that Tollygunge studios survived and continued business.

Even today, when I personally interviewed people from the Tollygunge film industry who were working during the 70s and 80s, they spoke with great emotion and sentiment about how not a single film was produced after Uttam Kumar's death and the industry had almost collapsed. I wondered if this was true and not a mere sentimental lament. My search became interesting when I found a detailed article in the monthly periodical 'Parivartan' dated 15th July, 1981 by Bhaskar Chowdhury titled "*Uttam Kumar er obhab tallyganj para ekhono bisesh ter paini*" (Tollygunge area has not been able to realize the loss of Uttam Kumar yet - my translation). Chowdhury elaborates on how more than one year had passed post the demise of Uttam Kumar when many cine-goers constantly exclaimed while watching films without their favourite star that the actor on screen had been Uttam Kumar, forgetting that all the films released after his death had begun their production while he was alive and much before his death. So Kumar was perhaps not the obvious choice for the films in which he was not cast.

Uttam Kumar had been acting in films that extended to a varied range of subjects since the mid 70s. He hardly rejected scripts in the last five years before his demise. If people lamented his absence to such an extent, and traced every reason for the downfall of the Tollygunge film industry to his death, it was probably an emotional response generated out of excessive love and respect for him. There was a strong collective voice of loss and despair from the 'Studio Supply Co-operative', for they had been earlier supported and advised by Kumar at various instances. One such instance was when it received a closure notice before Kumar's death. The studio employees and staff had made an appeal to the government and had plans to rope in Uttam Kumar to stand by them and support their cause, for in the past whenever he had associated himself with such causes, they had turned in favour of the staff and employees.

In the year after his death till about 15th July 1981, twenty eight films were released, fifteen during 1980 and the remaining in 1981. Of these twenty eight, Uttam Kumar was in three, of which

two collapsed at the box-office. *Ogo Bodhu Shundari* (Salil Dutta, 1981) however was a record hit. Many commented that the success of *Ogo Bodhu Shundari* was due to the publicity stills of Uttam Kumar in a shaving sequence, widely circulated in newspapers and magazines. Since it was the last film he shot for, it was felt that people had an emotional connection with that film, and their sentiments were involved. But if that were true, why was *Rajashaheb* (Palash Banerjee, 1980) a disaster at the box-office? Or *Khana Baraha* (Bijoy Bose, 1981), where Uttam Kumar played a mythological character that he had never done before, thus foregrounding the question - if the star is bigger than the story and script of the film? Moreover, on the contrary what was the reason for the phenomenal success of Tarun Majumdar's *Dadar Kirti* (1981) which, despite a cast comprising mainly of newcomers, was a huge success at the box-office. Press reports suggest that the audience appreciated the work of the film. In *Rajashaheb* Uttam Kumar played a merciless corrupt landlord, whose character goes through a transformation at the end. He had earlier played similar roles in films like *Rajnandini* and *Stree*. But *Rajashaheb* had faulty production values and a shoddy look, which probably deterred its success. In *Khana Baraha*, Uttam Kumar played the role of Baraha, depicting deep anguish, pain and sorrow that were his strengths as an actor. Yet, the film did not appeal to the audience.

In *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*, loosely adapted from *Pygmalion*, Uttam played a happy-go-lucky and a lost academic professor, something he had played before. The film appealed to the audience for its production value, music and story, though Uttam Kumar could not complete the shooting. During the period of 1980-81, twenty five films were released without Uttam Kumar featuring in any of them and only nineteen of them were average grossers (Chowdhury, 1981). Chowdhury also points out that the State Government's reduced ticket price of one rupee did attract a section of the audience, but at the same time there was no guarantee that if these nineteen films had featured Uttam Kumar they would have been successful, because they were most certainly not good films

and hence the failure.

At the time of his death, Uttam Kumar had left eleven films unfinished. The producers and directors of these eleven films were paranoid. Some even used dummies to finish their films; some changed scripts and managed to finish five of them out of which only two were released. The rest of the films remained unfinished and got shelved. In the last one year Uttam had also acted in two Hindi films, which released after his demise. These were *Dooriyaan* (Bhimsain Khurana, 1979) and *Plot number 5* (Yogesh Saxena, 1981). Both flopped though his work in both films was appreciated and discussed in the press reviews. In this context the film *Bancharamer Bagan* (Tapan Sinha, 1980) is worthy of note. Uttam Kumar had been initially signed to play the role of a zamindar, but due to his ill health he could not do the film and a comparatively new actor Dipankar Dey was cast in his place. This infuriated the star and he had even filed a case in the court. But before it could come up in court, he passed away. Following this, several newspapers and magazines reported this incident annoying Uttam Kumar fans. Surprisingly, the film did very well at the box-office. No one raised objections about Dipankar Dey (Chowdhury, 1981).

With the success of *Bancharamer Bagan* Dipankar Dey became a busy actor with the maximum number of films signed during that and the following year. Others like Samit Bhanja, Ranjit Mallik and Shantu Mukherjee became popular and had a respectable number of films as well. Certain directors and producers who did not have to work hard with Uttam Kumar as the star in their film were now in great difficulty. They had not announced any film for more than a year after his death.

It is in this situation that the audience and many cinema hall owners along with the government perceived that film production had declined in Tollygunge. But actually the number of films being produced had increased. Government funding was one of the prime reasons for this rise.

This was also the time when numerous new technicians entered the studios alongside established directors. New directors were making more films; many cast new actors and experimented along the lines of the ‘art’ or ‘parallel’ filmmaking practice in keeping with the impulse of the ‘New Wave’ movement that had emerged during the ‘70s. The ‘Indian New Wave’ movement—a realist project, spearheaded by the likes of Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal et al. was a response to the socio-political issues of the time and a counter movement to the dominant cinematic characteristics of mainstream cinema that “privileged entertainment values, spectacular display, song and dance and melodrama”⁵. As Mira Reym Binford has observed the ‘new wave’ aligned itself with a “serious international artistic enterprise” (Binford. 1987: 148). The aspects that distinguished the cinematic treatment of the new wave films from the mainstream were their excessive emphasis on realism and experimentation with technical form and content. The content of new wave films dealt with subjects like class conflicts, caste inequalities, social injustice, and patriarchal repression⁶. In Bengal this form of cinema found a new facet with the establishment of the state sponsored West Bengal Film Development Corporation that extended its patronage to certain directors who could carry forward the legacy of the ‘literary’ and cinematic traditions of Bengal. The press, the state institutions and the *bhadralok* section of audience also conformed to this new form of cinema for its strong association with ideology, especially leftist in the case of Bengal.

Directors like Utpalendu Chakraborty, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Nabyendu Chatterjee, Aparna Sen and Goutam Ghosh entered the Tollygunge brigade of film production with their orientation towards the New Wave cinema movement. They introduced new actors and kept up the workflow in the studios. But the biggest challenge that the government and the Tollygunge industry had to confront was the issue of earning revenue from the New Wave directors’ films. The Calcutta city cinema theatres were already experiencing losses and repeatedly devoting more screening time to

⁵ See Ira Bhaskar .”The Indian New Wave” in Moti Gokulsingh and Wimal Dissanayake. Eds. Handbook of Indian cinemas. London: Routledge, 2013 (Forthcoming).

⁶ Ibid

Hindi mainstream cinema. The situation was grimmer in small towns and rural areas, where halls had limited number of seats and ticket prices were less. The tax benefit and rebate that the government provided for films produced and financed by the West Bengal film Finance Corporation was also not lucrative as these films barely attracted audiences in smaller towns and rural areas, or for that matter in Calcutta mainly due to the lack of proper distribution and exhibition. The competition from the commercial or mainstream Bombay cinema being relatively high, there were lesser chances of risks being taken by the distributors, and hence the small and independent films that lacked the elements and attractions of popular cinema were generally avoided by them, making it extremely difficult for state funded films to find screens for exhibition. The government took a step to finance several issue driven film projects, but failed to wake up to the issue of distribution and exhibition centres that could possibly cater to this kind of cinema exclusively. The New Wave or ‘parallel’ cinema directors like Buddhadev Dasgupta, Goutam Ghosh, Nabyendu Chatterjee and Utpalendu Chakraborty were consistently supported by the West Bengal Film Development Corporation(WBFDC) and later the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) to make films that were ‘different’ from the mainstream cinema. As Spandan Bhattacharya mentions quoting Aruna Vasudev in his unpublished M.Phil dissertation this kind of cinema was born out of ‘governmental decision’ and not merely from ‘the impetus of filmmakers rebelling against the existing popular cinema (2011: 13). Bhattacharya also cites critics like Iqbal Masud who wrote critically against this kind of cinema for being ‘orthodox’ and ‘detached’ from the average viewers (ibid). Also the class of audience (mainly the bourgeois –middle-class *bhadralok*) at whom these films were targeted perhaps preferred to sit at home and enjoy television. Films like Buddhadev Dasgupta’s *Charachar*, *Grihayuddha* (1982), Utpalendu Chakraborty’s *Chokh* (1983). Goutam Ghosh’s *Paar* (1984) Saroj Dey’s *Koni* (1986) failed to reach audiences for the lack of distribution and probably because they were too ‘ideological’ in their form and content. As Kiranmoy Raha

mentioned in his book *Bengali Cinema* criticizing the press reports that excessively hailed the ‘parallel’ or ‘good cinema’ movement:

...this resurgence, if so it can be called, seen in the eighties has been feeble compared to that of the fifties and the sixties. For one thing many of the films the new generation of filmmakers have made or are making are in Hindi. For another, except for Aparna Sen they appear to be overtly concerned with economic and social issues rather than with human ones (Raha, 1991: 81)

While Raha criticized the concerns of these films in terms of their form and content, Someshwar Bhoumik also expressed his views about the failure of these films when he wrote quoting filmmaker Goutam Ghosh that the films produced by the state (WBFDC and NFDC) hardly reached the audience outside the circuits of film festivals and film societies (Bhoumik, 1996: 125-26).

The regular cinema halls that otherwise mostly screened mainstream cinema were also not maintained qualitatively, and the situation deteriorated beyond repair, thus forcing many producers and distributors to quit the film industry, severely affecting film business opportunities in Tollygunge and film production budgets (Chatterjee, 1979: 26). At the same time, directors and producers used to making ‘hero’ or more specifically ‘star’ centric films were also in trouble, even those who were used to producing star-centric films with Uttam Kumar, who was known to carry a film solely on his shoulders which had led to scripts and characters being written around him. But this began fading after his passing away. It was no longer clear what kind of films could be made without Uttam Kumar. Uttam Kumar’s strongest rival Soumitra Chatterjee was not seen in the type of films that Uttam Kumar acted in or would have acted in. Besides, he continued to do a maximum of three to four films a year, rejecting several offers earlier written for Uttam Kumar (Chowdhury, 1981: 44). Many distributors successful during the Uttam Kumar phase now took time to understand the shifting trends in filmmaking practices. They could no longer enjoy profits. It was time for the survivors to survey the market seriously and understand the art and business of

filmmaking minutely. A large number of filmmakers realized that they had to work hard on the script and screenplay of a film, which earlier was not an important issue, especially when Uttam Kumar was roped in for a film. This change was crucial, for now the industry people had to work harder, and had to come to terms with this huge shift from an era that was so strongly dominated and controlled by one man- a star. This industrial shift would be a witness to who would survive and what would be the fate of Tollygunge.

Thus, while the industry was trying to tackle the void created by Uttam Kumar and witnessed the shift in cinematic practices to a more thought-provoking narrative story telling, the industry was getting fractured into the binaries of ‘parallel’ and ‘mainstream’ cinema. Perhaps this scenario was also responsible for the audience bifurcation and segmentation that drastically affected the overall condition of the Bengali film industry. The Bengali middle-class *bhadralok* section gradually distanced themselves from the mainstream cinema that was to continue throughout the ‘80s, and endorsed television as a medium that provided them with an opportunity to watch films from the ‘Uttam-Suchitra’ era, along with the ones made by ‘parallel’ cinema directors of the ‘70s and ‘80s. The press too was very critical about the mainstream films that were being released during the post Uttam Kumar phase. There was concern from the *bhadralok* community too, voicing their vehement criticism against the mainstream filmmakers and the films they made. Their primary concern was that the Bengali mainstream was excessively imitating popular Hindi cinema aesthetics and form blatantly. The element of ‘masala’ was not something that Bengali cinema has been associated with, and thus a serious disconnect developed between the mainstream Tollygunge cinema and its otherwise most loyal audience base till the ‘70s. This period and phenomenon is also termed the lowest period of the Tollygunge industry and referred to as the ‘crisis period’ or ‘crisis narrative’ of Bengali cinema. Therefore, with the industry insiders struggling to address the crisis, the state government also took various steps and initiatives to alter this plummeting state of affairs

in the Tollygunge industry, which I will be exploring in the following section.

State Government Policies and Initiatives:

The state government came up with a law for the resurgence of Bengali cinema and the industry. On 25th June 1981, The Calcutta Information Centre organized a meeting for the first time with the re-established Film Development Board that was attended by twenty-seven of the forty registered members. Some of the attendees were Mrigankoshekar Roy, Ramananda Sengupta, Subrata Sensharma, Samarendra Sengupta, Anil Chatterjee, Pantu Nag, Mohit Chatterjee, A.K.Dey, Purnendu Patri, Basanta Choudhury, Hari Dasgupta, Swapan Dutta, Mrinal Gupta, A.N.Bhattacharya, Sishir Sen, Habul Das, D.Majumdar, M.A. Saiyad, Salil Choudhury, D.Mukherjee, Satyen Chatterjee, Soumendu Roy, Bijoy Chatterjee, Indranath Banerjee, Parthasarathi Choudhury, Shibnath Chatterjee and representatives of the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association. The Vice chairman Buddhadev Bhattacharya mentioned in his speech that

..... the State Government has been trying to obtain prior consent of the President of India to a bill providing for compulsory screening of West Bengal films in the cinema houses of this state for a period of 12 weeks a year. The Law Ministry of the Government of India has raised certain constitutional and legal points and the State Government is working on these points for obtaining necessary clearance (Bureau 1981, 41).

In response, Subrata Sensharma pointed out that the State Government could easily impose this law and call for a renewal of Licence, without any further delay. The Board had not known this before, and the final draft of the proposal in that meeting was:

The Board approved the State Government's stand regarding compulsory screening of West Bengal Films in cinema houses within West Bengal for a period of 12 weeks in a year. The Board has further

requested the state Government to explore if such compulsory screening can be made a condition of licence granted to the show houses (Bureau 1981, 41).

The law had to be drafted in a way that none of the cinema halls could deviate from the terms and conditions. Hence a section from page 588 of the Cinematograph Code was incorporated in to the draft, which mentioned,

The State Government may from time to time, issue directions to licensees generally or, if in the opinion of the State Government circumstances so justify, to any licensee in particular, for the purpose of regulating the exhibition of any film or class of films and in particular the exhibition of scientific films, films intended for educational purposes, films dealing with news and current events, documentary films or films produced in India and where any such directions have been issued, these directions shall be deemed to be additional conditions and restriction subject to which the licence has been granted (Bureau, 1981: 41,42)

Following this, on 10th July the same year, the Left-ruled government issued a letter with the above-mentioned clauses and the mandate of 12 weeks of compulsory Bengali film screening to the Home Department Secretary, to all district offices, Calcutta Police Commissioner, and cinema hall owners.

However, this was a shock to most hall owners. The news created a tremor in Tollygunge studios, the Dharmtala area of distributors' offices and especially among cinema house owners who ran Hindi or English films 365 days in a year. Simultaneously, several cinema halls were short listed by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation and a notice was issued to them to immediately amend the hall in order to keep their licence intact, as the maintenance standards of these halls were below the quality mark. Cinema theatre owners had earlier avoided the compulsory conversion to air-conditioning on grounds of frequent power cuts, and frequent increase in renting, hiring or booking charges (Bureau, 1981: 43).

During Congress rule in the 1970s, the Information Minister Subrata Mukherjee had raised considerable debate in the Legislative Assembly in favor of mandatory screening of Bengali films in the state's cinema houses. But due to various oppositions and the delay in the formation of policies, the mandate was withdrawn. After the victory of the Left front in West Bengal, a Bill was passed in the Bidhan Sabha for the imposition of this law, but the final rule had to be passed by the Centre. The bill was nevertheless rejected after a period of two years with the logic that it would disrupt national integration (Bureau, 1981: 42,43). The government was not sure about the repercussions of this Law as there was only one year left for the state assembly elections, and if forced, cinema houses could go to Court to challenge this rule.

Basically the Left government had lost huge sums when they had invested in thirteen feature films, along with nine children's films and another thirty-seven feature films were already under production. The films so far produced by the government had not only incurred losses, but some had also not been released in cinema houses for a single week's run. Most of the government financed films had not been bought by private distributors. Cinema hall owners refused to screen any of these films. Most hall owners earned more profits from the 'black market' by screening Hindi films, so the repeated notices and requests from the government did not affect them. A strong reason for this was that none of the government-funded films were box-office earners. A very limited group came to watch these films. The government was left with no option but to implement the law of compulsory screening of Bengali films. The larger and more pertinent question was - would producers and distributors be able to meet this sudden increase in demand for Bengali films to be run for twelve weeks by all the cinema houses in the state. Only thirty films were being released per year on an average count during the early 1980s. This somehow met the demands of the five prominent chains (cinema houses) in Calcutta (Bureau, 1981: 44).

On an average, these five chains would run new Hindi films for nine months in a year, and

for the rest of the year they would show old Bengali films. Though the number of new films released in a year was thirty, there would always be at least more than ten films at a time that had been certified, but were not eligible for theatrical release due to a lack of cinema halls. One main reason for Bengali films not getting enough halls was the large number of Hindi films that were released and those distributors exclusively distributing Hindi films would book cinema houses and chains paying hefty advance amounts to hall owners, who were then contract-bound to show only Hindi films. For instance, halls like Basushree-Bina-Darpana and Priya would earlier show more number of Bengali films. But they chose to stick to only Hindi films for the years 1981 to 83. Several others followed the trend. This was a matter of concern because the law the government wanted to impose demanded at least seventy five feature films to be produced in Tollygunge (Bureau, 1981: 44). In 1981 West Bengal had a total number of 350 cinema halls that were permanent and roughly another 210 exhibition sites that were temporary. In order to meet the demands of the cinema halls, more number of films needed to be released. The state Tollygunge was in at the time did not permit the production of so many films. The lack of actors, technicians, efficient producers and committed directors were a major drawback, alongside the poor and deteriorating condition of the studios. Though the prices of tickets had been reduced to one rupee, only hall owners who had a hit Bengali film running would make a profit (ibid).

The reduced ticket price policy also disturbed the business for new releases, because even old films were being run simultaneously for a one rupee ticket; this was another source of competition for newly released Bengali films. The films that had already earned huge profits, were again giving extra returns to the hall owners. But in this extra profit, producers or distributors had no share. Distributors made good use of this loss by gaining greater control over the rural sector. They took a major portion of profit from small hall owners in rural areas, and in return gave them new releases (Bureau, 1981: 43).

On the other hand, the issues that perturbed distributors and hall owners was how they would run Bengali films in areas where the audience was majorly non-Bengali. They would incur huge losses if they had to run Bengali films for twelve weeks in such areas. In such a situation, the government's intervention with the compulsory rule of screening Bengali films for twelve weeks complicated the situation further. Since the government had incurred huge losses by bringing down the ticket price to one rupee and financing several feature films that both audience and exhibitors refused to acknowledge, the scenario for Bengali filmmakers, distributors, producers and hall owners became acutely tricky and challenging (Bureau, 1981: 43,44).

1980 was also a turbulent year for the Tollygunge industry triggered by a prolonged strike during September and October by the Bengal Motion Pictures' Employees Union demanding an increase in the payment structure and bonus benefits, and the subsequent lock-out declared by the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association. Out of the 400-and-odd cinema halls in West Bengal almost all the halls were shut down except for four or five. Hall owners could not meet the demand for a hike in the bonus and salaries of employees. They argued that they had to pay 125% of the ticket price as Entertainment Tax to the Government so they barely earned enough to pay their employees. The strike and lock-out caused an estimated loss of Rs. 10 to 12 lakhs per day to the industry and Rs. 15 lakhs to the Government. This deeply affected the regular cine goers, especially the audiences for Bengali cinema. The death of super-star Uttam Kumar and the more or less weakening condition of the overall Bengali cinema industry created a detachment in the minds of the audiences of Bengali cinema making the scenario very dismal.

Calcutta as a metropolitan city was also changing - culturally, socially and politically - in the mid 80s when the *bhadralok* Bengali middle class was familiarizing itself with television sets at home, giving it the privilege of watching films in the comfort of their households. The VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) was also making its entry in the city dwellers' rooms that enabled them to watch

films of their choice at their discretion, conveniently avoiding the drawbacks of the overall experience of going to the cinema theatres.

Producers and distributors especially from the seventies were anxiously searching for a formula that could reclaim the praise and dedicated viewership they had enjoyed in the past. Actor-director Sukhen Das started making films that made way for the new genre and aesthetic that Anjan Chowdhury's *Shatru* robustly embodied. Some box-office hits of Sukhen Das were *Nayan* (1977), *Singhaduar* (1978), *Maan Abhima* (1978), *Jibon Maran* (1983), *Milantithi* (1985), *Achena Atithi* (1973) *Shunoyinee* (1979) *Rajnandini* (1980) *Pratishodh* (1981) A popular actor of the 80s and 90s, Tapas Pal who acted in several films directed by Sukhen Das, says in an interview to *Anandalok* magazine that Sukhen Das was like a *Gharana*, as in a school unto himself. Pal adds that the kind of films that became popular in the 80s and 90s made by directors like Anjan Chowdhury was actually initiated by Sukhen Das. His films also dealt with social and contemporary issues. Most of his films had very successful music tracks and songs. He was a pioneer in bringing talent from Bombay whenever the film needed it. Pal further mentions that Sukhen Das had a unique style of storytelling. He gave priority to the story and dialogue alongside drama which was the most important aspect of his films. He made way for the voice of the suppressed to be heard and articulated through his films. But he was not free from criticism. There were opinions around his films that termed them regressive, lacking in cinematic sense and high in melodrama similar to the *jatra* (Pal, 2004: 16, 17).

***Shatru* – and the Anjan Chowdhury Moment:**

In 1984, a young script writer from Tollygunge directed his first feature film *Shatru* which changed the scenario of Bengali cinema. *Shatru* altered the earlier situation of Bengali films

running for a maximum of two to three weeks and then struggling to stay in the hall chains in Calcutta. It was as if Anjan Chowdhury had discovered the formula that the film industry had been frantically looking for. *Shatru* ran for more than one and a half months with ‘house-full’ boards in major cinema halls of Calcutta. Unexpectedly, tickets of *Shatru* were being sold in ‘black’. Anjan Chowdhury’s *Shatru* makes a striking departure from the tradition of the popular genre of romantic films in Bengal. The protagonist is a noble, honest and a dutiful police inspector played by Ranjit Mullick. Before this film, he was mainly identified as a romantic hero. Ranjit Mullick’s character of the O.C of Haridevpur village lives up to the image of a hero as a fighter capable of physical action. The protagonist’s figure can be identified with the angry-young-man image of Amitabh Bhacchan in Hindi cinema, popular in the 1970s (Chakraborty, 1985:1).

Shatru had a mixed ensemble cast with a corrupt MLA played by Manoj Mitra, whose son is a rogue, troubling and eve-teasing the village school master’s college going daughter. There was another character of a comic and corrupt police sub-inspector played by Anup Kumar, and the figure of a local businessman dealing in illegal country liquor. The film had fight sequences, theatrical comedy and heavy melodramatic dialogues. *Shatru* ran very successfully in city halls like Radha-Purabi-Ujjwala-Sri for seven weeks consecutively, mostly with ‘housefull’ boards. This situation of an overwhelming audience response was till then associated with the so-called *bhadralok* cinemas of the 50s, 60s and to an extent the 70s. People flooded back to the halls in huge numbers to watch *Shatru*.

The crucial question among the audience was - who wrote *Shatru*? Till then, Anjan Chowdhury was a script writer in Tollygunge, with films like *Dadamoni*, *Sathe Shathyan*, *Sankalpa*, *Prayaschitta* and *Lal Golap* in his script portfolio. In an interview to Dipankar Chakraborty Anjan Chowdhury remarked, “....the Bengali audience can be satisfied very easily within three to four reels of the film; the hero has to be made ‘loveable’, and then the audience will

automatically like the film...” (1985: 1). Furthermore, Chowdhury’s formula for a box office film had to have the following ingredients:

one has to emphasize in a film, the natural humanistic relationships, like mother-father, brother-sister, love and respect etc., the ‘speed’ or ‘pace’ of the film(it should not get boring). A clash between the people of the upper class and the lower class, a debate or struggle between honesty and dishonesty and finally honesty has to win. There should also be a particular type of revenge in the film, as revenge is the most important ingredient for a successful film or the ‘Key point’ (Chakraborty, 1985: 1-2).(Translation mine)

He further says,

why do you think the early sound film by Charu Roy ‘*Bangalee*’ was never accepted by Bengalis, or for that matter films of Rittwik Ghatak (*Ajantrik*), Barin Saha’s (*Tero Nodir Pare*), Satyajit Ray’s ‘*Aranyer Din Raatri*’? They, in fact, stand erased from public memory, because the clash between honesty-dishonesty was not there, everyday human relationships of a family and a key factor like ‘revenge’ was missing, and even if they were there, they were not present in the story directly and simply. They also probably lacked ‘speed’ (Chakraborty, 1985: 1-2). (Translation mine)

For Anjan Chowdhury therefore, the Bengali audience was now that of the class who identified more with the themes and stories of ‘jatra’. Elements like theatricality, over-the-top dialogue delivery, farcical comedy and sorrowful or joyful music were essential in a script by Anjan Chowdhury. *Shatru* today occupies a distinct position as a significant marker in the history of Bengali cinema.⁷ A black-and-white film with absolutely no big star cast, how did *Shatru* become a hit? In the same interview, Chowdhury says,

Bengalis do not unconditionally love stars; they want good story, and hence I laid emphasis on the story while making *Shatru*. The contemporary social scenario must reflect in the story and if one

⁷ In a special feature story by Anandalok Magazine, titled “*Dorshokdhannya Shera 30 Bangla Cinemar*” 27th June 2003, a public poll was published that listed the 30 all time hits from Bengali cinema, among which two films of Anjan Chowdhury had a place, *Shatru* and *Gurudakhina*.

looks, today the police are maligned for their corruption and nobody trusts the police anymore, therefore the story of *Shatru* was about a police inspector who every citizen would respect and dream of, an ideal figure that is smart, honest and dutiful (Chakraborty, 1985: 2-3). (Translation mine)

Chowdhury justified his style of storytelling as a formula which, if and when not altered by the director or distributor, would ensure success. For e.g. in his scripted film *Prayaschitta* (Arabinda Mukhopadhyay, 1984) according to the script he had written at the end the hero (Ranjit Mullick) would die, because the character had committed many mistakes in his life. But the distributor (Amar Nan) did not agree and wanted the hero to remain alive. The director had to listen to the distributor's orders and to the great dissatisfaction of Chowdhury; the hero had to be kept alive. The final outcome was that the film flopped.

Shatru was received with whistles, hooting and claps at theatres like 'Ujjwala', 'Purna' and 'Sri', every time the Police officer gave a blow or a kick to the villains. The film had three to four songs, a dance number for which Jayashree Tee was brought from Bombay, and the fight master Mr. Makravi was also brought from Bombay. Other actors included veteran character actor Bikas Roy, from the '70s and '80s, Manoj Mitra and new comers Prosenjit and Shakuntala Barua.

In the 1980s, a large section of the audience avoided going to theatres for films that had too many songs that were seen as superfluous. A part of the audience walked out of the theatres when the songs began to play because they knew they would not miss out on any important part of the story if they did not watch the song sequence. Anjan Chowdhury tried his best to alter this mindset. For him, songs were a very important part of Bengali cinema and it was through music and songs that directors expressed their ethical thoughts and sentiments.

Shatru had a song directly commenting on the corruption in the police force (written by Chowdhury himself). Chowdhury kept the suspense flowing through the song, so that no one could

leave their seats and go away. Keeping the female audience in mind Chowdhury kept a song ‘*Hotam khushi tomar majhe maa ke fire pele...*’ (I would be happy to get back my mother in you) where the orphan (whose father is killed because he gets involved with the illegal country liquor seller of the village) sings the song embracing the childless widow (Shakuntala Baruah). According to Chowdhury, emotions, sentimentality, motherly care and love are crucial to satisfy the female audience. Chowdhury was also conscious of not giving away too much. So, he avoided any chance of a possible romance between the police officer (Ranjit Mullick) and the young widow (Shakuntala Baruah). This was possibly the first time that a relationship of mere respect and reverence was introduced between the main male and female characters in a mainstream Bengali film.

Anjan Chowdhury emerged as one of the busiest scriptwriters and directors of the 80s. He scripted *Mahamilan* (1987) for the widely appreciated director Dinan Gupta. According to Dinan Gupta

Chowdhury could incorporate various positive aspects in his script; “the heroes in his stories would act, look and behave like heroes, who audiences loved and desired. Apart from that Anjan is also aware of the problems that ail the present day society. Doctors, police, village, and town form the core of the themes of his films and stories. Anjan’s heroes sell a dream to end social evils. Today’s audience wants that, as the old school of story-telling is no more relevant today, Bengali cinema narrative has changed. One cannot continue making films based on Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay. Also the Bengali audience is somewhat bored by the monotonous overdose of recent Hindi cinema” (Chakraborty, 1985:1). (Translation mine)

In the 80s and early 90s some of the films that Anjan Chowdhury directed were *Bidrohi* (1987), *Gurudakshina* (1987), *Chhoto Bou* (1988), *Anjali* (1988), *Bidhilipi* (1991), *Indrajit* (1992) etc. He also scripted several films like *Aakrosh* (1989), *Mangaldip* (1989), *Shatarupa* (1989) etc. There was a lot of hope bestowed on Anjan Chowdhury for his ability to deliver hits by

foregrounding the voice of the oppressed and the subaltern figure and for highlighting the issues of everyday life of the common man and of people living in the margins of the city. In an interview to Dipankar Chakraborty of *Anandabazar Patrika*, Tollygunge's famous Chhayabani Distributors' proprietor, Mr. Nirendranath Shil, said that though he had not seen *Shatru*, he had gathered information that *Shatru* had a lot of sentimental emotions which might have touched the hearts of the female audiences, as according to him it was the female audience that mainly came to watch Bengali films.

However, I read a different message that Anjan Chowdhury tries to deliver in *Shatru*. He actually targets the youth, both the audience and the young talent of the Tollygunge film industry. Haridevpur's law and order is set right, the corrupt MLA (member of the legislative assembly) and his rogue son are taught the right lesson, the illegal businessman is beaten up by the honest, upright and dutiful police officer who takes off his police cap (symbol of official duty of protecting and upholding law and order and justice) and puts it on the head of the orphan, picks him up, looks at the audience (into the camera) and gives a congratulatory smile.

It is important to note here that earlier in the film there was a song sequence where the MLA's son was making fun of the same police cap '*ei tupi kake porai*' (Anjan Chowdhury) which translates 'who shall I put this cap on?', and at the end of the film the same cap is put on the head of the child '*ey tupi noy shei tupi*' 'this cap is not that cap' for in Bengali '*tupi porano*' (to cap somebody) is used as a phrase which means to fool or cheat someone. So at the end of the film, Anjan Chowdhury tries to establish the message that the youth is the future of any developing nation and that the legacy of power, control and fight for justice should be passed on to the next generation. The cap symbolically expresses this and establishes the trend that Rajiv Gandhi initiated - that 1985 marked the beginning of a new India -an India of the Youth (*Yuva Bharat*).

The changing trend of Bengali films during this period has been more or less identified. Promod Chakraborty's *Teen Murti* was a roaring success at the box-office. There were also films like *Rajeshwari*, *Joy Porajoy* and *Parabat Priya* that were not received well in the city cinema halls but did extremely well in the suburbs and cinema halls around West Bengal. Apart from these, most Bengali films between the periods of 1984 to 85 did not run for very long - even those films that had high budgets. The 'parallel cinema' or 'art-films' whose success and position could not be measured or evaluated only through box-office figures were restricted to two films *Grihayuddha* (Buddhadeb Dasgupta 1984) and *Dakhal* (Goutam Ghosh 1984) (*Anandabazar Patrika* 1985, 7).

Anjan Chowdhury's *Shatru* made it possible for the Bengali film industry to fight back and ensure that the production, distribution and exhibition process could continue. Anjan Chowdhury became a banner, with three of his films that were released back to back becoming super hits. These were - *Gurudakhina* (1987) a musical still remembered for its music and popular songs, and *Chhoto Bou* (1988) that foregrounded everyday family crisis in middle-class or rather lower middle class joint families, and was narrated from the perspective of the female members of the family. Revenge, oppression of the economically poor by rich landlords, the local businessman and his goons was a recurring theme of Anjan Chowdhury's films. He states that

I know how to tell a story, and I do only what I know, I don't know if I am capable of making art films, and even if I am capable I don't think I want to make such kind of films. I am mainly engaged in a trade, a business, a 'dhandda' (merely money earning trade). I make films according to the taste of the audience. Fortunately, it has worked most of the times. When it has failed I have blamed my fate not my capabilities or the audience (Guha, 1997:13-17) (Translation mine).

Anjan Chowdhury's contribution was not only restricted to making super hit films one after the other, he also brought new talent to the industry. He was solely responsible for establishing his assistants as independent directors like Bablu Samaddar, Haranath Chakraborty, Subhas Sen, Amal

Roy Ghatak and Dulal Dey (commonly referred as team Anjan Chowdhury in the industry).

It is also important here to mention, the other filmmakers who complicated the singular popularity of Anjan Chowdhury. Though the bhadralok audience often vehemently criticised the films of Chowdhury and his successors, they also continued to endorse films made by Tarun Majumdar (known for films like *Balika Bodhu*, *Shriman Prithviraj*, *Ganadevata*, *Dadar kirti*, *Bhalobasa Bhalobasa*, *Poroshmoni* etc.) and Arabinda Mukherjee (known for films like *Dhanyee Meye*, *Mouchak*, *Pita Putra*), who were highly popular and successful since the 70s for making films that were family based, musically enriched and mostly literary adaptations. However, by the mid 90s both Majumdar and Mukherjee began to loose their mettle by being excessively repetitive with their themes and not adapting to the changing context of globalization and urbanization. Their films continued to project an euphoric idealistic and overtly simplistic ‘bengaliness’ and middle-class life, that could neither target the urban audience nor the small town and rural audiences any further.

By the mid 1980s the two prominent directors who followed the the tradition of Majumdar and Mukherjee were porbably Prabhat Roy and Biresh Chattopadhyay, who consistently made films that were possibly termed as commercially successful films with social relevance. Both Roy and Chattopadhyay were also responsible for popularising new stars like Victor Banerjee, Ranjit Mullick and for casting quite a few Bengali and non-Bengali actors from the Bombay film industry in their films. Films of Roy and Chattopdhyay are still remembered for their music and multi star cast, good drama and for being socially relevant. Biresh Chattopadhyay’s *Ekanto Apan* (1987) starring Victor Banerjee and Aparna Sen and released in July 1987 at Minar, Bijoli, Chhabighar was an instant success. In 1989 Chattopadhyay’s *Kori Diye Kinlam* was also a moderately successful film and was received well by the critics; the film starred Moushumi Chatterjee, Arjun Chakraborty, Utpal Dutta, Tapas Pal, Aparna Sen and Madhabi Mukherjee. The very same year he also released his other two popular films *Srimati Hangsaraj* and *Tufan*. By the early 1990s, Prabhat Roy in

Tollygunje was often referred to as the expert filmmaker who could walk a tight rope between cinema for commerce and cinema of social relevance (Chatterjee, 2000: 11).

Roy came from the stage and had acted in more than forty plays in Barrackpore near Calcutta. He had initially migrated to Mumbai to make films, and had started by assisting Shakti Shamanta and directed his first two Hindi films *Zindagani* produced by actor Rakhee in 1984, followed by *Hum Intezaar Karenge* produced by Neelima Paul. Both the films were commercially unsuccessful, after which he debuted in the Tollygunge film industry with *Pratidan* (1983), starring Victor Banerjee, Naseeruddin Shah, Sharmila Tagore and Ranjit Mullick. The story dealt with the reform of a villain. Roy's next massive box office hit was *Pratihar* (1987) starring Chiranjeev, Victor Banerjee, Debashree Roy and Utpal Dutt. Films like *Prateek* (1988), and *Agnitritshna* (1989), *Swet Pathorer Thala* (1992), *Laathi* (1996), *Sedin Choitramash* (1997), *Shudhu Ekbar Bolo* (1999), *Shubho Drishti* (2005), *Pitribhoomi* (2007), are some of the films for which the period and the director Prabhat Roy are remembered and credited. *Swet Pathorer Thala* based on a novel by the popular bengali writer Banai Basu bagged the National Award (Silver Lotus) for the best family film. It's a story that revolves around the struggles of a young widow who sacrifices her emotional desires for the sake of a thankless Bengali middle class family. *Laathi* was based on Roy's own story, with Victor Banerjee portraying an old man crusading against elder abuse within the family; the film also won a National Award. Roy being an important director, was often asked to comment on the present state of the Tollygunge film industry and he quite eloquently expressed his anxieties and hopes, as follows:

I'd say the Bengali Film Industry is alive and kicking. True we have problems, which industry doesn't? Right now we are bogged down by the overproduction syndrome, where the supply is more than the demand. There are fewer theatres and more films in Bengali. We face competition from television too. The rural-urban divide can also work to our disadvantage at times because Calcutta

theatres are in a very bad shape, you can actually find mice scurrying for cover under your feet. The airconditioning is more fiction than fact. Theatres running hindi films, like Menaka and Priya for example have been renovated over the past few years and are very good. But they have closed their doors to Bengali films. The number of technicians here has increased. This is a very good thing, we may be struggling to survive, but survive we can and will (Chatterjee, 2000: 11).

By the mid 1990s, the television industry's rising popularity and invasion also impacted the Tollygunge film industry. The crisis faced by the film industry throughout the 1980s that was marked by low cinema aesthetics resurfaced once again. The increasing demand for quality content in television attracted several film directors of Tollygunge to produce content for television. The actors and talent from the film industry rapidly migrated to television, for regular work and better remuneration. The bhadralok section of the audience also generously endorsed television programmes, as they were able to identify better with the content of television than the mainstream films that proliferated in Bengal. This situation affecting drastic audience segmentation, enabled certain new directors to make films in the Tollygunge studios categorically targetting the mofussil and rural audience and altering the overall cinema aesthetics all over again. Therefore, in the following section I shall closely look at the shifting scenario of the film industry and also take into account the filmmakers who dominated the post Anjan Chowdhury phase in Tollygunge.

The Post-Anjan Chowdhury Phase:

Haranath Chakraborty and Bablu Samaddar who started their careers as assistants to Anjan Chowdhury, later went on to become two of the most popular directors who churned out the maximum number of block buster films at the box-office. By the late 1990s, several films scripted and directed by Anjan Chowdhury failed one after the other at the box-office. Films directed by Haranath and Bablu were doing better than films by Anjan Chowdhury, and the 'Anjan Chowdhury

team' gradually began to fall apart.

Ananya (1992) directed by Dulal Dey and scripted by Anjan Chowdhury was a flop, though noted actress Aparna Sen played the lead; *Sriman Bhootnath* (1997) directed by Amal Roy Ghatak and scripted by Anjan Chowdhury also did not do well. By this time, the 'crisis narrative' was at its peak. The industry was divided into polarities of 'good cinema' and 'bad films'. The press celebrated directors who experimented with the form and content of filmmaking and sometimes critiqued the social and political system. Filmmakers like Goutam Ghosh, Mrinal Sen, Utpalendu Chakraborty, Buddhadev Dasgupta and the Press lashed out strong and loud at the Anjan Chowdhury team for bringing down the the standard of Bengali cinema by making films that were shoddily shot, very often copied directly from cheap Hindi *masala* films and were even worse when copied from 'jatra' or from the films of Bangladesh.

Most scholarly work and press writings on Bengali cinema have been generally biased in favor of 'parallel' cinema. In popular press and film society writings, the recurrent concern has been the degradation of Bengali films that were no longer based on the rich tradition of Bengali literature, and were not like the films of the 1950s and 60s, marked by realism and a 'middle-class sentiment' (Raha 1991). These discursive responses continued with celebratory work on *auteur* directors like Satyajit Ray (Banerjee 1996), Ritwik Ghatak (Roy 1974) and Mrinal Sen (Bandyopadhyay 2003) with a focus on the film text and narrative content.

During the 80s and 90s, writings on Bengali cinema expressed concern about the transition towards the '*masala*' film as a copy of Hindi popular films that could possibly appeal only to mass audiences (Ghosh, 1990: 135). This work engaged with the notion of 'crisis' that the middle-class intelligentsia had constructed⁸ (Bhattacharya 2011; Raha 2004: 80-81; R. Roy 2001). This 'crisis'

⁸ In an essay titled "Sattar Dashaker Bangla Chhabir"/ "The Bengali Films of the Nineteen Seventies" Someshwar Bhoomik observed the deterioration of Bengali cinema in the late 1970s with films like *Amanush*, *Ananda Ashram* or *Baba Taraknath* arguing that these films were devoid of the 'clean entertainment value' that was a characteristic of

was not seen in any way in economic terms; rather the primary concern was the decaying quality of Bengali cinema⁹. The success of certain films and the changes in the industry proved to the middle-class intelligentsia that it was not just the ‘crisis’ of quality films that was deterring Bengali cinema (Bhattacharya 2011), but there were various other factors as well.

1991 marked the economic liberalization of India. It had a very strong impact on the Bombay film industry that witnessed several changes, gradually affecting the regional film industries. The term “Bollywood” was gradually gaining currency then and corporatization of film production was introduced. UTV motion pictures, Yash Raj Studios, Dharma Production and few others became fully corporatized film production and distribution houses. The then-Minister of Information and Broadcast Sushma Swaraj made an official declaration terming Bollywood a recognized Industry. This event changed the way films were produced, distributed and exhibited. A large number of films could now be released in territories outside the Indian nation. The diaspora as a category not only became a huge revenue-earning source, but the content, look and the narratives of Bombay films also began to cater to the expectations, sensibilities and aesthetics of the diaspora market. The 1990s thus saw tremendous changes in the Bollywood industry and its film production in terms of economic development, wider distribution, technological advancement and neo-liberal aesthetics in film content and narrative that foregrounded a tension between the tradition of the East versus the liberal values of the West.

Interestingly, the Bengali film industry was still struggling to find a place in the minds of

Bengali films in the 1950s and the 1960s (1981: 28-43). Somen Ghosh in his book *Bangla Cinemar Palabadal* (The changing Phase of Bengali Cinema) has tried to analyze this ‘crisis’ ridden period of Bengali cinema when he observes that “when totally unrealistic, lower standard film made its silver jubilee at the box office, it expressed our shameless nature in our cultural characterless-ness” (1990: 135) (Translation mine).

⁹ In their writings on 1950s and 60s mainstream Bengali Cinema, authors like Rajat Roy, Kiranmoy Raha and film journalists (Bipra Das, Ranjan Bandyopadhyay et al) point out a significant difference between Bengali Cinema and other regional cinemas of that period. According to them unlike other mainstream cinemas, in Bengali mainstream cinematic practice (films featuring the hit pair Uttam-Suchitra) the mythological narrative and ‘vulgar’ song and dance took a backseat. This feature according to them made this cinema more mature and ‘distinct’ compared to the other cinemas of that period. Also see Spandan Bhattacharya (2011).

people beyond a certain class and section of audience. Popular films that were dominated by film makers like Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty were completely disowned by the Bengali middle class *bhadralok* audience. By the mid 90s, a severe situation plagued the Tollygunge industry. Films like *Beder Meye Josna*, *Shami keno Ashami* and *Baba Keno Chakor* were filmed versions of *jatra* often enacted by actors from Bangladesh. The popular cinema hall chain of Minar-Bijoli-Chhabighar began to concentrate on Hindi films mostly and the *bhadralok* audience had nowhere to go and watch ‘good’ Bengali films.

At this point of time, a large pool of talents from the film industry, comprising of actors, directors, writers and technicians shifted to television¹⁰, as it had a larger appeal amongst the middle and upper classes. Television content was once again close to literature. It was also more lucrative in terms of economic returns. But most importantly, it gave work to large numbers of actors and technician in the industry. Suddenly, Tollygunge became an industry catering to television audiences. At the same time, a few directors like Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty, Sujit Guha and Bablu Sammadar continued to make films for a certain class and section of the audience.

In a special series of articles and interviews published by *Anandalok* on ‘why this crisis in Bengali cinema?’ eminent filmmakers, actors, producers and writers expressed concern about the decline in Bengali cinema, and its distance and shift from the literary tradition. Noted director Dinen Gupta said that Bengali cinema was in a miserable state. He added that most of the directors were uneducated; no one believed in doing home-work before going on the floors and mocked at a certain group of directors and actors. He further mentioned

¹⁰ *Anandalok* Magazine carried articles in the mid 90s about how Tollygunge was now a hub of Television production and not so much an industry that focused on making films. “*Tollygunge ekhon T.V.gunje*” (“Tollygunge is now a T.V.gunje”) 28th January 1995, page 38. “*Chhoto Pordaye bartamaan e Tollywood Tarokader Bheer*” (“The Small Screen is crowded by stars from Tollywood”) an article by Kamalendu Sarkar, *Anandalok*, 20th September 1997, page 61-65, expressed the opinion that the stars on Tollywood were more busy doing T.V serials; the studios of Tollygunge were all booked for television serial shootings and daily soap operas, and questioned the decline in the tradition of Bengali cinema and its future. (Author’s translation)

these days if you go and buy vegetables for some of the directors they will cast you in their films, and more over where can we find talented actors, actresses and directors these days?¹¹.

Anjan Chowdhury who once gave blockbuster hits, but had gradually limited his filmmaking career by the late 90s was asked the reason for the decline of Bengali cinema. The attacks from the *bhadralok* section were leveled at Anjan Chowdhury, but were directly mostly towards Swapan Saha. Anjan Chowdhury explained his reasons as follows:

the Bengali cinema audience of yesteryear and the present generation of audience are as different as heaven and hell. Till recently, the Bengali cinema audience crowded the cinema halls, but today the only audience that visits cinema halls are the ones who do not have television sets or a VCR player at home. Today, the larger section of middle class bengali audience get their entertainment from television. They watch Bengali films regularly on television and VCR players. Today's audience for Bengali cinema are rickshaw-pullers, fish mongers and vegetable hawkers. Stories drawn from literature of high standard might not be liked by them. This audience merely want to be entertained in the cinema halls. For them it is escapist entertainment. They do not want to cry or use their brains,. So, one cannot make films like before. The element of entertainment for this audience must be kept in mind before making films.

If filmmakers like myself must survive in Tollygunje, we must think about this class of people and their taste. If we think about our educated friends and audience and make films for them, the films will flop I have experienced this when I made the film *Abbajaan* (1994). Though *Abbajaan* was a 'good' film it did not work. The film I am now making is called *Naach Naagini Naach Re* is a full-blown, unabashed commercial film. I have kept in mind this section of the audience I have defined. It is clear that I have to bend low now to collect money. If I continue making 'good' films, I will perish.

¹¹ *Anandalok Prothom Pratibedan-Bangla Chhobi: Sankat keno?* ("Bengali cinema: Why this crisis?") 18th January 1995, 28th January 1995, the special series continued till the next four editions, interviewing several directors, actors and writers asking them about the crisis in Bengali cinema and the decline of audiences for Bengali cinema. 'Bengali cinema in its present state and form in every way is in a terrible state of affairs, whereas once upon a time this very Bengali cinema and industry was a pride of Bengal and the rest of the nation. But today its existence and identity is at the verge of decline and disappearance and it is of great fear and shame. Anandalok tries to ask several talents from the industry including the likes of Madhabi Mukherjee, Soumitra Chatterjee, Gaoutam Ghosh, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Haradhan Bandopadhyay, Anjan Chowdhury. Sabitri Chattopadhyay and Supriya Devi, what ails the industry? What are the reasons? What could be the possible remedies? (Author's translation) – ((Chakrabarty 1995)

I have to earn money to survive. Let us forget *Abbajaan*. Recently, Prabhat Roy made *Sandhyatara* (1994). The film was good but it failed at the box office, the audience did not receive it well. Even Tarun Majumdar's *Kotha Chilo* (1994) did not work. Now, Tapan Sinha's *Wheel Chair* is not attracting good audience. The main point is that there is no audience for 'good' cinema, and generally there is a decline in the audience for cinema. Since times have changed, one has to match up to the demands of the time. Films have to be made according to the demands of the time. Only then can we come out of the crisis. Hence we now have to make films only for entertainment. The industry will survive only if we cater to the section of audience I described earlier (A. D. Gopa Sengupta, 1995: 35-37).

Since corporatization had not yet made its entry in the Tollygunge film industry, it is important to study directors who were making films during the mid 90s and at the beginning of the new millennium. What kind of films were they making? What kind of success were they getting?

Haranath Chakraborty:

Haranath Chakraborty who began his career as an assistant to Anjan Chowdhury debuted as a director with *Mangal Deep* (1989) starring Ranjit Mallick and Sandhya Roy. The film had a treatment, plot-line and direction that were very close to that of Anjan Chowdhury. Gradually, Haranath Chakraborty carved an independent identity. He concentrated on the action genre and made films like *Nabab* (1991), *Sangharsha* (1995), *Mahan* (1996), *Bidroho* (1997), *Ranakshetra* (1998). Chakraborty established himself as one of the most commercially successful directors in Tollygunge. He was the busiest director of the 90s and early 2000s. According to him, *Ranakshetra* brought in several changes in the industry. He shot the film on a much higher budget than the prevalent practice. The action sequences were choreographed with greater technical finesse in car blast and chase sequences involving expensive cars. He says he never shot a film on 16mm, always

on 35mm. With every film, he increased the budget and the number of prints to be released¹². In 2000 Haranath made the biggest budget film of Tollygunge *Shasurbari Zindabaad* (henceforth SBZ). The film SBZ was shot in cinemascope, a first in Tollygunge. It also had a costume designer, a publicity designer, a set built on a very high budget that could have made several films all together. The film had pre-release publicity, a music release and digital posters.

Shasurbari Zindabaad was a massive hit across cities, suburbs, small towns and villages. Chakraborty says that he never wished to take a gap of more than a few weeks between two films, for he believed that his crew should always be working, as that would generate revenue for the industry and its workers, which would ensure the survival of the industry. SBZ was released with 50 prints, also a first for a Bengali film. But critics were merciless. They lashed at Chakraborty for making Bengali films look like cheap imitations of Hindi *masala* films and frame-to-frame copies of South Indian hits. But Chakraborty believes that these were precisely the factors that made his films popular and commercially successful. Seventy lakhs spent on *Shasurbari Zindabaad* were recovered in just about fifty days. This was unbelievable and absolutely a first for any Bengali film over the last three decades (Bhattacharya, 2001: 30-32).

The film drew a full house in more than twenty five cinema halls all over Bengal. Seventy lakhs for a Bengali film was a huge risk in 2001. Until then, Tollygunge had been experiencing huge financial losses. A blockbuster was the need of the hour. Most hall owners had sold off or leased out their property by 1999. A few studio owners were negotiating with promoters to sell off their studio premises. Though Swapan Saha's *Baba Keno Chakor* and Motiur Rahman Panu's *Beder Meye Josna* were hits, this didn't bring about significant changes in the economics of the industry. This was a time when corporate values had gradually begun to enter the Calcutta (now Kolkata) market, the neo-liberal life style was picking up at a slow pace, and the urban population of the

¹² Author's interview with Haranath Chakraborty 17th October 2010, Kolkata.

metropolis, Calcutta, were shopping from Pantaloons; mainstream Bengali cinema was a distant concern. Quite unexpectedly yet surprisingly, Pantaloons cashed in on the success of *Shasurbari Zindabaad* and came up with a slogan during the Bengali festival *Jamai Shoshti*- (a festival where sons-in-law are treated by mothers and fathers-in-law and gifted new clothes). It went thus - “*Eibar Shoshti te Jamai bolbeiyee Shasurbari Zindabaad*” (this festival the son-in-law will definitely say that his in laws house rocks!) This was possibly the first recognition of a mainstream film and the Bengali film industry by a corporate brand. This was a time when Bengali films would hardly run for more than two to three weeks in a row. SBZ was a trend setter, not merely for the hero and heroine of the film, Prosenjit and Rituparna Sengupta, who had worked together in eight films the previous year but had given only one hit, *Kulangaar*. SBZ ran for a record period of time, crossing more than eight weeks (Bhattacharya, 2001: 30-32).

The story bore a strong resemblance to the Hindii film *Jamai Raja* (A. Kodandarami Reddy 1990) starring Anil Kapoor, Hema Malini and Madhuri Dixit. It also bore similarities with two other Hindi potboilers namely *Raja Hindustani* (Dharmesh Darshan 1996) and *Biwi Ho Toh Aisi* (J.K. Bihari 1988). The story is about a deprived child (Prosenjit) who grows up to come back and avenge the wrong done to him. Anamika Saha is the stereotypical wretched and wicked mother-in-law who is forced to accept this son-in-law as a *ghar jamai* (a son-in-law who lives in his mother-in-law’s house) followed by a constant battle of wits between the mother-in-law and son-in-law. The romantic songs were similar to the fare dished out in popular Hindi films of the time with not too much of action (Bhattacharya, 2001: 30-32).

Robin Agarwal who produced *Shasurbari Zindabaad* lamented that the present breed of Bengali films were poor in story and originality, that the industry lacked good actors, directors and when a film like SBZ became a hit, it was merely a question of chance. Despite all this, SBZ had elements that are still remembered. The credits were novel and did not follow the established

practice of a rolling down of names and titles. As members of the audience were entering the hall, looking for their seats and settling down, the film introduced each and every member of the ‘family’ directly to the audience. The first few songs for the film, unlike contemporary Bengali song sequences shot in Nicco Park or other parks and lakes in and around Kolkata were shot against the picturesque backdrop of Kalimpong in northern Bengal (Bhattacharya, 2001:30-32).

While regretting the pathetic condition of single-screen theatres in Kolkata, actor Ranjit Mullick complimented the filmmaker for holding the audience captive with a ‘clean family comedy film.’ Haranath Chakraborty analyses the raving success of *Shasurbari Zindabaad* quite differently. He states that the film explores comedy, a genre rarely found in Bengali cinema of the time. The audience lapped up Prosenjit in a comic role and Rituparna in a different persona from the ones the audience was used to. The audience was tired of watching these two in the same kind of romantic roles again and again in film after film. The film deviates from the usual plot line of most commercial films. Instead of being a melodramatic story about a cruel mother-in-law torturing the weepy daughter-in-law, SBZ manages to execute chauvinism of a kind that is comical where the son-in-law tames his mother-in-law (Bhattacharya, 2001: 30-32).

Pratibad (2001) which followed SBZ was another blockbuster which was a record success and probably one of the highest grossers in the last twenty five years. *Pratibad* is remembered and marked for its contribution in initiating the trend of remaking South Indian hits in Tollygunge. Filmmakers still making films in the so-called ‘Anjan Chowdhury’ style were taken aback with the gimmicks, action and the element of thrill the film was filled with. *Pratibad* moved a step ahead from using fake revolvers to the use of stein guns, dynamite blasts to whip lashing of villains. The climax was shot in Chennai; cannon blasts were recorded authentically; expensive cars were blown off, the hero flew to a height of forty feet, and there was a rocket launcher that burnt off an entire gang of villains. Added to these, the film had acts like bike jumping, and other action filled stunts

that Bengali cinema had never witnessed before (Sarkar 2003,49).

The cinema hall Prachi announced that *Pratibad* was one of the highest grossers in their fifty two-year-long history of exhibiting Bengali films. With the success of *Shashurbari Zindabaad*, almost all cinema hall owners increased the rate of tickets in West Bengal. *Pratibad* was Anjan Chowdhury's story. He scripted it and wrote the dialogues. Chowdhury agrees that the story was nothing new, but the film had technical advancements and the use of gimmicks similar to Bollywood films. Haranath Chakraborty remarked that it was high time Tollygunge filmmakers incorporated these techniques and aesthetic advancements. An audience now exposed to international cinema through cable television would watch Bengali films only if they get more than what they have been getting from Bengali films so far (Sarkar, 2003:49). The period around early 2001-03 was a defining moment for Bengali cinema when both the industry and the press woke up to the possibilities of a new resurgence in Tollygunge in terms of technicalities and visual aesthetics (Sarkar, 2003: 49).

The success of *Pratibad* in Kolkata cinema halls once known for their tradition of screening 'Uttam-Suchitra' hits proved that audience taste had possibly changed and people wanted Bengali mainstream films to be technically advanced and on par with Bollywood films (Chattopadhyay, 2001:59-61). Haranath Chakraborty stated that films would work only if they could feel the audience pulse and that pseudo-intellectualism would fail in Bengal. He stressed that one could neither waste the money of producers, nor cheat the audience in the name of art films. The audience now exposed to cinema from Hollywood wanted more than what they had been getting from Bengali films so far (Sarkar, 2003:49).

It is not surprising here that even Chakraborty's mentor Anjan Chowdhury talked in a similar fashion when asked why his films repeatedly dealt with issues of mofussil problems of

everyday life, like fights and quarrels in a kerosene shop, or in a queue for filling water from a municipal corporation public water supply tap in a village. Without hesitating, Chowdhury said that those who still cook their food using kerosene oil everyday and who have only one municipal tap providing drinking water in their area are the ones he makes films for. They are his customers and he caters to them. He would not be able to deliver and would fail miserably if he forced himself to make films like Goutam Ghosh, Aparna Sen or Rituparno Ghosh. He knew his formula and he could deliver his best knowing his audience and his style. He wanted to make profits and there was no other way to do it than the way he wrote or directed his films; his filmmaking style guaranteed profit and made the producers earn higher returns (Chattopadhyay, 2001: 27-30).

Swapan Saha:

Getting the maximum number of hits was the only way Tollygunge could survive in the face of tough competition from Bollywood and Hollywood blockbusters when press discourse was completely against mainstream Tollygunge. There were still a handful of Bengali producers who wanted to cater to the *Bhadralok* middle class audience. Film production in Tollygunge was controlled more or less by fleeting producers who were mostly non-Bengali businessmen. They were primarily engaged in multiple or real estate business who invested in film production

Around this time, the director who worked with the maximum number of independent non-Bengali producers was Swapan Saha. At times, he made more than three films with a lump sum he received from a businessman. By 2003 Saha had completed fifty feature films within twelve years. For the first time in Tollygunge, an average of four films a year were being made by a single director. Almost all his films recovered the money the producers had invested in them. Never mind the fun the *bhadralok* audiences made of films like *Baba Keno Chakor* (why is the father a servant?)

or *Shami keno Ashami* (why is the husband an alleged victim?); his films continued to be extremely popular in the suburbs and villages. A certain section of people would walk into cinema halls knowing that it was a Swapan Saha film they were going to see.

According to Saha a small group of ‘serious’ filmmakers with National Awards and Film Festival screenings abroad would often label his films as ‘photographed *jatra*’. But none of their films ever drew a full house continuously for two weeks, landing the producer in a lurch. Saha reiterates with confidence that he was perhaps the only director on whom producers could bank on without doubt in Tollygunge for almost a decade. Of the fortysix films of Swapan Saha that had released so far, fifteen have been super hits, fifteen were hits, while the rest had all recovered costs. Saha began to be looked at with greater suspicion and shock because he could make three films at a time on paltry budgets, which no filmmaker had ever dared to do before in the Tollygunge film industry. He completed most of his films in two months, sometimes even in one month. These were issues on which the Press wrote profusely and most often with a mocking tone and a sense of ridicule. Even in television shows when ‘paralell cinema’ film directors were questioned about the films of Saha they repeatedly held him responsible for bringing down the standards of the cinema in Bengal.

Swapan Saha began his career in Dhaka assisting Alamgir Kumkum. He even acted in two Bangladeshi films *Monimala* and *Moner moto Bou*. He assisted Dhaka’s popular director Johir Raihan, from whom he learnt the technique of finishing a film shoot in less than a month. He shot *Shothbhai* in less than ten days. The film was released within one month of its production and had a total budget of only Rs. 9 lacs. Trained in Bangladesh, Saha’s films had a strong influence of the tradition of Bangladeshi films, in-your-face high melodrama and double meaning dialogues, with an imitation of rural and kitschy ‘Jatra’ aesthetics. Saha admits that this was his speciality and these were attributes that made his films popular in the mufossil areas and in rural Bengal. His super hits

included *Sujan Sakhi*, *Bhai amar Bhai*, *Jhinukmala*, *Adorer Bon*, *Tomake Chai*, *Maatir Manush*, *Baba Keno Chakor*, *Kamalar Bonobash*, *Praner Cheye Priyo*, *Santan Jokhon Shatru*, *Guru Shishya*, *Jabab Chai*, *Strir Morjada*, *Kurukshetra* and *Sneher Protidan*. The hits were *Bedenir Prem*, *Maan-Shomman*, *Bishwas Obishwas*, *Nagirikanya*, *Sokhi tumi kar*, *Nishpaap Ashami*, *Bakulpriya*, *Mayer Dibbi*, *Sundori*, *Swamir Adesh*, *Ghorer Lokkhi*, *Swamir Ghor*, *Maanush Keno Beimaan*, *Ei Ghor Ei Shongshar* and *Bhalobashi Tomake* (Saha, 2003: 30-31).

Swapan Saha candidly expressed his discomfort when asked about directors who won awards and were invited to prestigious gatherings where discussions on cinema took place. He totally disapproved of such groups and activities as an elite practice. According to him, they did not make films for the industry and people; they made films for themselves and festivals. Saha repeatedly quoted Anjan Chowdhury who appreciated his contribution for generating profits and revenue at the box office for the Tollygunge industry.

Interestingly, contemporary Tollygunge's biggest and most successful production house Shree Venkatesh films Pvt. Ltd. started their film production venture with Swapan Saha's *Bhai amar Bhai* (1996). Swapan Saha believes that today the industry has changed. It is no longer driven by one hit, or one genre, because every new hit is a new genre, and there is no consistency in filmmaking style and content. However, he is confident that the 90s was a crucial period when directors like himself gave hundreds of people their bread and butter mainly the workers and staff of the studios in Tollygunge.

Earlier, he released his films with a maximum of twelve to fifteen prints, and a maximum budget of twenty lacs, which is not the norm now. Tollygunge has grown in leaps and bounds. Saha is happy that Tollywood is perhaps at par with Bollywood. But he is not hopeful about the numerous independent one-time production houses mushrooming across the industry. He says they

will all disappear within a year or two. Only Eskay and Shree Venkatesh Films will survive, for they know the film business the best. When asked why his films no longer work (*RUN, Private Practice, Love Story of a Super Star, Warrant* were all flops) he says they still work in rural areas. He believes that it is not enough to think that just because some films do well in multiplexes, they will necessarily earn profits for the producer. He also believes that the multi-plex hit does not ensure that the rural audience will accept these films, and according to him it is certainly the rural audience that makes a film a hit.¹³

The Changing Scenario: Tollygunge industry becomes Tollywood

The Film Market, set up during the 8th Kolkata Film Festival had gone unattended. According to Pritam Jalan, producer and distributor, corporatization and multiplexes were needed to promote Bengali films. However, for the Bengali *bhadralok* class there was more than one reason to celebrate the film industry getting recognized as Tollywood. Rituparno Ghosh, a Bengali film director whose films won national awards was appropriated by the urban upper middle class educated Bengalis. Ghosh's films like *Unishe April, Dahan, Bariwaali, Subho Mahurat* and *Chokher Bali* not only got critical acclaim, but was immediately celebrated for their rich aesthetics and literature-centric content. (ibid)

Alongside was the advent of multiplex theatres in the metropolis. Inox Forum was the first multiplex to be set up in Calcutta at Bhawanipur, where the famous single screen theatre chain Minar-Bijoli-Chhobighar existed, a hub of the intellectual *bhadralok* Bengali audience. The Inox multiplex not only changed the entire experience of film viewing, but it created a space for the niche audience that was desperately in search of a legitimized space for a certain kind of cinema that had

¹³ Author's interview with Swapna Saha on 15th October 2011, Kolkata, Technician Studios.

just begun to get popular. Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* was the first Bengali film that got screened at the Inox multiplex screen and created a storm critically and earned reasonably well at the box office. However, there were few critics who were not kind to the film at all probably because they were biased against a Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai being cast in a Tagore interpretation with her voice dubbed by a Bengali actress.

Chokher Bali produced by Shree Venkatesh Films (henceforth SVF) founded by Mahendra Soni and Shrikant Mohta entered film production in 1996 with Swapan Saha's film *Bhai amar Bhai*. The film did moderate business at the box-office. They continued to produce Bengali films and became highly successful and popular after producing Haranath Chakraborty's *Shashurbari Zindabaad* and *Pratibad*. There was no looking back. In 2007, SVF produced Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* starring Aishwarya Rai. The film had a budget of more than 1.5 crore, a record for the time. *Chokher Bali* was declared a hit even though the film mostly ran in Kolkata and other metropolitan cities, and more or less changed the fate of SVF and Rituparno Ghosh. The press, public and critics saw the success of *Chokher Bali* as a starting point that triggered major developments in the corporatization of Tollygunge and in initiating aesthetic changes in film production. SVF produced Rituparno Ghosh's first Hindi film *Raincoat* (2004) starring Aishwarya Rai and Ajay Devgan.

Around this time, actor-singer-filmmaker Anjan Dutt made his first Bengali film *The Bong Connection* (2007) a film dealing with the present day young urban Bengalis. It was a big success not only with the audience in Bengal and India but outside India among the diaspora audience. *The Bong Connection* (2007) opened the flood gates for the industry to experiment with different genres, subjects and treatment. The film was crucial in changing screening regulations of Bengali films in multiplexes. Multiplexes earlier screened only selected Bengali films, ones that targeted the niche urban audience. With the overwhelming success of *The Bong Connection*, the rules changed.

The EIMPA made it mandatory for all multiplexes to devote at least 40% of their screen time to Bengali cinema.

Following these developments, the Bengali film industry went through diverse changes: newer groups of producers, directors and film technicians entered the industry that gradually led to the corporatization of film production, distribution and exhibition. At the same time, post liberalization there was a boom in private television channels. Several Bengali private cable television channels began such as *Etv Bangla*, *Zee Bangla*, *Star Ananda*, *Tara Bangla*, *Akash Bangla* and so on, with a wide range of information and entertainment based programmes related to the Bengali film industry. This was followed by the entry of Bengali FM Radio stations like *Amar FM*, *Friends FM*, *Big FM*, *Red FM* etc. which, unlike public service providers did not stick only to *Rabindra sangeet* and film music from old Bengali classics. These Radio Stations provided a new range of programmes involving newer talent from the contemporary Bengali film and entertainment industry, and also began playing songs and music from contemporary films.

The changing scenario of the English and Bengali language press was interesting. The earlier discourses and discussions related to the post 1980s ‘crisis narrative’ and decaying quality of Bengali cinema began to shift towards a more celebratory discourse of the overall Bengali film and entertainment industry. These articles and stories began to circulate through newspaper supplements like *Calcutta Times* of *The Times of India*, *HT City of Hindustan Times*, *t2* of *The Telegraph*, and Bengali magazines like ‘*Anandalok*’, ‘*Unnish Kuri*’ and ‘*Sananda*’. All featured columns, articles and pages with a focus on Tollywood and related aspects of the Bengali film industry. New stars, new directors, corporatization, film exhibition, film budgets, visual and techno-aesthetics, music and fashion¹⁴, etc. were profusely covered. This was followed by reports of various business and

¹⁴ See Ruman Ganguly and Roshni Mukherjee “Tollywood has room for all”; *Calcutta Times*, Sunday 3rd July 2011

economic collaborations and ventures that Tollywood experienced¹⁵. The word Tollywood had gained currency in the popular press and media discourses, leading to its acknowledgement in the public sphere. The industry was hopeful about this turn mainly because of the logic of sheer economics, as more number of films, and more press and media coverage meant sustaining employment in the film industry for people working and controlling the industry, facing the unequal threat of competition from Bombay films. Nevertheless, Tollywood was often criticized by the popular press and media for making copies of southern hits and morphing Bollywood (Nag, 2009: *The Telegraph*)¹⁶. With fewer exceptions, because of the new crop of filmmakers, the success of unconventional films at the box-office alongside regular ‘pot-boilers’ forced filmmakers to switch to diverse Bengali content, aggressive marketing, all-round publicity, and even world wide release. For instance, singer-director Anjan Dutt’s *Madly Bangali* tried to break stereotypes of the staid and conservative *bhadralok* Bengali who cannot party and adapt to the over all global life style and a cosmopolitan attitude; it was about city youngsters trying to make it big in the music industry. Another film by Anjan Dutt *Chalo lets go*, a travelogue was based on challenging human relationships belonging to a post global urban metropolis. Both films did average business at the box-office. Director duo Abhijit Guha and Sudeshna Roy’s romantic comedy *Cross Connection* ran for a record breaking ten weeks in central Kolkata and elsewhere. Actor-turned-producer Rituparna Sengupta experimented with unconventional film plots, star cast and higher budgets in films like *Alo* and *Potadar Kirti*. There were changes both within and outside the Bengali film industry that

¹⁵ Yash Chopra, incharge of the Entertainment wing of cinema attached to the FICCI, led a delegation on its behalf to the Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya for the revival of the Bengali Film Industry. The proposal included the construction of a chain of multiplexes, state-of-the-art entertainment plazas, shopping malls and food rendezvous, which would assure “a sustainable revenue generation scheme” for the overall entertainment industry in the state (Biswas 2002, no page nos.)

“After sponsoring city football giants a decade back, liquor baron Vijay Mallya is here to sponsor Tollywood. Inox Leisure Ltd, one of the leading multiplex chains, has already shown interest in distributing Bengali films. Mallya’s United Spirits Ltd, the biggest IMFL firm in the country, will promote commercial Bengali films by cobranding one of its highest selling whisky brands, Bagpiper, with Tollywood movies. Mallya is starting his Tollywood innings with Rituparna Sengupta’s maiden production venture *Patadar Kirti*” (Mukherji 2009, 4)

¹⁶ See Bureau Report ‘*Poran Jai...a copy, says court*’ *The Telegraph*, Tuesday, August 11, 2009.

ushered in a revamp. These are possibly the changes and developments that outline the journey of the Bengali film industry's identity from Tollygunge industry to Tollywood.

But Tollywood's contemporary financial condition is generally dominated by a very high rate of interest for film financiers and production houses. This is tackled through the vertical revenue earning model- theatre release, satellite rights, home video rights, music rights and overseas rights. This model is most successfully practiced and adopted by Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF). Actor and executive producer Arindam Sil is believed to have started the trend of cross over films in Tollywood as executive producer of 'Moxie Group' with *Bong Connection* 2007 (budget one crore) that earned ten times the invested amount. He believes that this is because of the changing mindset in the youth and the narrowing gap between rural and urban psyches (Dasgupta 2010).

In 2010, the number of films released increased from 45 to 80 films. Subrata Sen, a noted contemporary Tollywood filmmaker states that for a very long time Bengali films have been titled as '*Nyaya-Annaya*' and '*Bichar-Abichar*'¹⁷, making it an education in antonyms. These traits were changing, which industry insiders considered the Midas touch, in the form of the new star Dev, director Raj Chakraborty, composer Jeet Ganguly and the biggest production house in Bengal Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF). Raj Chakraborty's *Chirodini tumi je amar*, (2007) created history by grossing fifteen times its budget of Rs. 80 lakh. His other films like *Challenge* with a two-crore budget earned ten times the amount and *Prem Amar* a 1.5 crore film, fetched twenty times the money invested. Changes like these with films earning unexpected figures question the earlier notion of Bengali audiences and their taste. This situation has resulted in the rise of a mixed discourse of celebration and criticism amidst the press and the public. Perhaps there is logic of finance and economics on one side, which is paradoxically and ironically generated from the

¹⁷ Filmmaker says, "Bengali films have been timelessly called stuff like *Nyaya-Annaye* and *Vichar-Avichar*. It had almost become an education in antonyms. All this is changing." *Eastern promise*: Abhijit Dasgupta ; January 21 2010 Updated 17:16 IST:

quintessential formulaic binary of mainstream cinema and artistic integrity on the one hand, and glamour and honour on the other, that began to be associated with the new films of Tollywood. The popular press discourse foregrounds the industry as Tollywood, somewhat similar to Bollywood as a response; the similarity is only in the coinage of the term because the former is different in its composition and characteristic formation. It is important that a closer exploration is made about these changes operating through various circuits within the overall cultural and industrial structure of Tollygunge now established as Tollywood, most of which were mainly brought in by Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd. almost after a decade of liberalization, which perhaps needs detailed study and critical attention.

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***Pather Dabi* and Revolutionary Nationalism in Bengali Cinema: A Review**

Sujay Chatterjee

Unlike Hollywood and Bollywood, Bengali films have suffered from severe constraints which included lack of money that often resulted in lack of creativity. The last thing was responsible for the gradual decline of Bengali Film Industry after 1960's. In Hollywood, we can view movies covering almost all the fields of human life: one can see movies based on war, natural calamities, adventure, history, biography, animal world; there are children's movies, romantic comedy, personal and historical tragedy, movies depicting great things of the past, movies about an imagined future, horror films, family drama, slapstick comedy, sports movies – the list will be endless.

But in Tollywood, one can be bored by movies repeatedly based on love, action and melodrama. But This was not always not the case. Even 50 years ago Bengal could entertain its people as much as Hollywood. Then came the communist movement. It can be seen from the history of world cinema that Film Industry almost inevitably declined wherever communists came to power, and West Bengal was no exception. Worldwide, from 1950s to 1990s, there was only one competitor to Hollywood – the Bombay Film Industry. As the shadow of Communism covered almost the half of Europe and most of the world, countries like Soviet Russia and China witnessed a decline of the entertainment industry. Among the capitalist countries, Japan, France, Germany, Italy and Britain were facing economic crisis after the World War II.

Thus Bollywood had no competitor in either Europe, Asia and Africa. Only in India it had its rival in Tamil Film Industry. By that time, Bengal gradually fell into the hands of the Communists. This ended the Golden Era of Bengali Cinema and it also freed Bollywood from a very powerful rival it had to face. This was a tragedy – perhaps a Greek tragedy – a tragedy that gave Bengali Cinema a new outlook. Tragedy was always a popular genre for the Bengalis. Failure is a pillar of success for those who can dream further and Bengalis have been great dreamers. Dreams rarely come true, but then films have a connection with dreaming and imagining. Bengali revolutionaries

had a dream – a dream that was made immortal by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novel, *Pather Dabi*.

Pather Dabi was made into a film for the first time in 1947, just before independence. It released on 7 March, 1947, at the Rupbani cinema hall in Kolkata. It was directed by Satish Dasgupta and Digambar Chattopadhyay. Debi Mukherjee played the role of Sabyasachi in this film, while Chadrabati Debi played the role of Sumitra. Kamal Mitra acted as Talwalkar, Jahar Ganguly as Shoshi and Sumitra Debi was in the role of Bharati. Debi Mukherjee (b.1916) the actor who played Sabyasachi died an untimely death on 10 December 1947. *Pather Dabi* was his last movie.



A collage of different images of Debi Mukherjee which appeared in an old film magazine

The plot of Sarat Chandra's *Pather Dabi* drew its inspiration from the struggle of Bengali Revolutionaries outside India. The novel is set in South East Asia, particularly in Burma and Indonesia. A strong network of Bengali Revolutionaries was present in both the countries. Burma and Burmese lifestyle are important motifs in *Pather Dabi*. Bengalis are often nostalgic about Burma which offered economic support to them during early 20th Century. Sarat Chandra's early

life was spent in Burma.

The novel was considered seditious and was ultimately banned by the British. The central character of *Pather Dabi* is a doctor named Sabyasachi, a revolutionary who wants to free India from British rule. Today, people variously identify the character of Sabyasachi with Subhash Bose, with Bagha Jatin, with Rashbehari Bose and with M. N. Roy. These are indeed misconceptions. All these revolutionaries share some traits of Sabyasachi, but a historical study in the background of Sarat Chandra's novel reveals that this character is modeled on Dr. Jadugopal Mukhopadhyay. I have come to this conclusion after carefully reading the texts related to our Revolutionary Movement. Biplobi Jibantara Haldar also established it in his writings that the inspiration behind the characterization of Sabyasachi was Jadugopal.

First of all, among the above mentioned revolutionaries, the only doctor was Jadugopal. Secondly, none traveled so much in South East Asia before 1920's except Jadugopal who was in charge of Foreign Affairs Department of Anushilan Samiti. Thirdly, Sarat Chandra had close connections with Jadugopal and was familiar with his exploits. Lastly, the style of working and thoughts of Sabyasachi match with Jadugopal's thoughts and working style, as his character matches with that of Jadugopal's. Of the other characters, Apurva was modeled on M. N. Roy and Bharati on his wife (later). Sumitra, the President of the Organisation, was perhaps created without any model and was based on the abstract qualities of Bharat Mata, whom the revolutionaries respected. Most other characters were also based on real life personalities whom Sarat Chandra himself came across. Like Bankim, Sarat often created characters based on real life and events.

Pather Dabi first appeared in *Bangabani*, a monthly journal, between February-March, 1922, and April-May, 1926. When it was published as a book by the editor of *Bangabani* on 31st Aug, 1926, the first 5000 copies were sold in a week. In 1927, the British Govt. banned it for preaching sedition under section 124A of the Indian Penal Code. Fazlul Haque govt. lifted this ban on March

1, 1939. However, the Muslim League Govt, following the Dramatic Performance Act, debarred any theatrical performance of *Pather Dabi*.

Let us come back to the 1947 movie *Pather Dabi*. With Debi Mukherjee in the lead role, other actors and actresses of this movie included Bhanu Bandopadhyay, Jahar Gangopadhyay, Tulshi Chakraborty, kamal Mitra, Nitish Mukhopadhyay, Ashu Bose, Banibabu, Bechu Singh, Kali Guha, krishnadhan Mukhopadhyay, Mihir Bhattacharya, Chandrabati Debi, Reba Debi, Maya Bose, Sumitra Debi, Bijoykartik Das, Malcom, Master keshab and Tapan Mitra. Music was given by Dakshinamohan Thakur. The film was produced by Associated Pictures. This film was a success and its success inspired a Hindi version titled *Sabyasachi* in 1948, in which Kamal Mitra and Meera Mishra played the lead roles. Kamal Mitra was in the role of Sabyasachi. Director of the Hindi version was Agradoot and Music Director was Robin Chatterjee.

However, for the Bengali viewers of today, the familiar movie adaptation of *Pather Dabi* is the *Sabyasachi* that was released in 1977, in which Uttam kumar and Supriya Debi played the lead roles. Other actors and actresses in this movie were Bikash Roy, Anil Chatterjee, Tarun kumar, Jayashree Roy, Sulata Chowdhury, Nripati Chatterjee, Haradhan Banerjee, Satya Banerjee. Directed by Pijush Bose, this film went on to become an Uttam-Supriya classic. The film was released in an atmosphere of change. 1970s witnessed a gradual rise of CPIM, and nationalist culture in Bengal was completely marginalized. Henceforth in Bengal, nationalist film-making would cease to exist. Apart from the acting of Uttam Kumar, what else did make *Sabyasachi* a success, since it was against the tide of its times?

As film is a medium through which any contemporary culture reflects itself, and as the armed politics of naxal period finds a strange resonance with Ogniju, so quite interestingly the 1977 *Sabyasachi* in fact appears with a greater revolutionary fervour than the 1947 *Pather Dabi*. It touched the spirit of the original novel of Sarat Chandra, in which the touch of Congress brand civic

Uttam Kumar in *Sabyasachi*

nationalism (a hoax really) was absent. The smell of revolution was in the air, the thunderclaps of spring was heard. The Naxalite Period was felt in the films like *Pratidwandi*. Naxalite Movement was seen as a revival of the Revolutionary Movement except the ideal which never revived. In *Sabyasachi*, Bengalis found a lost world – a world which was magical and adventurous. The text of *Pather Dabi* was simple and yet vast. The Bengali revolutionaries shook the world in the first half of twentieth century. From Central Asia to Vietnam, the Bengalis roamed everywhere. The scene irreparably changed after the death of Sarat Chandra. By the end of 1940s, Bengal ceased to be a major power due to the weakening of Bengali nationalists. The strong ideals of revolutionary power partly gave way to the influence of Mahatma Gandhi's Congress and partly got converted to communist agenda.

Pather Dabi is a political text that yields a serious film which shows both the strong and weak sides of Bengali character. In a limited way, *Sabyasachi* can be compared with a films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, which was based on the life of Colonel T. E. Lawrence during WW I. The character of Sabyasachi has similarities with that of Lawrence. In both the cases, patriotism, duty and discipline mark the characters. Both the characters are forgotten heroes. The portrayal of

Sabyasachi was more dramatic because he worked secretly and trusted only chosen people and believed in a centralised organisation. This was the real image of a Bengali revolutionary from Ognijug. As the entire screenplay revolves around Uttam in *Sabyasachi*, he overwhelms the film's pace while other characters are only centered around him.

Sabyasachi works alone. He could change his appearance if necessary as he was a master of disguise. He was a lover of adventure but he lived for his mission. He did not live either for himself or for others. The supreme goal of his life was freedom. It was such an era when all other people and things were secondary to a revolutionary. His never ending quest for freedom bestows an epic immortality on himself, like Khudiram's sacrifice remains an epic tale irrespective of whether the Bengali revolutionaries succeeded in the end or not.

Sabyasachi which one may argue is the best film based on the novel of Sarat Chandra so far, is centered around the personality of Bengal's matinee idol Uttam Kumar whose acting made it a success. With spectacles on eyes, and a commanding appearance, Uttam matches the appearance of Dr. Jadugopal Mukhopadhyay. In his portrayal of Sabyasachi, we witness some essential qualities of a Biplobi – one who mixes easily with people and one who is serious about his country. In a famous scene, the character of Sabyasachi tells Bharati that his aim is freedom and not welfare of the people, which is a bold statement, if controversial. In another scene, we see Sabyasachi uttering the prophetic words – “You want freedom, but I demand it. And I revolt if my demand is not met.” This is the supreme ideal of *Pather Dabi* that is skilfully depicted in *Sabyasachi* – freedom from foreign dominance – a thing still relevant in our times. At one place in the movie Sabyasachi tells a fellow character that revolution is not necessarily bloodshed: it is a complete social change. That catches the true spirit of Revolutionary Nationalism.

The last scene of *Sabyasachi* is memorable, in which Uttam promises to return and then walks towards uncertainty. It ends with the prophetic words of Sarat Chandra, and shows the

uncertainty of a revolutionary's life. One major difference between the original novel and the film is that the acting of Uttam kumar first gave the character of Sabyasachi a human touch. Sarat Chandra's Sabyasachi is like a stone: hard, true and awe-inspiring.

Interestingly, the present writer has seen a recent post by a Bengali boy in Amir khan's website: fondly recalling the acting of Uttam Kumar, the boy urged Amir khan to remake the film *Sabyasachi*. It establishes the popularity of *Sabyasachi*. It would certainly be a good idea to make a new Hindi version of *Sabyasachi*, as India needs to recall the contribution of the Bengalis to India's freedom.

Uttam's acting, along with that of Supriya Debi, made *Sabyasachi* a classic. It has never been highlighted like some other films of Uttam, nor it had a mammoth popularity like his romantic cult-classics. However, in no other films Uttam Kumar portrays a Biplobi and in no other films we can see the magnanimous screen presence of Uttam Kumar bringing to life the ideals of the Bengali revolutionaries. So *Sabyasachi* will continue to yield a charm for us.

Pather Dabi. Dir. Digambar Chattopadhyay and Satish Dasgupta. Perf. Debi Mukherjee, Chandrabati Debi, Jahar Ganguly, Kamal Mitra. Associated Pictures. 1947.

Sabyasachi. Dir. Pijush Bose. Perf. Uttam Kumar, Supriya Debi, Anil Chatterjee, Bikash Roy. Usha Films. 1977.

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Promoting Kolkata on a Global Scale: A Review of *Kahaani*

Abhijit Mallick



Kahaani is a Hindi movie made in Kolkata, made by a Bengali director, by a Bengali cast and crew (well, mostly), and this film reminds us of the past glory of Tollygunge film industry when Bengal used to make a number of Hindi movies and marketed them successfully all over North India. But *Kahaani* is not just a film made in Kolkata, it is a film about Kolkata. One can even say that Kolkata is a main character in this movie.

Made on a tight budget of Rs 8 Crores, which is shoestring really in case of Hindi movies, *Kahaani* delves deep into the heart of Kolkata bringing out a certain essence that was long lost even in the Bengali movies. The lanes and by-lanes of Central and North Kolkata, or Calcutta, as it used to be known once, appear in this movie with their sensual details. The commercial Bengali movies of the 90's era neglected the city only to concentrate on melodrama that took place behind closed doors. The Bengali middle class was undergoing huge crises, so did Bengali cinema of 80s and 90s. Joint families were breaking to give birth to nuclear families; values were redefined. Filmmakers had no time to waste on the cityscapes. They rather concentrated on the evolution of characters.

The rise of Venkatesh films in the 21st century changed this scenario of Bengali cinema to a large extent. The Bengali film directors started shooting song and dance sequences in locations that

were out of India. The spectators actually saw a Bengali film hero dancing amidst the Swiss Alps or ambling down the lanes of San Francisco. It was the dominant side of Globalization where we subscribe to the products of other cultures. But globalization also means that we highlight our cultural treasures on a global scale, a fact that remains conveniently forgotten in Bengal, and so a celebration of Kolkata was still missing in our films. *Kahaani* brought back the nostalgia of Kolkata, while it explored the city and the people living in it. The Metro rail, the slums, the narrow North Kolkata lanes – they all hit our eyes. The film depicts the journey of a pregnant woman who comes to Kolkata in search of her husband, Arnab Bagchi. The film was shot in exact locations according to the events depicted.

On a superficial level, *Kahaani* portrays the eternal story of good versus the evil, where good gets the better of evil in the end. It belongs to the category of revenge tragedy, a really popular genre in Indian cinema. Vidya Balan, the protagonist of the movie, is probably at her best in bringing Mrs. Bagchi alive. And as we already noted, the other protagonist of this film is its setting: Kolkata. As lights go off and the big screen unfolds its magic, the spectators are mesmerized to see their city come alive. As what they had thought to be petty and mundane now suddenly became important, it surprised them.

Kolkata's magnitude surprises the spectators in *Kahaani*. The dim lights of Kalighat Metro Station are no more ordinary; they are oozing of a thrill that the spectators have never imagined. Kolkata provides the ideal setting for the plot to flourish. The Monalisa Lodge where much of the film was shot was always there on the Sarat Bose road facing anonymity. No one knew it existed until *Kahaani* happened. The lanes of the cities were explored again through the eager eyes of the Kolkata spectators after watching the movie. The city became alive. In this way, though *Kahaani* is a Hindi movie (its dialogues teem with plenty of Bengali words nonetheless), to many Kolkatans, it is more of a Bengali movie. Now, when the spectators experience a good movie, they feel good

factor (mixed with a certain excitement) stays with the audiences even though they leave the theatre. So the feel persists. Kolkata becomes interesting and ambiguous; the dim lights and streets evoke thrill which earlier were commonplace. Durgapuja, the biggest festival of the Bengalis suddenly comes alive on screen and stays fresh in our mind.

And what stays is the realization of the urban audience that watching a Bengali movie in an essential Bengali setting may be as exciting as watching *Kahaani*! Box office reports will prove that Bengali films that released post-*Kahaani* made good business, most notably *Bhooter Bhobishyot*. Those were no doubt good films on their own, but they carried forward the feel of *Kahaani*. A hit movie is like an event, a movement that charges its spectators so much that they feel like going to the theatres to experience the magic of film viewing more and more. And *Kahaani* has done this by promoting Kolkata. Just the way different cultures have promoted their own products and globalized their uniqueness, Bengalis can successfully promote Kolkata, its colourful festivals like Durga Puja and the quintessential Bengaliness of our excellent contemporary actors by making movies like *Kahaani*. Needless to say, as someone associated with the Bengali film and television industry, I am hopeful at that prospect.

Kahaani. Dir. Sujoy Ghosh. Perf. Vidya Balan, Parambrata Chatterjee, Saswata Chatterjee, Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Boundscript Motion Pictures. 2012.

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***Kahaani* and *Bhooter Bhabishyot*: Two Reviews**

Mousumi Biswas Dasgupta

A Durga Comes to Kolkata to Slay the Asura: *Kahaani* and Feminine Power



All over the world, film industries churn out revenge sagas because of the mass appeal of this genre, since the general psychology of human beings is to mete out justice to the wronged and punishment to the wrongdoer. The process is however lost somewhere between the chaotic rules and regulations and loopholes of power that exist in every society. The end result therefore is the individual attempt to avenge the wronged, becoming a court of law in itself. *Kahaani* presents a similar story. It is a revenge tragedy: a wife murders the terrorist who killed her husband; but in spite of it all, she cannot bring back to life her husband or her miscarried child. In a patriarchal society, a woman out to avenge her family either convinces other men to fight for her, thus pitting one patriarch against the other; or comes back to the familiar place in an unfamiliar form, disguised in a new identity so that no one recognizes her.

But Vidya Bagchi does not solicit male assistance, nor she goes in disguise. She just assumes a new name and returns to the city of Kolkata that she is well acquainted with, though not living in it currently. From the minute she enters the police station, she formulates a series of misinformations none of which are substantiated upon verification. Still, the police believe her, the spectators believe her because she cleverly manipulates certain societal norms and perceptions. Instead of accumulating power to strike back at the right moment, (as we have seen in Hindi films like *Khoon Bhari Maang* and *Army*), she assumes the most helpless state for a woman or at least what the society believes to be the most helpless state of a woman, a lone woman heavily pregnant looking for her husband who has in all likelihood deserted her (most of the police men believe that). Therefore most of the people are sympathetic to her and even those who are not (Khan) at least do not disbelieve her. Vidya therefore wages an intellectual war against the patriarchal system. Interestingly, the women in this film, Agnes D'Mello (played by Colleen Blanche) and Sapna (played by Pamela Bhuttoria) assist her instead of opposing her, thus thwarting the notion popularized by some films and soaps that women are unsympathetic to their own kind.

Kahaani moves at a fast pace offering many twists and turns. The spectator watch the pursuer becoming the pursued not once but twice – first when Milan Damji considering himself the hunter comes to retrieve some files and finish a helpless pregnant prey but ends up becoming the victim himself, and the next time when the IB and police realized that they had been used while they had assumed that they were smartly utilizing Mrs Bagchi. The fight between Vidya Bagchi (who is actually Mrs Arup Basu) and the hardened criminal Damji would have seemed ludicrous in the film had it not employed the shock technique. Damji fells Vidya with a kick on her abdomen and aims the gun to wipe out the last piece of living evidence, but what happens next stupefies him. He sees the weak woman pulling out a prosthetic abdomen and while he tries to figure out why she would fake a pregnancy, Vidya strikes the gun away from his hand, pulls out her hair pin and thrusts

it first into his left foot and then his neck, almost like Goddess Durga spearing the Asura. The image of the hair pin recurs again and again throughout the film. Vidya gives it to Rana to unlock the door of the old NDC office and also Milan's deserted residence. She searches for it when Bob Biswas threatens to throw her in front of an approaching metro train but realises that her hair was plaited that day. She keeps fiddling with it while hacking Shridhar's computer for the second time. Like Vidya, the hair pin represents a thing which appears innocent and harmless but contains enormous potential. Damji bewildered by Vidya's attack asks her, "who are you?" but gets a "how does it matter?" and a couple of bullets in reply. In taking out her prosthetic abdomen, she symbolically recreates the violence that was once committed on her, almost crystallizing the moment to form a new kind of divinity.

Towards the end of the film, Rana gives a packet with his name on it to Khan, containing information about Bhaskaran. The packet was left to him by Vidya, who chose to write Satyaki on it though she had throughout the film called him Rana. When she heard his good name for the first time, she remarked that he was "Arjun's charioteer" and Rana actually accompanied her and drove her around most of the time in the film. In a way, therefore, Vidya is Arjun; or more properly Brihannala, an Arjun in disguise. If Arjun had disguised himself as Brihannala, Vidya disguises herself as a mother. In a reversal of roles, in *Kahaani*, the men have to bow down before Vidya. The police (Rana, because of his guilt consciousness), the IB (Khan pleads with her to access Shridhar's computer) and even the terrorist (Milan Damji) accept defeat before the movie ends. However, Vidya's supreme adversary in this film is not Milan Damji, but Bob Biswas (a chilling performance has been given by Saswata Chatterjee). And while Milan is killed by Vidya, Bob dies in an accident before Vidya can punish her.

Kahaani is a movie about a strong woman. The police force is shown as rather contained and restrained. Their limited power is exposed more than once in the film. When Khan comes to

meet Vidya the first time, he rudely orders everyone out of their own P.S.; again when Rana goes to NDC to make some enquiries regarding Agnes D'mello's death, he is reminded by Khan that he cannot do so without prior permission of the IB. Most of the force of Kali Ghat police station work under the fear of being transferred to the traffic section! The most pathetic picture however would be the one where Rana the Assistant Sub-Inspector hides from Bob Biswas the serial killer in the old NDC building, almost like a thief, fearing discovery. But if *Kahaani* did not have a twist in its plot, the facts would turn scary. If Vidya was indeed a pregnant lady searching for her missing husband, then her plight would be unimaginable. As a citizen she does not get any help or assistance from the police and is instead sacrificed to tie up their loose ends. When Rana, enraged at Khan's intention to let Vidya be the bait for Damji asks him what the difference is between the police and the terrorist, Khan replies, "Nothing. We work for the law and they, against it." The rest is collateral damage.

Some minor weak points however remain in the story. The IB needs Vidya to reopen the case. It should however not come to mean that she solve it herself. She should only have provided the much required excuse to officially go after Damji, but is allowed to become the medium herself. Vidya assisted by Rana sneak into Milan's abandoned residence and by questioning the errand boy of the nearby tea-stall, trace "the man with the briefcase", Shridhar. One keeps wondering why it had not occurred to the IB earlier. Khan requests Vidya to hack Shridhar's computer as without her help they would not be able to proceed. It simply implies that both the IB and police (Vidya helps Rana with the computer at Kali Ghat P.S.) are partially computer literate and electronically challenged, who don't have hackers in their system and have no intentions of hiring some either. We just hope they continue to get assistance from the complainants. The incompetency of the police is brought out glaringly when Inspector Chatterjee forgets to get Vidya's signature in the F.I.R. registrar even after her numerous visits to the P.S.; one then has to presume that Vidya's case was

the last to be recorded in their register because had it been opened again, Chatterjee would surely have noticed the missing signature.

In spite of these weak points (which are relatively fewer given the weak narrative logic in most Bollywood blockbusters), this film stands apart as excellent entertainment. Vidya Balan always had a special connection with Bengali films, and she does absolute justice to the expectations of the Bengal audience. She not only just symbolises Ma Durga (Like Ma Durga she came to Kolkata for a few days, slayed the Asura, provided justice to millions who suffered at the hands of evil, and then she went back to her place), but through her character, a certain spirit of Kolkata has been foregrounded. Vidya Bagchi walking along the roads and lanes of Kolkata will be a memorable image for the viewers for a long time to come.

Kahaani. Dir. Sujoy Ghosh. Perf. Vidya Balan, Parambrata Chatterjee, Saswata Chatterjee, Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Boundscript Motion Pictures. 2012.

Bhooter Bhubishyot: The Past Stages a Revolution

Anandabazar Patrika in a report published on 1st June 2012 (“Chhutir Shujog: Nirjib Shohor”) ruefully states that Bengalis are too much under the grip of bandh and *Bhooter Bhubishyot* as the previous day (31st May) they all celebrated the bandh and watched *Bhuter Bhubishyot* at home (original DVDs of this recently released film were launched in the market a couple of days back). There may be certain obvious reasons why *Anandabazar* may dislike this film, let us consider them. The film takes an indirect pot shot at *Anandabazar* when we hear of a certain (imaginary of course) Bengali industrialist O.K Dhar, (when sounded in Bengali, this name means literally “grab him”, metaphorically, “make a deal with him” or “find favours with him”) who was awarded *Shera Bangali* (the best Bengali), a signature award from Anandabazar group that is offered annually to the Bengalis worldwide who please Anandabazar. The story of O.K Dhar in the film is not exactly an exalted one. His daughter committed suicide because he did not allow her to be with her gym instructor who is a Christian – Dhar made his daughter home-intern and vanished her lover.

Then the episode involving Sandeep Bhutoria, a Marwari promoter is deeply communal at heart, another reason of unease for Anandabazar who do not want to differentiate between Bengalis and non-Bengalis in an open market. This film not only attacks vote-centric politics, but it attacks consumerism as well. Ghosts are in a sorry state – we are told a number of times in this film – because they are not voters or consumers. Neither the political parties nor the forces of capitalism bother for them. The film is anti-liberal and anti-openmarket. One very pertinent concern may be this: if Bengalis take interest in their history, if Bengalis read their history, then who will read *Anandabazar*?

Marked by an overwhelming presence of Satyajit Ray, this film offers innuendos to Ray's Feluda classics. Sandeep Ray's Feluda (Sabyasachi Chakraborty) and Topshe (Parambrata Chatterjee) constitute the narrator-listener duo whose conversations facilitate the entire storytelling. Sandeep Ray's Jatayu (Bibhu Bhattacharya) is the caretaker of the haunted mansion (Chowdhury Palace) who first introduces us to the house and its haunted history. Then, talking in rhymes in certain parts of the movie is a take on Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The budding director Ayan Sengupta receiving lots of money (left by Bhutoria in panic after he was scared to hell by the ghosts of Chowdhury Palace) and gold coins of the Raj from the ghost leader Biplob Dasgupta (a directly casteist angle may be found here, again to the discomfiture of *Anandabazar*; a dead Dasgupta is helping out a living Sengupta, and let us confess here, that is in tune with the general Bengali impression of the Boddi/Baidya caste) resemble Goopi and Bagha receiving boons from the King of Ghosts. And who can deny that Satyajit Ray was closer to the pulse of popular cinema than popular cinema itself in his Goopi-Bagha and Feluda films?

In a blend of fantasy and reality, the oppressed and helplessly tortured ghosts reclaim their world, in the manner of the wretched of the earth claiming its revolutionary victory, or the Biblical hope of the poor inheriting the heaven. Towards the end of the movie, this victory of the ghosts is

compared by the narrator (Sabyasachi Chakraborty) to the making of a history, the way a revolution makes history. This is the victory of the unnoticed and downtrodden who are neither consumers nor voters. An archetypal Bengali sentiment, that pre-dates the communist take-over of Bengal, that was present in our revolutionary freedom struggle, further back in Chaitanya and still further back in our Buddhist past, is thus stated at the end of this movie: that the disempowered will find their voice and claim their world. This immediately strikes a cord with the audience.

The opening song and the closing song of the film have the same refrain: malls are coming up, promoters are fast changing the face of our city, heritage is being steadily lost in an atmosphere of neo-liberalism, and ghosts (who symbolise a Bengaliness that increasingly becomes marginal and is on its way to be ousted) face the threat of being refugees. Contemporary political discourses are ridiculed: *Era Ora* (These and Them), *Shushil Shomaj* (Civil Society), *Mounomichhil* (Silent Procession) are terms frequently heard in Bengal in last 5-6 years since the days of Nandigram and Singur, and these terms are shown to be conceptually apathetic to the question of preserving our history. The script of Ayan Sengupta titled “Badly Bangali” is a satire on Anjan Dutta's *Madly Bangali*. Again there is a hint that Bengali cinema is clueless, plotless, and is churning out clichés which do not address the crisis of a people with a vanishing past and a doomed future.

This film is made as a protest against the systematic uprooting of the ghosts, the opening song tells us (so does the closing song). A formal introduction that is self-consciously cinematic (a practice that originated in ancient Indian theatre: before a play started the audience was introduced to its story by a *Sutradhar*) announces beforehand that this film is made as a protest against the current socio-economic order that fosters rootlessness among the bengalis and robs them of their history. Not exactly in these terms, but the audience interprets the symbolism of the ghosts easily.

The mastermind of the ghostly revolution is Biplobda, a Naxalite professor who was murdered by the police in the 70s. His very name stands for revolution. The revolution turns out to

be bloodless but very effective. Here is a silent revolt against the unfeeling and callous treatment meted out to the ghosts by the promoter who has been out to destroy Chowdhury Palace. It stands for the demolition of the past by the living.

There is a melange of ghosts in this haunted mansion called Chowdhury Palace: there is a Bangal (and a Ghoti, the owner of the palace zamindar Darpanarayan himself), a Khan, a Bihari and an Englishman. Death is not a leveller, as the ghosts carry their pasts into their future. Zamindar Darpanarayan does not want to allow Atma Ram to the upper storey of the palace because he is low born. After his death Atma Ram keeps pulling rickshaw, Khan is still a cook, the Major is given the charge of security, and Pablo is still a singer. They are a microcosm of a society Bengalis are familiar with. There is an immediate reaction when the villain Bhutoria (brilliantly played by Mir) enters the frame and tries to demolish this house.

Witty dialogues and play of words (united we stand, divided we misunderstand) mark the script of this film. There are hilarious and bawdy puns at times (photo is mispronounced as *phooto* which means hole in Bengali; Promode, a name is uttered like *pnod*, which means arse).

When it comes to scare the living people, it is always the ghosts of the women who step in, as we can see in this movie. Kadali scares a film actress who has come to Chowdhury Palace for shooting, while Bhutoria's murdered wife volunteers to scare Bhutoria. Perhaps there is something ghostly and scary about women that erupts even in a hilarious movie like *Bhooter Bhobishyot*.

Bhooter Bhobishyot is a spoof and continually refers back to the subject of the mundane world it parodies. "Bhringigram" is one such reference, "Badly Bangali" is another. It refers back to cinema as well by calling itself a potboiler with all the elements of a hit film: it has got crime, passion, thrill, songs and dances (with an item number as well). It refers to these subjects in a postmodern way: this film simulates these subjects (belonging to living men and women) and yet stands outside their world in a gesture of deferral. Ghosts are neither voters nor consumers and

therefore stand outside the established discourses of politics and economy, the categories of left and right, the systems of capitalism and socialism.

Ghosts are the real proletariat, the absolute dispossessed who are powerless to participate in the ways of the world; it is the world of shopping malls and political opportunism; it is the world of moneyed interests which are out to destroy our culture and identity; it is the world that is systematically erasing our history. The past of the Bengalis is the real margin that needs representation; the past is what demands a revolution in our present world and worldliness.

Bhooter Bhoishyot. Dir. Anik Dutta. Perf. Parambrata Chatterjee, Sabyasachi Chakraborty, Saswata Chatterjee. Satya Films and Mojo Productions. 2012.

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Creative Workshop: Theory in Practice

Script Adaptation of a Poem

Debanjan Das

Cinema and poetry have been buddies for a long time, though the initial relation of cinema was with fiction. Gradually poetry made its dent into cinema. Generally, in various discussions, poetry's loans from cinema are mentioned – montage, parallel cut, jump cut etc., but films took a lot from poetry too. Particularly during the 60s, there were attempts to oust narrativity from cinema that in turn took to the play of subjectivity of poetry. That is why film and poetry are repeatedly compared in the cinematic works of Bunuel and Godard. Now the question is, since the primary unit of film is scene, its free indirect subjectivity is capable anyway to establish a communication, but as sound is the unit of poetry, does it erect a steep wall of subjectivity in front of us?

Since poetry dissociated myths from words and went on to advance with sounds, it moved away from simple communication and moved towards a complex and subjective expression. That process involves its own problems which film has been able to avoid by virtue of visuals and polyphony. But the dependence on image in cinema presents the most challenging problematics for any poetry-to-film adaptation.

I have prepared a screenplay from a poem. Let us see for ourselves what the advantages and disadvantages are.

The Poem:

Sun-stuck city

Morning, you called me ... when it was

Waiting rays on the river stairs coloured the shoes

Fine tape moth and bits of sun on the sleep-bound street

The sky is the nick-name of the lemon woods

Straight chimney's peak spreading its limbs

The way some bosom some rhythm some march past

a lake on my chins and a palm full of Chilka

Ring road talks with the traffic gate

shoe polish is over

I bailed myself to the ring road

Sunny purse and navel

Exactly two mornings have had a tremor

One is apple another's orange

Morning's slow arrangements are on skirts ,in tiffin box and within steps of hair

body washing greetings had sounds of munching the sun

The bus came

I got up from the mattress of this social system

Now horn sounds of request and cannon shots of huge proteins

I walked and you were startled

But isn't this how man will talk to science?

(This poem is taken from Swapan Ray's collection of poetry, *Kuasha Cabin*, 1995).

The Script:

Scene 1

Outdoor. Dawn.

Shot1 Wide angle/long shot/steadycam	A man's indistinct silhouette wearing winter dresses is walking along the shadowy orchards on a riverside. Steadycam is following that silhouette. light effect resembling a tube light flickering at low voltage	<i>Tankari</i> of Bhairavi is playing in fast rhythm Slowly the Bhairavi Tankari fades out. The sound of flowing river fades in.
Shot 2 High angle/long shot	The sun rises. Again flickering light effect.	Fast rhythmic fade in of Bhairavi
Shot 3 mid shot	Orange colour of sunrise on the river water	
Shot 4 mid shot	A young man wearing pull-over is sitting by the riverside. We see his back. The orange colour of sunrise on the river water deepens. A stream of orange colour following the reflection of the sun rapidly moves towards the young man.	

Shot 5 close shot	The effect of colour spilling on a pallet is made on the screen where the main colour is orange.	
Shot 6 mid shot	The young man is seen from the front. The scarf on his neck and long hair are gently swaying in the wind. The orange colour rapidly proceeds to almost sweep away the boy.	
Shot 7 close shot	Again the effect of colour spilling on a pallet is made on the screen where the main colour is orange.	
Shot 8 high angle/long shot	There are bunches of orange clouds on the sky. The clouds are overlapping with each other rapidly. Orange hue on the sky.	The siren of a factory at a distance overlaps with Bhairavi
Shot 9 high angle/long shot	The shadowy factory chimney is standing in the backdrop of an orange sky, and there is a hazy line of smoke.	Bhairavi fades out
Shot 10 high angle/long shot	The same orange sky but in place of the hazy chimney there is a tree spreading its brunches.	Jamming of guitar is heard. Gradually the pace of jamming increases.

Scene 2

Outdoor. Dawn.

Shot 11 steadycam/ mid shot	The light and shadow of the morning and a rocky road where the camera descends fast. Camera crosses a turn and suddenly stops.	
Shot 12 eye level/mid long shot	An orange orchard. Bunches of ripe oranges on the trees.	Sudden stop of jamming of guitar.
Shot 13 eye level/mid long shot	The camera moves up and down like fast breathing after a run, the scene also moves up and down.	

Scene 3

Outdoor. Morning

Shot 14 steadycam/eye level/mid-long shot	A young woman comes running along the empty road of a mountainous village. She stops. She breathes fast. Drops of sweat on face. Stooping a little, she looks down. A boy's hand approaches and holds her chin. The girl looks up. Sweat from her chin comes dripping on to the palm of the boy.	Guitar's jamming begins at a fast pace.
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Shot 15 close up	A close of multiple water drops on face of the boy from the first scene. The water drops roll and mix with each other.	
Shot 16 low-angle/mid shot	The boy, stooping, drinks water from a roadside water tap. (after this, scenes come one after another in rapid succession)	

Scene 4

Outdoor. Morning

Shot 17 mid-long shot	Workers walk towards factory gate.	Jamming of guitar fades out. Bells of bicycles,, horns of scooters, chattering of workers fade in.
Shot 18 mid shot	That young man also walks. His pull-over has the rhythm of walk and wind. Long hairs are swayed in light wind. Cigarette on his lips emit mild smoke.	
Shot 19 mid shot/axis break	A middle aged man by the side of the young man chuckles “hey ya brat, you couldn't help coming today!”	

Scene 5

Indoor. Morning

Shot 20 mid shot	A newly married girl in unkempt <i>sari</i> stands behind the doors. The young man is tying shoelace sitting on a stool. The newly married girl says: “leave it today. You don't have to go.” The young man stands up after tying shoelaces.	
Shot 21 mid shot	The young man looks smilingly at the girl. Night is still seen all over her <i>sari</i> and her face. The young man bends his head and enters the room. The girl keeps standing at the door. Crossing the bit of a garden, sunlight is on the doors of the employee quarter. Half of her body receives sunshine. The wind makes the locks of her hair tremble.	<i>Darbari Kanada</i> fades in

Scene 6

Outdoor. Morning.

<p>Shot 22</p> <p>close shot</p>	<p>That middle-aged man and the young man are having tea at a shanty tea-stall by roadside.</p> <p>Middle-aged: Why do you have tea before entering the factory every morning?</p> <p>Young man: I crave, that's why...</p> <p>middle-aged: And why do you crave tea?</p> <p>Young man: everybody back home used to have it, a childhood habit...</p> <p>middle-aged: hmmm,, don't you think that tea is for your arranging of the words in the factory?</p>	<p>The rest of this conversation, that is, the middle-aged man saying “like, the bicycles are coming along the ring road. will pass the traffic gate and take a turn to the factory. Will halt a little at the time of crossing the gate. Will look to and fro. And in the meantime as if the bicycle will speak with the road.” These words pass as voice-over. With voice-over, there is a mild playing of <i>Darbari Kanada</i> in the background.</p>
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Shot 23 steadycam/long shot	Wipe in. The young man rides downhill on a bicycle. He wears the winter dress of the first scene. The scarf on his neck is slightly floating in the wind. After a turn, an orange orchard is seen by the road. Bunches of ripe oranges on the branches.	
Shot 24 steadycam/low angle/long shot	Bunches of orange clouds on the morning sky as well.	
Shot 25 steadycam/mid long shot	When the bicycle moves forward a little, a girl from the hills is seen picking oranges from a heap and keeping them in a basket.	
Shot 26 close shot	That flickering tube-light effect is seen again.	

Scene 7

Outdoor. Morning.

Shot 27 mid shot	The middle-aged man and the young man are sitting on a tree trunk that lies by the wayside. Both are laughing.	A trembling sound of the factory siren is heard.
Shot 28 mid shot	The young man walks towards a water tap by the roadside.	

Scene 8

Outdoor. Morning.

Shot 29 mid long shot	A mountainous spring flows. That girl from the orange orchard inserts tiffin box into schoolbag in front of a house.	The sound of mountain spring fades in.
Shot 30 close shot	Takes the bag on shoulder, tidies up scarf and skirt.	
Shot 31 close shot	Goes out on a bicycle.	The sound of the spring ceases.

Scene 9

The same place, time and characters as seventh scene.

Shot 32 high angle/close shot	The young man goes to the tap to drink water.	Sound of that mountain spring.
Shot 33 low angle/close shot	The young man is drinking water from the tap.	
Shot 34 low angle/close up	The water drops on the face of the young man mingle with each other and enlarge	That fast rhythm of guitar jamming from Shot 14 fades in.

Scene 10

Indoor. Late afternoon.

Shot 35 high angle/close shot	Locks of wet hair come splashing.	Jamming of guitar fades out.
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<p>Shot 36</p> <p>high angle/mid shot</p>	<p>That newly married young woman wearing a <i>sari</i> is wiping her hair dry with a towel.</p> <p>Orange coloured glimmering of the dusk from skylight is there on her body.</p> <p>She walks from the front of the bathroom to her room. Closes the doors. The rays from skylight are seen and sound of bangles is heard simultaneously.</p>	<p>Sound of bangles fades in.</p>
<p>Shot 37</p> <p>high angle/mid shot</p>	<p>Over the young man's shoulder, he is seen stirring sugar in tea cup with his head slightly lowered. The twilight on the closed doors remains the same.</p>	<p>The sound of bangles is overlapped by sound of stirring sugar in teacup.</p>
<p>Shot 38</p> <p>close shot</p>	<p>The young man comes with teacup.</p> <p>The young man goes walking to the room with teacup. Light comes from an yellow bulb inside the room. The young woman is not there. Nobody is there.</p>	

Scene 11

Outdoor same as Shot 25. Morning

Shot 39 mid long shot	The girl from the hills is picking out oranges from the heap and keeping them inside the basket. The young man stealthily comes close to the girl from behind.	Sound of mountain spring.
Shot 40 close shot	The young man has come to stand behind the girl.	
Shot 41 close shot	The girl startles and looks turning her neck.	
Shot 42 close shot	The girl gets up smilingly before the boy. The young man is smiling too.	

Scene 12

Indoor. Night.

Shot 43 close shot	Light from a reading lamp illuminates the room. Half-lying on the bed, the young man munches an apple and talks over phone “Is it raining there at your end?”	Sound of storm and rain from outside.
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Note: The poem and the script are translated from the original Bengali by Tamal Dasgupta.

Further Reading

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