

The Contemporary Bengali Film Industry: From Tollygunge to Tollywood

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CINEMA STUDIES

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation titled “**The Contemporary Bengali Film Industry: From Tollygunge to Tollywood**” submitted by me at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies** is an original work and has not been submitted by me so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution.

Anugyan Nag

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**The Contemporary Bengali Film Industry: From Tollygunge to Tollywood**” submitted by **Anugyan Nag** at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies**, is his work, and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Supervisor

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27th July, 2012

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Introduction

Abstract:

This M.Phil dissertation project is an attempt to study the emergence of the post-liberalization Bengali film industry, now recognized as Tollywood. I use the term ‘Tollywood’ in order to indicate the distinctive aesthetics that characterize this cinema and the larger industrial changes that have been taking place within the Bengali film industry. I argue that Tollywood gets constructed and re-shaped in the consciousness and imagination of the Bengali audience within and outside Bengal through several networks and media channels and their discourses, the emergence of a new star and celebrity culture, innovative marketing and promotional strategies, the development of diverse film exhibition and distribution models, and most importantly the corporatization of film production.

My project’s effort has been to look at the Bengali film industry (commonly referred to as the Tollygunge industry by the press till about the early 90s) from the early 1980s to the present, a period which also witnessed the heavy circulation of public and press discourses about the differences between the Bengali middleclass intelligentsia’s ‘*bhadralok* cinema’ or ‘good cinema’ and the mainstream commercial cinema, the reasons for which have been elaborated in the course of the dissertation. This discourse was complicated during the post liberalization period when the dividing lines between rural and urban locales were disappearing gradually in Bengal and elsewhere in India¹. The dissertation thus maps the several developments and

¹ This is both in terms of cultural differences and economics. In his article “Changing Scenes,” Moinak Biswas questions if the *bhadra* circle exists in the same form any more, with the success and popularity of certain kinds of films from Tollywood. At the same time, he also suggests the fading away of the stark difference between *bhadralok* elites and the non-*bhadra* due to the centrality of television in middle and lower middle class lives, as well as the Bengali language itself getting hybridized mostly by *bhadralok* urban citizens. Moreover, he argues that television has also picked up this hybridity in the form of language and cultural content. Biswas also draws a parallel with the changes that took place in the then opposition party leader Mamta Banerjee’s party that was accused of being full of hooligans, but changed as more and more intellectuals joined her protests to fight for a change. Biswas writes, “The lyrics of Bangla music band songs, a contemporary development in the vernacular, and newspaper features have come to a share an irreverent college canteen idiom that owes its origins partly to the decline in formal skills in the language. It is not a *bhadralok* idiom formally, but it is entirely urban. The kind of quasi-English Bengali films that Anjan Dutt makes for urban youth circuits owes a

changes in industry dynamics along with the media convergence that pushed to re-shape and form Tollywood as an industry in its present form within the discourse of Bengali cinema, constituting its audience and their imagination of Bengal and beyond.

Post liberalization and with the Indian film industry being officially declared as an ‘industry’ the imbrications of the media and the Hindi film industry popularly termed ‘Bollywood’ was overtly evident. Following this development, the Bengali film industry in its existing form began by the mid 1990s to adopt corporatization and a close association with the media in order to promote itself as Tollywood, ‘the industry’. In 1996, a corporate film production house - *Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd.* (henceforth SVF) was formed which, along with *Eskay Videos* and *Surinder films*, introduced several changes to the production, distribution and exhibition systems of Bengali films. I have also taken into account the rise of the multiplex as a sight of exhibition in the last decade, which has pushed Tollywood producers and distributors to adopt newer strategies of marketing and promotion of their films, often similar to the techniques practiced by Bollywood producers and distributors in the last decade. These factors are seen by the media and industry personnel as being responsible, to a large extent, for bringing Bengali middle-class audiences ‘back to the theatre’ and establishing Tollywood as an industry that is ‘popular’ if not necessarily ‘respectable’ in the consciousness of the Bengali audience within Bengal and beyond. While SVF has enabled the corporatization of the Bengali film industry, it has also been important for me to see their absolute monopoly over cinematic processes through vertical integration, leading to an undemocratic style of management control and a powerful monopolization of the industry. Thus, in this dissertation I have attempted to explore the significance of these intersections and the overlapping of production policies and the diversification of the industrial production system and dynamics within Tollywood.

similar debt to the decline of the Bengali language. Authors like Nabarun Bhattacharya or Gautam Sengupta, on the other hand, write for a serious minority readership and use a hybrid street language to break free of fictional as well as moral conventions. The territory of the image is giving in to unfamiliar people seeking entry. Those who find it wholly unacceptable are likely to turn away from all politics. But signs are clear that the minority culture of distinction has opened its doors to other semiotic neighbourhoods, and has even become dependent on the invasions for survival. We may not like it, but this might serve as an unexpected ground for political change” (2008).

The Bengali film industry-an overview

Broadly the Bengali film industry is understood as divided into three main phases without any special emphasis on any of the three. Firstly, historical discourse around Bengali cinema looks at the glorious history of the New Theatres studio² period when Calcutta as a film production site was recognized for its films, filmmakers, actors, technicians and musicians and their literary sense. New Theatres made films both in Bengali and Hindi, which were highly popular and of equal commercial viability (Gooptu, 2010: 71-72). The second phase is understood as the golden era of Bengali cinema referring to the period of the 1950s and 1960s which witnessed the tremendous popularity of matinee idol Uttam Kumar and his female lead Suchitra Sen, along with filmmakers like Ajay Kar, Asit Sen and Tapan Sinha. This is also the period which was marked for its films being based on literary adaptations from the vast reservoir of quality Bengali literature. The two decades of the 60s and 70s was significantly associated with the art/parallel cinema movement mainly with the works of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen popularized by the film society movement. The third discourse of Bengali cinema is the 'crisis narrative' of the 1980s post the death of matinee idol Uttam Kumar, when the Bengali film industry experienced a massive financial decline, leading to the rise of a certain kind of cinematic practice that was often referred to as the 'cheap copy' of 'masala' Hindi films from Bombay, or the mere imitation of the one wall theatre *jatra*³ by the

² New Theatres set up in 1930 by Birendra Nath Sircar, had an important role in the creation of the Indian film industry. Functioning from Calcutta, it was not just a well-equipped studio; it was a system, a way of life for the people working with it. . . . Sircar wanted not just cinema halls and a studio; he wanted a system. A pervasive, self-supporting, effectively-managed, supremely equipped, net-work of men and women and machines which would sell the celluloid dream like it had never been sold before in the country... From the Brochure published on the occasion of a screening of selected New Theatres films under National Film Heritage, a collaborative program of the Centre for Development of Instructional Technology and the National Film Archive of India, 18-23 February (1985) (New Delhi: Centre for Development of Instructional Technology for India International Centre, 1985).

³ *Jatra* (origin: *Yatra* meaning procession or journey in Sanskrit) is a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Bengali speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Tripura. The typical characteristics of *Jatra* being- high and excessive melodrama, loud acting, and stereotypical characters especially that of villains, tacky dialogues, hackneyed plots, trite dialogues and songs often with lewd or vulgar words, etc. It is interesting to note that newspaper columns, public sphere discussions and part of the film industry called the new popular Bengali films not only 'bad' or 'derogatory' but also described them as an 'art form' that was more close to one wall theater (*Jatra*) or folk performance than film. Precisely that's why this lack of 'film sense' was talked about when these films were described.

press and Bengali middle-class intelligentsia (*bhadralok*)⁴. It is against a background of this discourse that I have placed my dissertation project on the corporatization and industrialization of Bengali cinema that is now known as Tollywood. With the liberalization of the economy in 1991, and the recognition of the Indian film Industry as ‘an Industry’ by the then Information and Broadcasting Minister and the Government of India in 1998, the situation in the Bengali film industry went through diverse changes, like the entry into the industry of newer groups of producers, directors and film technicians, gradually leading to the corporatization of film production, distribution and exhibition, followed by reports of various business and economic collaborations and ventures that Tollywood experienced⁵. This situation resulted in the rise of a mixed discourse of celebration and criticism amidst the press and the public that has surfaced in the last decade. Hence it was important for my intervention to examine closely the forces that operate through various circuits within the overall cultural and industrial structure of Tollywood.

The discourse on Bengali cinema and the industry

Most scholarly work and press writings on Bengali cinema have been generally biased towards the discourse of ‘parallel’ cinema. In the 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

⁴ The Bengali film magazine *Anandolok* between January and May 1995 carried a series of interview based features titled “Bengali Films: Why the Crisis?”, which presented the views of industry persons like Soumendu Roy, Geeta De, Bibhuti Laha, R.D. Banshal etc. At the same time the magazine published some letters from the readers. Both the interviews and the letters expressed dissatisfaction regarding contemporary Bengali films.

⁵ Yash Chopra, who was then incharge of the entertainment wing of cinema attached to 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 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. See Pradip Biswas, “Yash Chopra for the revival of the Bengali Film Industry”, *Screen*, 6th December 2002.

See Udit Prasanna Mukherj, “Vijay Mallya’s brand to promote Tollywood “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*, - *The Times Of India*, Kolkata, *Times City*, 10 Nov, 2009, 4

the films of the 1950s and 60s, marked by realism and a ‘middle-class sentiment’ (Raha 1991). These discursive responses continued along 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 1980s and 90s, the writings on Bengali cinema expressed concerns about the transition towards the ‘masala’ film as a copy of Hindi popular films that could possibly only appeal to mass audiences (Ghosh 1990: 135). These writings were engaging with the notion of ‘crisis’ that the middle-class intelligentsia had perhaps constructed⁶ (Bhattacharya 2011; Raha 2004: 80-81; R. Roy 2001). This ‘crisis’ was in no way an economic concern; rather the primary concern was the decaying quality of Bengali cinema⁷. 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. Acknowledging these works I have attempted to construct my project outside this ‘crisis’ narrative of the decaying quality of Bengali cinema; rather, I have striven to investigate the transition in the discourse from the emphasis on Bengali cinema to the Bengali film industry. My project has been an exploration or an investigation to study Tollywood as an individual industrial category and as a response to corporatized ‘Bollywood’- commonly considered as a standard template for Indian cinema and the overall entertainment industry.

Following the development of Bollywood post liberalization and its growing popularity within the Indian and South-Asian diaspora, academic work for the first time started looking at Bollywood from various perspectives, and a whole range of

⁶ In an essay titled “Sattar Dashaker Bangla Chhabi”/ “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 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 by author).

⁷ 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).

scholarship began to get published, where Bollywood was seen as an industry, as a category, a phenomenon and an all encompassing substitute for Indian cinema, entertainment and the culture industry (Rajadhyaksha 2003). Tejaswini Ganti's book '*Bollywood A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* is an attempt to introduce the popular Hindi cinema of the Bombay film industry and its production practices in which she tries to summarize the structure and functioning of the Bombay film industry's production and distribution processes and dynamics, alongside identifying a formula for popular films with their distinctive song-and-dance routines in order to establish their relevance beyond the film narrative and understand their position in the socio-cultural scenario (2004). Ganti, through an extensive first hand industry interaction and several interviews tries to construct an anthropological narrative of the Bombay film industry's uniqueness and its development into a more global form pitted against Hollywood. My dissertation has thus been an attempt to understand Tollywood from a similar perspective of a corporatized industrial form and one that responds to other such formations, especially Bollywood.

It was important to also look at Derek Bose's understanding of Bollywood as a brand in his work *Brand Bollywood* (2006) where he elaborates how film entertainment in India is no longer just an artistic or creative enterprise, but the rapid convergence of various media like- home video, satellite television, radio, internet, animation and gaming, which determine the success or otherwise of films. In a similar vein, Paul Grainge in his book *Brand Hollywood* talks about the growth in merchandising and product placement and the rise of movie franchises, where branding has become central to the Hollywood blockbuster economy. Analyzing the practice of branding, the poetics of corporate logos, and the industrial politics surrounding the development of branded texts, properties and spaces, Grainge considers the relation of branding to the emergent principle of 'total entertainment' (2008). Considering the above models and studies as templates to look into the media convergence that took place in Bengal's media scenario, Tollywood's formation seems to be very distinctive and it has been my endeavor to examine the overall dynamics of the industry to explore whether these processes in the Bengali film industry have produced a clone of Bollywood and/or something different.

Moinak Biswas has recently focused on a few films from the last decade that draw from the ‘spectacle’ and ‘sensation’ of certain political street events that had implications directly and indirectly on popular public imagination inspiring directors like Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty and Raj Chakraborty to make films that represented these political expressions (Biswas 2008). Biswas looks at films like *MLA Fatakesto* (Swapan Saha, 2006), *Minister Fatakesto* and *Tiger* (Swapan Saha, 2007), and Haranath Chakraborty’s *Tulkalam*, and the more recent box-office super hit *Chirodini tumi je amar* (*You’ll be mine for ever*, Raj Chakraborty, 2008), all of which position the contemporary political scenario becoming kitschier and increasingly deviating from the *bhadralok* aesthetics of Bengali cinema, representing the ‘street or mass culture’ in and around Bengal⁸. This kind of cinema is also crucial for my project as these were the films that grossed record revenues at the box office, and it was during this period that the ‘so-called commercial’ mainstream cinema found its way to the multiplexes and also launched new stars in Tollywood. That these films were all produced by the two powerful corporate production houses of Tollywood, *Shree Venkatesh Films* and *Eskay Videos* needed to be scrutinized for an understanding of the changing industrial scenario that “Tollywood” embodies.

Gaston Roberge (2010), Chidananda Dasgupta (1981), Shoma A. Chatterjee (2004) and John W.Hood (2005) who have extensively written on the Film Society movement and Bengali cinema auteurs have been consistently critical of commercial cinema and have established art cinema as their primary focus of engagement. Roberge and Dasgupta have opposed the box office and art cinema divide with so much determination and emphasis that it is almost impossible for them to say anything significant about the commercial cinema beyond rejecting it; thus once more restricting their study within the limits of Bengali cinema texts and the quality of narrative rather than the industrial scenario of Bengali films. Sharmistha Gooptu’s recently published book *‘Bengali Cinema an Other Nation’* looks at Bengali cinema from the 1930s till the 1980s defining it in the context of ‘Bengaliness’, Bengali culture and the Bengali *bhadralok*’s world-view. The political and economic history of Bengal gets intertwined with this teleological history of cinema. Besides exploring

⁸ See Hemchhaya De’s “Filming Ferment Tollywood has a new buzzword — political films that capture Bengal’s state of political unrest in recent times. Hemchhaya De goes behind the scenes to find out what fuelled the trend,” http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110515/jsp/7days/story_13983689.jsp

the ‘Bengaliness’ of Bengal’s cinema, another sub-text that unfolds in Gooptu’s writing is the idea of ‘film as an art’ and ‘film as non-commerce’-an idea that has been central to the debates and writings on Bengali cinema for a very long time (2010).

In the context of these academic works, I realized that it was important for me to center my project by focusing on the new industrial formations that have led to the emergence of Tollywood beyond the issues of Bengali cinema and its ‘Bengaliness’. I see as central to the issue of industrial formation, an interrelationship between the industry and popular media networks and channels, which I have, explored along with the contemporary films produced by the leading corporate houses of Tollywood - Shree Venkatesh films Ppvt. Ltd. and Eskay Videos. I have also discussed the emergence of new stars, the innovative and diverse marketing, promotion and distribution techniques of the corporate firms, which have constructed and formed Tollywood in its present form and state. These new changes and developments have gained an urgency that required that they be examined and analyzed critically, and it is here that I have attempted to make my intervention by constructing my argument in three chapters that detail these developments.

Reading Methods

Limited or almost no academic work on contemporary Tollywood cinema allowed me to deploy certain methodologies that I believe have enabled the progress of my investigation and pushed my argument forward to establish my intervention. To begin with, I have tried to problematise the barriers between the *bhadralok* taste for ‘good cinema’ and a perceived ‘low culture’ taste for commercial cinema with Raymond Williams’s⁹ idea of ‘Culture is ordinary’ (In McGuigan, 1993). The study of certain filmic texts and their constant interplay with the discourses around them in

⁹ Williams says that while he respects Leavis and the Marxists, he disagrees with their views of culture. Williams discusses the three Marxist ideas that “matter” in the discussion of culture and that which he opposes:

1. That culture must be interpreted by its underlying system of production,
2. That the masses are considered “ignorant,”
3. And that for socialism to succeed, a person must write, think and learn in “certain prescribed ways” (9).

the popular press and other media networks have been a primary focus while studying the transformation of cinematic practices. Igor Kopytoff's idea of studying the commodity as a cultural and cognitive process, and not just as things, but as markers of society, of people and of the economy, which can be further decoded to access a variety of meanings (1986) has been a methodological approach important for my project to explore and understand how certain films of the Tollywood industry acquire a different meaning in the processes of their commercialization and commoditization that also marks changes in the industry, the discourses of cinema and the economy. While using several films as examples I have also examined other factors that establish a relationality to Tollywood industry, especially the supplements of English dailies like *The Telegraph's t2* and its Tollywood pages, *Hindustan Times's HT City kolkata* supplement, with Tollywood columns, *The Times of India's Calcutta Times* edition, and the Bengali film magazines published by Anandabazar Patrika Pvt. Ltd. with regular Tollywood celebrity stories and other features including those on Tollywood personnel like *Anandalok* and *Shananda*. Also relevant is Rose Valley group's *Cinema Ebong*.

My dissertation has also drawn from the idea of Cultural studies as 'devoted entirely to the immediate present' and to take it away from art to everyday life, opening the field of my investigation to various interpretations, looking at the issues from the context of popularity and politics; which allowed for a close reading of Tollywood's several or only power structure and the larger field of aesthetics (Felski 2003). Brian Larkin's idea of cinema theatres and film exhibition sites as a public space creating newer publics and altering meanings of exhibition and audiences has been applied to study contemporary Tollywood film exhibition systems and sites.

Amit S.Rai's concept of 'media contagion' has been very useful to understand the media's role in the formation of Tollywood as an industry and see what kind of similarities there are with Bollywood and the over all media consumption in a globalizing India. Rai's use of the Deleuzian concept of "assemblage" as a model for understanding the complex clustering of technological, historical and physical processes that give rise to contemporary media practices has been a key model for me to understand the present scenario of Tollywood. Rai argues that the fast paced, multivalent qualities of contemporary Bollywood cinema are emblematic of the

changing conditions of media reception and consumption in the context of globalization. He considers media as a form of contagion, endlessly mutating and spreading, connecting human bodies, organizational structures, and energies, thus creating an inextricable bond between ‘affect’ and ‘capital’. Expanding on the notion of media contagion, Rai traces the emerging correlation between the post colonial media assemblage and capitalist practices, such as viral¹⁰ marketing and the development of multiplexes and malls in India (2009: 134-140). This has been useful for my argument about the emergence of Tollywood in the post-liberalization era, when media and the overall entertainment business scenario in Bengal also experienced capitalist interventions and marketing similar to the forces constitutive of Bollywood; however I have been interested to understand the areas and instances where Tollywood differs from the former.

Anustup Basu’s recent book that looks at popular Indian cinema in an age of globalization, new media and metropolitan Hindu fundamentalism, focusing on the period from 1991 to 2004, when popular Hindi cinema took a certain spectacular turn towards a more characteristic or signature ‘Bollywood style’ evolving post liberalization with the growth of global ecology in India has been important for the conceptualization of my project. Films increasingly featured transformed bodies, fashions, life-styles, commodities, gadgets and spaces, often in non-linear, ‘window-shopping’ ways, without any primary obligation to the narrative flows of desires, affects, and aspirations and frequently crossed the bounds of stories and determined milieus, with the overall cinematic-cultural ecology as an informational geo-televisual aesthetic (2010). With this understanding of Basu’s book I have tried to lay out the industrial landscape of the Bengali film industry that is affected by media convergence-internet, television, print, DVD etc. and this is not the culture industry in the older sense that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had written about (Horkheimer 1972). In contrast, it is the context of new global transformations, newer circuits and complicated pathways that have been analysed in detail to understand and comprehend the industrial frameworks that have produced what is called Tollywood,

¹⁰ Viral marketing or advertising is spreading as a popular, efficient marketing tool, as consumers increasingly pick and choose what ads they watch and when. Viral is today's electronic equivalent of the old-fashioned word of mouth. It's a marketing strategy that involves creating an online message that's novel or entertaining enough to prompt consumers to pass it on to others — spreading the message across the Web like a virus at no cost to the advertiser.

and through which cultural identity is created and ascertained. Thus I have paid attention to the details of this new cultural institution¹¹ as opposed to meta positioning, in order to excavate from within, rather than theorize from outside¹².

Since part of the newer developments in Tollywood is the rise of new stardom, I have methodologically applied John Ellis's argument about 'television fame' which he considers being that much more present or immediate than cinema stardom. For Ellis, "what television does present is the 'personality'". The personality is someone who is famous for being famous and is famous only in so far as he or she makes frequent television appearances (Ellis 2000). I see a similar trend in the Tollywood Industry with its new stardom relating to Christine Geraghty's argument that one needs to re-think the categories through which stars are examined and understood because the flow and flux of the contemporary representation of the 'famous' differently shape "how film stars make meaning in contemporary cinema and contemporary culture" (Geraghty, 2007: 185-189). Geraghty locates three meta categories through which stars generate meaning: firstly through "star-as-celebrity", then star-as-professional" and thirdly "star-as-performer"- all of which I see manifesting in Tollywood through press reports, audio-visual media publicity, social networking sites and most recently the individual fan clubs of these newer stars and their product endorsements (Mukherjee 2008). A large part of my dissertation is based on field work like interviews with industry people, directors, actors, producers et al. to understand formal and informal networks and mediums of opinions and discourses. However, my methodological approach draws from different theoretical arguments regarding the changing nature of the post globalized public sphere, not forming a linear and direct relation between Hollywood-Bollywood and Tollywood, but one that applies these positions and methods such that rather than providing a transcendental view from the outside, I have attempted to look at Tollywood as a culture industry from within its functional processes and have tried to sense all the circuits that are operating within and outside. In the first chapter, I have closely analyzed the transformation of the film industry mainly from the post 80s onwards. In the second

¹¹Cultural institutions studies (a translation of the German term "Kulturbetriebslehre") is an academic approach "which investigates activities in the cultural sector, conceived as historically evolved societal forms of organising the conception, production, distribution, propagation, interpretation, reception, conservation and maintenance of specific cultural goods" (Zembylas, Tasos, 2004: 13)

¹² I thank Prof. Ranjani Mazumdar for drawing my attention to this idea.

chapter I have elaborated on the processes of transformation of the industry with a special case study of the most successful production house of contemporary Tollywood: Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd which has gradually controlled the industry and led to its monopolization by them. The third chapter examines the converging media phenomenon that has led to the emergence of Tollywood with a discussion of the extra cinematic apparatuses like the popular discourses in English newspapers and Bengali television channels about Tollywood, Film and Television Award ceremonies and events, and FM Radio programmes that also constitute and disseminate discourses about Tollywood.

Chapterization:

In my first chapter I have looked at the processes that transformed the film industry located in Tollygunge into an industrial form that is now known as Tollywood. In the process, this chapter has focused on the cinema produced during the late 70s and 80s that plunged the Bengali film industry into crisis post the death of Uttam Kumar. Going by M Madhava Prasad's article on Bollywood, I discovered that Tollywood is a much older word and concept¹³. Until very recently, the popular film tabloid *Screen India* used the term "Tollygunge cinema" and "Around Tollygunge" as a heading for reports on the Bengali film and the industry. This gradually changed when the word Tollywood gained currency and popularity in the public and media

¹³ Madhava 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.³ 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.

discourses in the last decade. Post 1970s and the death of super star Uttam Kumar, the films in Bengal underwent changes, and the financial crisis of the industry reduced the number of films made in Tollygunge to a handful of 20 to 25 a year. The films of this period (in the 1980s and 90s made mostly by Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty) gradually began to lose their city or *bhadralok* audiences to television that gained popularity by catering to the middle class intelligentsia's aesthetic tastes. Single screen theatres began to shut down in and around Calcutta due to heavy financial losses, with films being released mostly in *mofussil* areas. The films directed by the trio of Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty were made with extremely low budgets, shoddy camera aesthetics and limited marketing strategies. Stories and plot lines revolved around family issues and interiors. Thus, in this period, the industry reached out to the lesser sectors of the film market and targeted mainly a particular class of audience whose tastes and preferences were not taken into account earlier. Calcutta releases began to shrink whereas districts around west Bengal had more releases and the revenues collected were also mostly from these pockets. It was also important for me to note that most of these films were produced by either the directors themselves or non-Bengali producers who were primarily business men. There was a lot of criticism of these films that were seen as causing the downfall of Bengali cinema because films were produced by non-Bengalis who did not understand the Bengali audiences' tastes thus merely copying 'Hindi masala' films.

It took ten years for the liberalization of the Indian economy and for the Bengali film industry around Tollygunge to actually experience a shift from the concerns of the narrative crisis in Bengali film content to a wider perception and consciousness of an industry called Tollywood. *Beder Meye Josna* (Josna, the snake charmer's daughter) gave back monetary stability to the film industry in 1991 while Anjan Chowdhury's *Bourani*, *Gurdokhina* and Haranath Chakraborty's *Shasurbari Zindabad* reintroduced box-office success in the 90s, along with films like '*Shami keno Ashami*', '*Baba Keno Chakor*' etc. The 90s was also a period that saw films shot mostly with poor technical equipment, and copies of Bollywood 'masala' films. Independent film producers began to back out of film production due to the divide between urban and rural audiences and the shutting down of cinema theatres. A

certain kind of 'parallel' cinema also began its entry slowly with newer directors like Rituparno Ghosh, Anjan Das and Subrata Sen that catered to a very niche audience. Bengali television's boom and a new genre of telefilms nurtured a new demand for quality Bengali films and this allowed Shree Venkatesh Films who were until then just distributors of Hindi films to produce their first Bengali film *Bhai Amar Bhai*. The film had a considerably larger budget and was shot with better equipment. Simultaneously, Eskay videos also ventured into film production business incorporating newer aesthetics of slickness and shooting films abroad on the lines of popular Bombay cinema. A new trend emerged and spectatorship altered with the release of Bengali films in multiplexes. Other factors like an increase in the publicity budget were a significant factor in making films popular and successful, and I have analyzed these processes of financing, budgeting and publicity that transformed the industry and allowed SVF and Eskay Videos to make their entry into film production in my second chapter. Tollygunge slowly became a site of films that had a regional and sometimes a national appeal. The use of digital technology, marketing of films abroad, the satellite sales of films, production by corporate houses redefined the Tollygunge film industry that soon developed a global reach with diaspora and International film festival audiences.

Therefore in the second chapter it is these processes of corporatization that I have tried to explore in detail through a close analysis of Shree Venkatesh films that entered into film production in the year 1996 initiated by Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni. It is SVF that has largely been responsible for transforming the film production scenario in Tollygunge. Their production company operates across multiple verticals within the media and entertainment industry that includes production, exhibition, promotion and distribution and has gradually become a brand name in Tollywood and has also come to be associated with a certain kind of Bengali film. SVF began as a distribution unit in eastern India releasing Bollywood big budget films like *Bombay*, *Josh*, *Company*, *Baghban*, *Munnabhai MBBS*, *Hungama*, *Khakee*, *Tere Naam*, *Bhoot*, *Murder*, *Waqt*, *Black* etc. and soon began to transform itself into the leading production house in Tollywood. They have their own cinema halls both in Kolkata and the suburbs of West Bengal, own a television channel (*Sangeet Bangla*) and are co-owners of television channels like Music India, Sangeet Bhojpuri, Music

India (UK), while they also produce prime time shows for other television channels like Star Jalsha. Certain marketing strategies by SVF like television promotion through trailers, songs or by stars of their films participating in talk shows and interviews, publicity photo shoots in leading English and Bengali dailies have been their stronghold for reaping higher benefits from film releases. Their financing and marketing strategies are a marked change from earlier practices in Tollygunge. By the year 2005 SVF had turned into one of the most successful and powerful production houses of Tollywood. However, if the *bhadralok* Bengali middle-class had shifted their attention to television, then the success of SVF begs the question about the factors that were responsible for this scenario. Much of SVF's powerful and successful status is due to their adoption of a unique business model, that of vertical integration. The implication of which is severe monopoly and control of the production-distribution-exhibition system, also resulting in excessive control over the industry. These are some of the issues that have been dealt with in detail in this chapter. .

The resurgence of the West Bengal economy has added to the media boom since 2001, and by 2004 there were several changes in the media industry that were a result of the change in the overall economic outlook, with new brands and companies setting up operations in Kolkata and its hinterland. New shopping malls opened up opportunities and the purchasing power of the middle-class increased. DTH technology began to enter the television market contributing to the growth of the television business. This was the time when experimentation with content and the standard of production underwent major changes, which audiences and the press claimed, placed Bengali channels on par with any other national level Television player (S. D. Basu 2005).

The print media's role in the construction of Tollywood in the public discourse is further important and has been analyzed in my third chapter. The urban *bhadralok's* preference and loyalty to English language newspapers mainly in Kolkata has a long history, and up until the year 2000, English newspapers carried stories and articles related to Bengali cinema in a limited way, with reviews of Friday releases and sometimes some interviews. The Bengali dailies also did the same, except that they carried debates over the loss of Bengali cinema's content with the films becoming

mere copies of Hindi ‘masala’ films. This changed to a large extent when supplements like *Calcutta Times* of *The Times of India* and *HT city* of *The Hindustan Times* started to look at the Bengali film industry beyond film reviews and interviews. As the ‘page 3’ format began to get popular and the content was not restricted to the Bollywood entertainment industry and its players alone, soon the word Tollywood started gaining currency and popularity, and urban readers started to get an insider’s view into the Bengali film industry. The inclusion of Tollywood celebrities, content, films, gossip, news, talk shows, interviews and regular promotion in Television programmes like *Sangeet Bangla’s Tollywood Reporter*, and FM radio stations popularized new stars, and introduced a convergence of media which I have argued is responsible for the construction of Tollywood by media and public discourses. Media convergence altered the perception of the public and the press to a large extent, and this is what I have perceived as a shift in attention from the focus on Bengali cinema to one that foregrounds the film industry-Tollywood.

My investigation and research for the dissertation led to more focused and detailed findings that enabled me to elaborate these micro-causes and dynamics which I have seen as emphasizing the shift of academic and press discourses on Bengali Cinema to the Bengali film and entertainment industry, Tollywood, a culture industry that I have attempted to lay out in detail with its unique characteristics that operate through various circuits. In this project my focus has also been to map the impact of globalization on the creation and movement of film and entertainment content, people's changing perceptions of the medium, the shifting skills of people involved in the making of this content, in order to bridge the gap between the so called industry people and the audience and to decipher questions of national cinema, and the hegemony of Bollywood as a homogenous category for Indian cinema and the overall culture industry. At the same time Tollywood has seemed poised for change – a revamping that several Tollywood celebrities and talents from the entertainment industry have voiced in order for it to become a better culture industry and institution.

I have ended this dissertation by commenting on the present scenario of the Tollywood industry, especially the issues of genre and films being classified into categories like ‘mainstream’ and ‘parallel’ that have become complicated and also ambiguous. There are several other emerging phenomena within the industry and the

socio-political and cultural context of the state of Bengal that perhaps is altering the business and functioning of the Tollywood industry that I have tried to hint at and take into account. Especially with reference to the notions of ‘class’ and the ‘mass’ audience that continue to make their presence felt within the present scenario of a resurgence narrative of Tollywood, heavily promoted by the Press. Lastly, it is the complexity, and the evolving dynamics of the Tollywood industry that has allowed me to end my dissertation in an open ended state so that it enables possibilities of further intellectual and academic engagements and newer interventions.

CHAPTER ONE

From Tollygunge to Tollywood

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 Bengaliness’ that seemed to give way to a crass and unimaginable imitation of Bombay cinema.

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.

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.

Therefore this chapter tries to explore the gradual changes in the form and composition of the films during the 1980s and investigates the journey from the Tollygunge film industry to its present form 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. 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'¹⁴ 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-Suchitra¹⁵ 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 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*, (the Bengali version of *Barsaat Ki Raat*), and later *Teen Murthi* (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 films¹⁶ were produced and released; but

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ "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.

¹⁶ Bengali Film Directory, Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre – 185-89.

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:

- 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 Choudhury titled “*Uttam Kumar er obhab tollyganj para ekhono bisesh ter paini*” (Tollygunge area has not been able to realize the loss of Uttam Kumar yet - my translation). Choudhury 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”¹⁷. 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 repression¹⁸. 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 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

¹⁷ See Ira Bhaskar. “The Indian New Wave” in Moti Gokulsingh and Wimal Dissanayake. Eds. Handbook of Indian cinemas. London: Routledge, 2013 (Forthcoming).

¹⁸ Ibid

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. Sukhen Das had a unique style of storytelling. He gave priority to the story and dialogue and drama 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.¹⁹ 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 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.

¹⁹ 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*.

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 Dinen Gupta. According to Dinnen 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 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 *Grihayuddhha* (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 lose 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 Bires Chatterjee, who consistently made films that were possibly termed as commercially successful films with social relevance. Both Roy and Chatterjee 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 Chatterjee are still remembered for their music and multi star cast, good drama and for being socially relevant. Bires Chatterjee'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 Chatterjee'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 Kareng* 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 *Pratikar* (1987) starring Chiranjeev, Victor Banerjee, Debashree Roy and Utpal Dutt. Films like *Prateek* (1988), and *Agnitrisna* (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 constructed²⁰

²⁰ In an essay titled “Sattar Dashaker Bangla Chhabi”/ “The Bengali Films of the Nineteen Seventies” Someshwar Bhoomik observed the deterioration of Bengali cinema in the late 1970s with films like

(Bhattacharya 2011; Raha 2004: 80-81; R. Roy 2001). This ‘crisis’ was not seen in any way in economic terms; rather the primary concern was the decaying quality of Bengali cinema²¹. 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 people beyond a certain class and section of audience. Popular films that

Amanush, *Ananda Ashram* or *Baba Taraknath* arguing that these films were devoid of the ‘clean entertainment value’ that was a characteristic 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).

²¹ 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).

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* mere 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 television²², 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

²² *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. “*Tollugunge 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?²³.

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. 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

²³ *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)

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 released²⁴. 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

²⁴ Author's interview with Haranath Chakraborty 17th October 2010, Kolkata.

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 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 Hindi 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 *Shasurbari 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 guranteed 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 ‘parallel 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.²⁵

²⁵ Author's interview with Swapan Saha on 15th October 2011, Kolkata, Technician Studios.

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 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 *Shasurbari 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 fashion²⁶, etc. were profusely covered. This was followed by reports of various business and economic collaborations and ventures that Tollywood experienced²⁷. 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*)²⁸. 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

²⁶ See Ruman Ganguly and Roshni Mukherjee “Tollywood has room for all”; *Calcutta Times*, Sunday 3rd July 2011

²⁷ 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 *Patahar Kirti*” (Mukherji 2009, 4)

²⁸ See Bureau Report ‘*Poran Jai....a copy, says court*’ *The Telegraph*, Tuesday, August 11, 2009.

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 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*'²⁹, 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

²⁹ 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:

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 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 I shall discuss in detail in my next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

The Consolidation of Tollywood and the Logic of Corporatization: A Case Study of Shree Venkatesh Films

Introduction

After 1991 when the BJP (*Bhartiya Janta Party*) government in India brought in economic liberalization in full swing, the Bombay film industry began to change its *modus operandi*. This was followed by the recognition of the film industry as an “Industry” by the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The Bombay film industry, now referred to as Bollywood, went through several internal industrial changes that had an impact on the content, visual aesthetics and overall mechanisms of the industry¹. It took another decade for the Bengali film industry to imbibe this change that was a result partly of this liberalization, and partly a consequence of the changed strategies of production, distribution, promotion, publicity and exhibition that came about with the formation of corporatized film production houses most exemplified by - Shree Venkatesh Productions Pvt. Ltd. (SVF henceforth) founded by two young entrepreneurs, Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni. This chapter will question, analyse and explore the success of SVF in order to elaborate upon the corporatized structuring of the industry that they brought about and that transformed the landscape of the Bengali film industry. Perhaps it is the vertical integration model of business they adopted that resulted in absolute monopoly and control of the production-distribution-exhibition machinery which offered severe competition and challenge to other production

¹ See Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, especially the Introduction: *What is “Bollywood”?* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2-4: “Bollywood” – a tongue-in-cheek term created by the English language press in India in the late 1970s – has now become the dominant global term to refer to the prolific and box-office oriented Hindi language film industry located in Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995). The Bombay film industry is aesthetically and culturally distinct from Hollywood, but as prolific and ubiquitous in its production and circulation of narratives and images As the dominant media institution within India, the Bombay film industry plays an important role in constructing and defining dichotomies like “traditional/modern,” “global/local,” “Western/Eastern” and categories such as “culture,” “nation,” and “Indian”. Outside India, the category “popular Indian cinema” tends to denote Hindi films produced in Bombay. The distinctive features of popular Hindi cinema – song and dance, melodrama, lavish production values, emphasis upon stars and spectacle – are common to films made in the southern Indian industries as well. Thus, “Bollywood” has become a shorthand reference not only to a specific industry, but also to a specific style of filmmaking within the industry which is aggressively oriented toward box-office success and broad audience appeal.’

companies in the state who found the growing monopoly threatening, and had to strategize to survive in the new film industrial environment.

SVF in Tollygunge: Contextualizing the Emergence of Tollywood

The Background

The entry of SVF into Bengali cinema was significant for causes I have already fleshed out in my first chapter. Even immediately after liberalization, the Bengali film industry was struggling to find space, place and position among an audience that crossed class boundaries. The time was critical in terms of economic viability because films made by film-makers like Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty were by now, completely disowned by the Bengali middle class *bhadralok* audience. Furthermore, even films like *Beder Meye Josna*, *Shami Keno Ashami* and *Baba Keno Chakor* that had been big hits before were losing their popularity among the audiences they had earlier targetted. The *bhadralok* audience consistently expressed their concern about the qualitative downfall of Bengali cinema as exemplified by the above-mentioned films. They accused these films of being celluloid copies of the jatra form of entertainment and were therefore, liked by semi-urban and rural audiences who loved jatra with its crude representations of Bengali ‘culture.’ The Bengali film industry was thus clearly in an acute crisis by the mid-1990s.

Another charge levelled at these films was that they featured actors from Bangladesh who did not have an audience in West Bengal. The prominent cinema hall chain of Minar-Bijoli-Chhabighar switched over to screen and exhibit Hindi films. This left the *bhadralok* audience in a state of audiovisual stasis that gave them no idea about where to go and watch ‘good’ Bengali films. During this time numerous actors, directors, writers and technicians shifted to television², as it had a larger and an instant

² *Anandalok* Magazine carried articles in the mid 90s about how Tollygunje was now a hub of television production and not so much an industry that focused on making films. “*Tollugunje ekhon T.V.gunje*” (Tollygunje 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 of Tollywood were more busy doing T.V serials, and that the studios of Tollygunje were all booked for

appeal among the middle and upper classes. Television content drew generously from literature and had become more financially conducive than films at that point. The biggest attraction was the volume of work it threw up for the talent in the industry. One could suddenly discern how the entire industry in Tollygunge began to cater to the television audience. The few directors who continued to make films for a certain class and section of audience were Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty, Sujit Guha and Bablu Sammadar.

SVF – Laying the Foundation

Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd was founded by two entrepreneurs, namely Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni. They began in the film distribution area in the early 90s, when they primarily distributed blockbuster Hindi films and a few Hollywood films. They founded Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd in 1995 to begin production of Bengali films. Their first Bengali feature film *Bhai Amar Bhai* (1996) featured Prosenjit and Chiranjit and was directed by Swapan Saha. Shrikant Mohta says that it was an accident, just a question in his mind – ‘why can’t I produce a feature film?’ that made him attempt production³.

However, Mohta realized that investing roughly a sum of 50 lakh was not something one should have done, without a clear vision and understanding of the process of film making. The years that followed – 1997, 1998 and 1999 were, according to Mohta, the worst years of their career and life. Every single film from their production house including *Tumi Ele Tai* (1999) directed by Prabhat Roy, *Sakhi Tumi Kar* (1996) and *Mayar Badhan* (1997) directed by Swapan Saha failed to click commercially.

But Shree Venkatesh Films continued to produce films directed by Swapan Saha though his films had not brought any financial revenues to them, perhaps for not being able to understand the audiences’ changing notions of tastes and preferences. Swapan Saha was also very popular in the rural areas for his kitschy films, and it is

television serial shootings and daily soap operas, and questioned the decline in the tradition of Bengali cinema and its future. (Author’s translation)

³ Author’s interview with SVF’s Shrikant Mohta, Kolkata, 18.10.2011.

possible that SVF chose Saha to simply make profits with the kind of films he was known for, without realizing that Saha's style of story-telling had faded away. SVF then attempted their first film with Tapan Sinha, an icon of Bengali cinema and a nationally recognized filmmaker. The film was *Ajab gayer ajab kotha* (1998). It was critically acclaimed but failed to click commercially. SVF was desperately looking for a blockbuster. They then decided to produce another successful director Haranath Chakraborty's big budget film *Shasur Bari Zindabad* (henceforth, SBZ) (2000). Till date, this film remains one of the highest grossers of all time.

Mohta mentions in his interview that they spent a small portion of money for marketing and publicity, which according to today's standards and industry norms does not even qualify as marketing and publicity expenditure. There was no English media at the time writing either about Tollywood or about Bengali cinema. The limited writing that prevailed was mostly in Bengali, derogatory in its comments and reviews and was strongly biased against popular cinema. After the success of SBZ, SVF decided to continue producing films directed by Haranath Chakraborty. There was no looking back for SVF after this film. All films produced after SBZ were blockbusters. Examples are *Dada Thakur* (Haranath Chakraborty, 2001), *Pratibad* (Haranath Chakraborty, 2001), *Saathi* (Haranath Chakraborty, 2002), *Champion* (Ravi Kinagi, 2003).

By 2005, most films produced by SVF were box-office successes, earning on an average, a minimum turnover of 25% to 40% over the total budget of the films. These figures and the sudden financial dynamism in the film and entertainment industry beg the question - what factors made them so successful? How were their films making profits? Where was the audience? In this chapter therefore I shall explore the success of SVF that seems due to—the vertical integration model of business that they have adopted resulting in absolute monopoly and control of the production-distribution-exhibition system making the survival of other production companies extremely competitive and challenging along with the implication of monopoly in the industry.

The Multiplex Invasion and SVF

In 2003, Calcutta built its first multiplex cinema in the heart of the city, the Inox Forum Mall at Elgin road. Multiplex theatres included in shopping malls had already begun to impact film exhibition in India. They helped to provide space for films that were different and catered to a niche audience⁴. Shrik Mohta of SVF says that this was a turning point; they knew they could go one step further and invest a higher amount in a film that was in many ways, unconventional and a first time for them.

By this time, in 2003, filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh had emerged as an able successor of the artistic and realistic directors of Bengali cinema. He had already won national and international recognition for making sensitive and women-oriented cinema. SVF invested Rs.2 crore in his new film *Chokher Bali*, unheard of at that time in Tollywood. *Chokher Bali* featured Bollywood's biggest female star Aishwarya Rai. The film immediately elevated SVF's status as producers within the industry and was taken note of by the media. SVF's ambition to reach out to a global audience was realised when it released the film in the US and UK with thirty prints. *Chokher Bali* received the National Award for the Best Regional Film in 2004, apart from being screened at the Locarno and Toronto International Film Festivals. It was the first film to be screened at the INOX Forum multiplex. The response was overwhelming, and it generated a lot of interest about the film and the screening space. But the film earned moderate revenue⁵. The success of *Chokher Bali* was followed by *Raincoat* (2003) SVF's first Hindi venture, with Aishwarya Rai and Ajay Devgan in the lead and directed by Rituparno Ghosh. *Raincoat* was 'inspired' by O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi". *Raincoat* earned the National award for the best Hindi film, but failed to bring returns at the box office.

⁴ See Aparna Sharma "India's Experience with the Multiplex" in *Seminar 525: Unsettling Cinema*, May 2003, 42-46

⁵ Author's interview with Subhasish Gangully, Regional Director, Eastern India INOX, (interviewed on 16.04.2012, Kolkata)

Conflicting Economics of Organizations and Government Initiative

Even after the two big steps SVF ventured into, with *Chokher Bali* and *Raincoat*, the Tollywood industry was not doing very well in terms of economics. This did have an impact on the budget, visual and technical prowess, and marketing and distribution strategies of the films being made around this time.

Ironically, when the Federation of Indian chambers of commerce and industries (FICCI) and Indian Chamber of Commerce were all set to promote Bengali films in national and international markets and the 8th Kolkata Film Festival 2003 registered an impressive turnout, Tollywood encountered a massive loss of around Rs 10 crore in 2002. The proposal of FICCI to build a Film City in Kolkata had also been scrapped by the state government on grounds of not having enough fund and infrastructure. Though various film organizations like Eastern India Motion Picture Association (EIMPA), FICCI and others were trying to tackle this crisis, distributors and producers saw little hope. Arijit Dutta, President, EIMPA (Sirkar and Konar, 2003: *The Times of India*) placed this problem in the following words:

I know the scenario is very bad. Bengali films are not doing well outside. Our new committee has earmarked a number of issues like amending archaic film laws, fighting cable and video piracy, subsidy on regional films, improving the infrastructure of studios etc. which need to be tackled urgently. We are sending our proposals to the government; A West Bengal Film Policy has been framed for promoting good Bengali films as well as boost the industry

Video piracy was also a major problem that continues to plague the industry till today. EIMPA had asked the police and the district magistrates to control piracy. With the proposal for a Film City being scrapped temporarily, EIMPA was trying its best to upgrade the existing infrastructure. The Film Market, set up during the 8th Kolkata Film Festival went unattended. "We need corporatization and multiplexes to promote Bengali films," mentioned Pritam Jalan, a leading producer and distributor of Tollywood (ibid). On the other hand, NFDC (National Film Development Corporation) set up 'Dhwani' a sound-video-film studio ("NFDC unveils hi-tech video studio", 2003: *Mid Day*). Responding to a request from the then West Bengal Chief Minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, the Sahara India group decided to set up a 400-acre film city on the eastern fringes of this metropolis to rejuvenate the moribund Bengali film industry and service film-makers from elsewhere in the country and

abroad. The Sahara India project had already acquired 50 acres of land from the state government (PTI, "Sahara to set up film city near Kolkata" 2004: *The Economic Times*).

Since the condition of the single screen theatres was a major concern for both distributors and exhibitionists, Priya cinema was one of the first single screen theatres to bring in change by modifying its interiors and making it more viewer-friendly. This was followed by Minar, Bijoli and Chhabighar, that introduced air-conditioning, comfortable seating and an improved sound system. Times were changing as Bengali cinema was no longer dependent on the rural and *mofussil* audiences anymore. Urban centers demanded better Bengali films, and the NRI Bengali audience was gradually waking up to the new phase that had just begun.

SVF perhaps played a major role in bringing about this change. Mohta in his interview mentions that they had a long-term vision; they wanted to be big players in the industry and sustain themselves as quality producers of content in Tollywood. The important factor here was to better and improve the quality and content of popular cinema, which according to Mohta is the backbone of any film industry. Popular films until early 2000 were not visually at par with Bombay cinema and lacked the slick sophistication that even reasonably low-budget Bollywood films had. Added to this was the fact that a big segment among directors involved in the making of popular cinema were being written off by the middleclass and the urban audience, and their target audience now remained confined to rural and the semi-urban masses.

Given the apathy of big banners like RD Bansal Films, Chhayabani, Aurora Film Corp., Daga Films, Damani Films and few individual film banners, the Bengali Film industry was in poor health for more than a decade. All initiatives earlier taken by the West Bengal Film Development Corp. had slowed down. Statistics showed that the state had spent nearly Rs.60 lakh on three feature films, but since three years these films remained canned. At the same time, the Rs. 3 crores that the Information and Cultural Affairs department had invested to assist some filmmakers had not been returned to the government by a single filmmaker. The colour laboratory Rupayan that the state had built in the early 90s for over a budget of Rs. 1 crore was also incurring a loss of Rs. 40 lakhs every year. State funded films directed by the likes of

Raja Sen, Nabyendu Chatterjee, Utpal Dutt and Goutam Ghosh suffered huge losses. This situation forced the state and the Cultural Affairs minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya to stop producing films and providing financial help to filmmakers (Mukherjee 1999). Only 40 films were made till about 2005 of which only 8 to 10 recovered costs. Directors like Buddhadev Dasgupta, a five times winner of the President's gold medal found his post-2005 films in deep trouble. They were not getting halls for release. It was only Rituparno Ghosh who even though he had become one of the most expensive filmmakers by 2006,, he was able to get producers like SVF, Planman Films and ABCL Corp to produce his films. But his films could not save his producers being burdened by debt despite the heavy promotion, Bollywood stars and gigantic marketing and promotional efforts.

The Competition - placing SVF in Perspective

The three directors who occasionally managed to produce blockbusters were Swapan Saha, Ravi Kinnagi and Prabhat Roy. Relatively new entrants (ones who made films that were abiding to the 'new-wave' or 'art-cinema' traditions and ideologies) filmmakers like Anjan Das, Subrata Sen and Abhijit Dasgupta managed to change the content and visual aesthetics to a considerable extent though this genre of films such as *Saanj Batir Roopkathara* (2002), *Iti Srikanto* (2004), *Faltu* (2005) and *Dwitiya Basanta* (2004), *Nil Nirjaney*(2003) and *Bibar*(2006) fared poorly at the box-office. Young filmmakers like Bratya Basu, Kaushik Ganguly and Suman Mukherjee attempted serious and off beat subjects for their films, but none recovered the invested money. Films that somewhat broke the jinx came from Prosenjit-starrers as Prosenjit was considered the one-man industry and fortune maker. The media dubbed his films as having too many commercial trappings and *masala* elements of the 80s and 90s Hindi cinema going by the label of 'shaggy-dog-story'. Sandip Ray and Goutam Ghosh managed to strike a balance in terms of revenue and critical appreciation with *Bombaiyer Bombete* (2003),(produced by ETV, Hyderabad) and *Abar Aranye* (2003) by reaching out to the global business market, through festivals and overseas releases. ("Cliched images that shun realism" 2006: *The Financial Express*).

What affected the industry was not just poor cinema halls and video piracy, not global invasion (foreign films in the last two decades didn't fair well at the box-office), but lack of authenticity, realism and good family drama. The state government lowered the amusement tax to 20% and provided subsidies to all theatre owners at Rs. 2 per ticket to boost Bengali cinema. The active participation of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and FICCI in Bengali cinema too failed to give it a face-lift.

Big Budgets, New Faces, *Juddha* and the Box Office

In this scenario, SVF raised the budget of *Bandhan* (2004) directed by Ravi Kinnagi. SVF's target was to reach out to a larger audience and improve the look, quality and story line of the film, move away from the cliché casting and introduce a new star pair Jeet and Koel Mallick- daughter of actor Ranjit Mallick. The film scored well at the box-office. But the story line and plot was outdated. The prudish patriarch (Victor Banerjee) who hates his Singapore-based businessman son-in-law Jeet and holds him responsible for his daughter Koel's death is a legacy reminiscent of the Chhabi Biswas-Uttam Kumar films. Victor Banerjee tried to portray the Chhabi Biswas archetype reducing it to more of a caricature of the former's performance.

As Jeet with his little son (master Angshu) try to win his father-in-law, a twin sister of Koel emerges suddenly about whose existence Jeet is completely unaware. Ravi Kinnagi tried to mix the old plot with a new twist, by introducing the twin sister. Though SVF and director Kinnagi brought in fresh talent and incorporated music by promising music director Jeet Ganguly, the score was forgettable. What possibly enthralled the audience and gave them a freshness quotient were the Singapore locales, a good marketing strategy and a departure from other films that shot song sequences in Hyderabad's Ramoji Film city or across the mountainous hill-scapes of North Bengal (Bhattacharya 2004). *Bandhan* was also one of the highest grossing films of 2004⁶.

⁶ Author's interview with Shrikant Mohta, SVF founder and owner, 18.10.2011, Kolkata.

***Juddha* – The first big hit of 2005**

For *Juddha* (Ravi Kinagi, 2005) SVF set its promotion and publicity machinery in motion much before its release (*The Telegraph* 2005). *Juddha*'s budget was pumped up to Rs. 2 crores (including print and Publicity). It became the first commercial and popular film in Tollywood to have such a high budget. *Chokher Bali* till then was the only film by SVF that had crossed the Rs.1 crore budgets in Tollywood. In an article titled "Big Clash Means Big Cash", in *The Telegraph* on August 29th, 2005, Reshmi Sengupta details *Juddha*'s success. She analyses how "it has taken the might of Mithun-Jeet, the sizzle of an item number and a sliver of style to deliver Tollywood's first big hit of the year".

When the box-office jinx had kept the Tollywood industry tripping for the six months before its release, it was the leading pair of Mithun and Jeet who teamed up along with Kinagi and SVF to vault the industry to success with *Juddha*. The film drew a full house for the first two weeks of its release and recorded an unprecedented initial of Rs. 1.2 crore in the first week, breathing fresh life into the industry. *Juddha* grossed more than Rs. 2.5 crore in a span of four weeks post its release. *Juddha* was released at Mitra, Bharati and Prachi in Kolkata. In the first week, *Juddha* ran to 90 per cent occupancy at Mitra, while Prachi and Bharati recorded 100 per cent collections.

Shrikant Mohta states that they never expected this kind of response from an action film; *Juddha* smashed all previous records in Tollywood, according to Mohta, earning profits at every theatre it ran. Other factors also complimented this success. One is the forty one-print release across the state whereas Bengali films until then had been released only with a maximum of twenty five to thirty prints. The ticket rates had also been increased by more than 50 per cent which added to the profits. The new rates at Bharati cinema hall were Rs. 20 for rear stall and Rs. 25 for balcony stalls. *Juddha* was a superhit, with house-full night shows over the weekends, a rare phenomenon those days, as Dipen Majumdar, owner of Mitra cinema confirmed. He believes that *Juddha* was the highest grosser in the past three-four years prior to this film.

Juddha's incredible box office success which was SVF's second attempt at action stands out as an example of the mystery that dictates the box office, for this was a film with a plot that seemed all wrong. Super-cop Mithun rounds up a local rowdy-Jeet but discovers the good soul hidden within. And just when the two men begin to bond over friendship, a corrupt MLA kills Mithun's wife Debasree to settle an old score. Here are excerpts from a review in *The Hindustan Times*.

The picturesque locales of Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad have been magically transformed into a fictitious Uttarpara. Lush swimming pools, discotheques where barely clad girls perform item numbers to the tune of an old Runa Laila number, beautiful mansions where Jeet and Barsha can dance..... *Juddho* opens with the camera focusing on a pair of boots that emits fire with every step that the wearer takes. He is none other than Mithun himself. The camera closes in on the other hero's feet as well, followed by focussing on the feet of Konkona (not Sharma) in her item number. To sum it up, *Juddho* is intended to launch Jeet as an action hero combined with the heartthrob of the whistling public, an openly aged and wrinkled Mithun Chakraborty. The songs are okay but the picturization and choreography leave room for improvement. *Juddho* however, promises to be a box office hit which is a sad reflection on the changing tastes of the post-modern Bengali (Biswas and Chatterjee, 2005: *The Times of India*).

Moreover, there was a fast, rhythm-based remix of a popular Bengali folk song *saadher lau* performed by Gladrags supermodel contestant Konkona Bakshi, in skimpy outfit, almost like what later came to be known as an item number. According to Mohta, *Juddha* was to stay long in the theatres and was targeted more towards the masses (Sengupta, 2005: *The Telegraph*).

***Subho Dristi* – Visual gloss and improved production**

Bengali films once known for their family oriented themes and a solid audience comprising the entire family had become a rare phenomenon since action genre films of Haranath Chakraborty became successful. To shift its focus somewhat, SVF co-partnered with Sooraj R. Barjatiya's Rajshri Productions of Bombay to produce Prabhat Roy's family and youth entertainer *Subho Dristi*, starring the hit pair of Jeet and Koel. *Subho Dristi* was a loose remake of the 1994 Rajshri blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* (henceforth HAHK). Starring Jeet, Koel Mullick and Parambrata Chatterjee, the film explores the story of two families bonding together during a wedding. It is also about the young lead pair who fall in love in the midst of

fun and laughter and make it to the wedding altar, similar to its Hindi counterpart HAHK, except for the twists and turns with the trauma (Das, 2005: *The Telegraph*).

The story developed a twist after the interval that differed from the Rajshri original. It involved the new husband diagnosed with terminal cancer and the wife's determination to fight death. The story catered to two central moods within the film – the first half a , frothy, song-and-dance, marriage-preparation routine with Koel getting screen space to show her versatility in several disguises and the second half a 'tear-jerking' tragedy-to-be where the two families are plunged into tragedy. But somewhat like *Savitri* of the 'Savitri-Satyavan' mythical story from Hindu mythology, she triumphs in bringing him back from the edges of certain death through her divine prayers and fasting restoring for the audience, feudal values of being the ideal '*pativrata*'(*dutiful*) wife who vows to fast until death unless her husband is cured completely.

For the publicity and promotion, SVF struck upon an original idea. A red card unfolded in the theatrical and television promos inviting everybody to a wedding on the 4th of November, 2005. It also gave a sneak peek into the nuptials, the glowing faces of the bride and the groom dressed in the best of attire. The jewellery was sponsored by Anjali Jewellers while Sarbari Dutta and Sudeshna Roy were responsible for the flashy and colourful costumes. For the first time, big names from the fashion and jewellery industry were linked to a commercial film.

The film reiterates the 'Bengaliness' and the popularity of Indian films with weddings and marriages as a backdrop, as weddings have always fascinated Indian viewers and more so Bengalis. *Subho Dristi* a love story that takes place against the backdrop of marriage, was a feel-good Bengali film along the lines of big Bollywood hits like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le jayenge* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* It entertained the audience after a long spell of different films. The sets were lavish following the tradition of Rajshri films and reminiscent of the interiors of the ongoing popular Hindi soap operas on Indian television.

According to Shrikant Mohta, the production design, by production designer Indranil Ghosh was one of the most important factors that contributed to the film's look and success. The budget for the production design was a thumping Rs. 20 Lakhs

(Sengupta, 2005: *The Telegraph*), a very high amount for a Bengali film. The lavish sets reflected the opulence and grandeur of a *zamindari* household bustling with relatives. The detailed visualization of Bengali wedding rituals drew female audiences into the theatres. *Subho Dristi* released during the annual Kolkata International Film Festival, in cinemas like Mitra, Prachi and Bharati, and swept the box-office for a record figure⁷.

Cushioning Flops with Mithun Chakraborty

In 2006, SVF produced Haranath Chakraborty's *Refugee* starring Prosenjit and South Indian actress Rambha. The film flopped and received severe criticism by critics in the print media. *Kranti* directed by Riingo followed which was also a big flop though it starred Jeet and Swastika. After this SVF tied up with veteran filmmaker Swapan Saha to make *M L A Fatakeshto*, starring Mithun Chakraborty, Debasree Roy and Koel Mallick. This film is also reported to be one of the highest grossers of all time. The film is said to have made a neat jackpot of Rs.4 crore – a repeat record of another film, *Coolie*, starring Mithun in 2004. *MLA Fatakeshto* has somewhat gained an iconic status for its overt rhetorical dialogues by NK Salil. Phrases like “I don't read the news, I make news,” (in the sequel *Minister Phatakeshto*) have come to stay.

MLA Faatakeshto made it to the national news channels for its unique release strategy just before the state elections that worked miracles both for the film as well as for its hero. The film takes off from the Anil-Kapoor starrer *Nayak*. Mithun takes over the reins of the state leadership for seven days, each day ear-marked for exposing corruption and rescuing the collapse in different sectors of public service, one day for the medical services, one day for the legal machinery and so on. The other line in the film, “*maarbo ekhaane, lash podbey shashaane*” (I'll bash you here and the body will fall in the crematorium there) has become part of Bengali slang in the state of West Bengal.

⁷ Author's interview with SVF owner Shrikant Mohta, 18.10.2011, Kolkata.

NK Salil mentioned that he would spice up the film's dialogue whenever he wrote for Mithun, since most of the films of Mithun were about him playing a messiah who fights against injustice (Nag, 2008: The Telegraph [i]). The film was released when the 2006 state assembly elections were round the corner, and the posters of the film with larger-than-life figures of Mithun were generously splashed across the walls of Bengal. *MLA Fatakeshto* seemed to be a sure shot victory, and swept the box-office, breaking all records in Tollywood almost as a precursor to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's the then CPM (the ruling party in Bengal then for the last 30 years) party leader and Chief Minister's return to the Writers Buildings. *MLA Fatakeshto*, was a film about a *goon-turned-neta* (politician) and the people's saviour, who teaches a tough lesson to corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and the police, re-establishing justice. Mithun's character in the film has a mentor, a chief minister who showed striking physical similarity with the current chief Minister of West Bengal. Released with an unprecedented 61 prints across Bengal four days before the state went to polls, *MLA Fatakeshto* outdid *Juddha*, the highest grosser of 2005⁸.



The hype generated by the film had much to do with its timing and the Election Commission (EC) directive that wiped other pre-poll graffiti off the state walls. The poster publicity was accordingly designed, helping generate a lot of hype around the film. At the end of the fourth week of its release *MLA Fatakeshto* had

⁸ Author's interview with SVF owner Shrikant Mohta, 18.10.2011, Kolkata.

touched Rs.2.5 crore against *Juddha*'s Rs. 1.75 crore. Shrikant Mohta mentioned that there was no love story in the film, yet people liked it. The audience profile for this kind of film had changed of which many were non Bengalis (Staff Reporter, "Filmi MLA sweeps stakes, CPM style", 2006: *The Telegraph*).

The story was inspired by the Anil Kapoor-Rani Mukherjee-starrer *Nayak*, (S.Shankar, 2001) and tracked seven days in the life of a goon who plays the political game to become the home minister and then turns everything topsy-turvy. However, Mithun did not give all the credit for the film's success to its political colour. He contended that the film was well-shot and had punchy dialogue, with lots of songs and dance, which are perhaps the quintessential factors responsible for the success of commercial potboilers (Staff Reporter, "Filmi MLA sweeps stakes, CPM style", 2006: *The Telegraph*).

***I Love You*, entry of new Faces in Tollywood**

The following year SVF introduced two new faces to the Tollywood industry, actor Dev and actress Payel in *I Love You* directed by Ravi Kinnagi, who consistently gave hits to the SVF banner. The film was inspired by the Telugu film *Nuvvostanante Nenoddantana* (Prabhu Deva, 2005). A typical feudal romantic love story bearing a striking resemblance with Hindi films like *Maine Pyar Kiya*, *Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya* and *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, the story revolves around a farmer Indra (Tapas Paul) and his younger sister Pooja (Payel), who live in a village. Indra is always protective of his much loved daughter-like-sister. Indra's childhood friend Shantanu (Rajatava Dutta), a rich businessman's daughter, Varsha (Paoli) invites Pooja to her house to attend her wedding, where she befriends Rahul (Dev), Shantanu's London-returned son.

From then on, it is a predictable, insipid plot of a love story. Rahul's father is strictly against his son marrying his farmer friend's village sister. Rahul finally wins over the heart of his father and Indra who make Rahul go through several daunting, tough and challenging tasks to test his love and win his sister. They want him to be able to support her on his own and not because he is the son of a rich father.

The film's promotion was heavy, with Dev and Payel marketed as the new poster boy and girl of Tollywood. Additional factors like romantic songs mainly sung by Bollywood playback singers added to the film's success⁹. Though critic Arnab Bhattacharya evaluated the film poorly (three out of ten), he went on to acknowledge

... the aggressively promoted new pair, Dev and Payel, does not fare badly either. Tapas, too, puts in a reasonably good performance. The snazzy sets along with the richly dressed up dancing duo, up the glitz quotient (Bhattacharya [a], 2007: *The Telegraph*).

SVF and the *Sangeet Bangla* Benefits

The same year, SVF co-partnered with Media Worldwide and launched the first 24-hour National Bangla film music channel, though within a short period of its launch the channel's identity was mainly marked by the heavy promotion of Bengali films and its music before their release. *Sangeet Bangla* provided a unique platform to SVF exclusively so that it could publicize its productions on air 24x7 and worldwide¹⁰. One of the most popular programmes of the channel is a show called 'Tollywood Reporter' that deals with every kind of news around Tollywood movies, music and television industry that includes 'first look' stories, panel interviews of about-to-be-released films, single star and director interviews, headliners and gossip. For the first time, a Bengali production house had created a television channel to ensure pre-release publicity and promotion on its own channel

The Entry of Digital Projection in West Bengal

In 2008 SVF ventured into a new area in distribution by pioneering digital projection of Bengali films in exhibition houses. This initiative introduced a digital cinematic experience for audiences in West Bengal for the first time on a larger scale catering to Category B and Category C towns as well. Digital Cinema marks a revolutionary change in the way movies are distributed, delivered, and projected in

⁹ See Kushali Nag's report "32 weeks of right mix", where she mentions about *I Love You*: "On the one hand, there's the year's biggest grosser *I Love You* (the film's producers claim it has touched the Rs 4 crore mark)", *The Telegraph*, Friday August 31st, 2007.

¹⁰ <http://www.sangeetbangla.com/aboutus.asp>

cinema halls with high quality, high definition, and powerful and flexible digital projection systems. Digital prints can be distributed via physical media such as external Hard Drives and/or Satellite instead of conventional 35mm film reels. With the mission of digitizing all the theatres in Eastern India, Qube-Digital had successfully installed digital projection of films into theatres. This not only improved the quality of film projection but also gave a lease of a fresh life to the almost dead, defunct and discarded cinema halls. Today, Qube-Digital has achieved 'digitization' of over two hundred cinema halls across West Bengal, making it one of the fastest rollouts of digital cinema anywhere in India. The knowhow involves a high-end computer server and a digital projector linked to a high-speed satellite internet network. The set-up provides high quality video projection and saves exhibitor celluloid prints costing around Rs 50,000 per print¹¹ :

Earlier, we used to release films first in Calcutta and then in the suburbs. By then, the hype around a film would have fizzled out. But with Qube we can release a film all over Bengal. The technology is cost-effective too. While we end up spending Rs 45,000 per print, one needs to shell out just Rs 15,000 for a Qube digital projection.... We've already taken it to over 40 theatres across Bengal and we plan to extend the list shortly, mentioned Vishnu Mohta of Shree Venkatesh Films ("Digital shows the way", 2008:*The Telegraph*).

SVF released *Love and Chirodini Tumi Je Aamar* in the Qube mode. "In terms of picture quality and sound, these films could now be at par with Bollywood", added Shrikant Mohta¹² Tollywood as an industry was gradually gaining momentum with the transformation of the films' looks and production design, music, costumes and locations, and to an extent with the introduction of new stars and actors. SVF continued to experiment and keep the promotion and marketing mission high on their agenda. In 2007, SVF collaborated with Swapan Saha to produce a sequel to *MLA Fatakesto*, a first time in Tollywood-*Minister Fatakesto*. Mithun had emerged as one of the most bankable stars in Tollywood after his mega hit with SVF and Swapan Saha-*MLA Fatakesto*. *Minister Fatakesto* had a bigger budget, slicker sets, smart fight sequences and a shocking makeover of Mithun who rapped an item number on a psychedelic set. The team that produces a film with Mithun in the lead, be it Swapan Saha or Haranath Chakabarty, deserve credit for their ingenuity in exploiting the actor's tremendous popularity among the masses. Mithun, on his part, teamed up with

¹¹ SVF website: <http://www.venkateshfilms.com/Digital-Cinema>

¹² Author's interview with SVF owner Shrikant Mohta, 18.10.2011, Kolkata.

his favourite dialogue writer N.K. Salil, who wrote the story to suit his screen persona and concoct the lines that invest his screen image as the action-icon of all time. Designer Agnimitra Paul created the bizarre costumes exclusively for Mithun that perhaps put Bollywood's Govinda in the shade. In fact, the Mithun Chakravarty brand of cinema was possibly a virtual industry unto itself that fitted neatly into the larger Tollywood workshop famous for producing more sober, and urban theme driven *Anuranan* at one end, soppy and sentimental Hrishikesh Mukerjee copy like *Aloye Phera* in the middle and films starring Prosenjit and Jeet at the other end.

There was little progression in the storyline from its prequel and the story was too predictable and repetitive. However, the film had a good opening in the first week, but gradually the revenues began to fall and after its run for more than two weeks the film could somehow manage to recover Rs. 2 crore. It was evident that Tollywood probably needed more time to accept sequels to such films, mentioned Mahendra Soni of SVF (Nag, 2007: *The Telegraph*(iii)). The film was released with 50 prints, and had a budget of Rs. 2.5 crore (ibid). N.K. Salil who had written the script and dialogue for both films, commented that the character of Fatakesto failed to meet the audience's expectations in the sequel, and said:

Maybe people expected something like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, where the main character is completely different from *Munna Bhai MBBS*. *Minister* begins where *MLA* ends. There was perhaps a communication gap between the makers and the audiences (Nag, 2007: *The Telegraph*(iii)).

The dialogues were weaker too in comparison to *MLA*, even after newer additions in *Minister*, like "*Fatakesto Khobor dekhe na, khobor pore na, khobor toiri kore*" (Fatakesto doesn't watch news, neither does he read news, he actually creates news) that unfortunately had little impact and popularity as compared to its prequel's cult line "*marbo ekhane laash porbe Shoshane*". Though SVF did have plans to make a sequel of *Minister Fatakesto*, it never happened.

Competition setting in Tollywood

With SVFs constant efforts to boost the standard of Bengali cinema and its revenues, other independent producers woke up to the phenomenal success of films

starring Mithun. Many other directors and producers hiked their budget to live up to the standards of SVF films in terms of lavish mounting, starcast, music and releases. *Tulkalam* (Haranath Chakraborty, 2007) was produced by Pijush Saha, an independent producer on an estimated budget of Rs. 3 crores. Earlier, when SVF had produced *Juddha* with Jeet and Mithun, which was a record grosser, director Anup Sengupta directed *Mahaguru* with Mithun, jointly produced by Anup Sengupta, Nimai Panja and Piya Sengupta on a big budget of Rs. 1.25 crores, possibly to compete with SVF's high budget standards. *Satyameba Jayate* (2008) a film by Milan Bhowmik, produced by Ashok Kumar Bed and Soma Bhowmik was made on an estimated budget of Rs. 1 crore plus. Swapan Saha also managed to raise the budget of his Mithun starrer *Tiger* in 2006 to Rs. 1 crore and above from independent producer Nishpal Singh. Debutant director Raja Mukherjee's *Bidhaatar Lekha* (2007) starring Jeet and Hrshita Bhatt was made with a budget of above Rs. 2 crore, but the film managed to garner only about Rs. 50 lakh, competing with producer Pijush Saha's *Tulkalam* (2007) starring Mithun. Ashok Dhanuka's *Bondhu* couldn't break even though the film starred Prosenjit and Swastika and was shot with an approximate budget of Rs. 2 crore. Giving tough competition to SVF were Anjan Dutt's *The Bong Connection* (2007, produced by Moxie Entertainment) , made with a budget of less than Rs. 1 crore and Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Anuranan* (2007). *The Bong Connection* recovered its cost within three weeks of its release possibly being appreciated by its targetted audience, the young urban Bengalis, who wanted to watch new-age Bengali cinema in multiplexes. *Anuranan* was also made with a budget of Rs. 2 crore, shot partly in London, it managed to earn a profit of Rs. 65 lakh. The film was produced by DVD and VCD makers and distributors Shemaroo. The vice-president of Shemaroo explained that they had done extensive market research before venturing into Bengali cinema and found out that *Anuranan* would do extremely well in the multiplexes and the overseas market (Nag, 2007: *The Telegraph* [iv]). In 2007, the industry finally woke up to the idea of proper marketing and strategising. Films were being released with a healthy gap between releases to ensure optimum return, mentioned Mahendra Soni of SVF (Nag, 2007: *The Telegraph*). The trend of producing big budget films started by SVF had become the norm for Tollywood because small budget films like *Aloye Phera*, *Kaal* and *Chakra* flopped; this was also

a view held by Bijay Khemka, president, Eastern India Motion Pictures Association (ibid).

“Regional Inspirations”

It was not unusual to see Bengali films made in the last decade (mainly during mid 80s to mid 2000s) being inspired and copied consistently from successful popular Hindi and South Indian films. In 2008, SVF’s second venture with Dev, the new hero whom they launched in *I Love You*, was *Premar Kahini*, directed by Ravi Kinagi, and the film seemed like a *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* revisited. The film’s music went on to become a chartbuster, and was heavily promoted through SVF’s television channel *Sangeet Bangla*. Dev’s career certainly got bolstered with this film. *Premar Kahini* was a love story of Akash and Barsha(Koel). It is Akash’s journey to win over Barsha’s heart as she is already engaged to Goutam (Jisshu Sengupta), and in between their love is Barsha’s tough colonel father (Ranjit Mullick). Akash tries to win over Barsha’s strict father by going jogging with him everyday, unlike feeding pigeons as in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*. Dev was perhaps able to do all the acts of the romantic hero, fitting ditto to the archetype of Sharukh Khan’s lover boy image, and impressed both Barsha and the audience. The film managed to include all the elements of a commercial entertainer from the SVF banner, melodrama, fights and action, tragedy, comedy, singing and dancing around picturesque locations and a lot of rain to add to the mood. T. Naidu from the south captured Hyderabad and Shakleshpur in Karnataka beautifully through his cinematography, and Jeet Gangully’s music for this film is to date a popular album, with the title track being one of the most remembered and hummed songs of contemporary Tollywood (Nag, 2008: *The Telegraph* [vi])

The BIG Picture and the Bollywood Connection

Despite the bright ray of hope SVF films brought through their box office success, the real picture was different. Tollywood had yet to unleash its full potential.

The size of the prospective Bengali audience is estimated to be high, considering that the Bengali speaking population is the fifth largest in the world. The Mckinsey report(2006) states that the Bengali film industry in terms of size ranks very low within the framework of the \$6-billion Indian film industry. Hindi films captured a 30% market share followed by releases in Tamil(20%), Telugu (18%), Malayalam (10%) and Kanada (9%), other languages, including Bengali made up for the rest 13% (“Poor revenue plagues Bengali Film industry”,2007: *The Financial Express*).

A special session was organised by the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce and Eastern India Motion Pictures Association to discuss the revival of Bengali cinema on May 16th , 2007, where Goutam Ghose lamented that the Bengali film industry was far behind the growth rate compared to Bollywood and the southern industry. The number of Bengali films released over a year was still limited to thirty eight-forty, which could not generate more than Rs.50 crore revenue a year, though the potential viewership is at least five times more than that of Telugu and Tamil viewers. The session discussions concluded that Bengali films needed to adopt newer modern technology that would help reduce cost and improve quality. Of the five hundred fifty odd cinema halls in West Bengal only fifty two theatres were properly digitized with upgraded projection facilities till 2007 (ibid). EIMPA executive committee member Shyamal Dutta mentioned that unless Bengali films were not shot and processed in Bengal, the filmmaking could never attain the status of an industry. Though Bengali films were released in West Bengal, they were mostly shot and processed in the South. A clearly chalked out plan and agenda was necessary to professionalise the Bengali film industry to enable it to pitch in more investments, bank credit and insurance safeguards (ibid).

There were reports about Tollywood’s attempt to adopt a radical new strategy to churn out Hindi films, or at least have actors and stars from Bollywood in Bengali films, perhaps to prevent the complete fading away of the industry. The number of films released per year was was stagnant for almost ten years at forty. Joy B. Ganguly and Arindam Sil of Moxie Entertainment (P) Ltd. said that most contemporary Tollywood actors neither had any poster value nor star value. Besides this, most actors sustained themselves with work in *Jatra*. (*Jatra* is the traditional folk theatre-in-the-round performed through a journey into villages and mofussil towns during the

winter season that has an entertaining blend of action, songs, dances, and so on) According to veteran filmmaker Buddhadev Dasgupta:

in the Hindi film industry, they have a separate league of actors for soaps and serials, and in Bengal the era of good actors had come to an end, there was hardly anybody available to do justice to good scripts, the state was that of a nightmare (V. Sengupta, 2007: *The Telegraph*).

Going by the age- old logic that the Bollywood or the Mumbai connection would give Bengali films an assured return and a higher saleability factor, Tollywood had begun making Hindi and Bengali films with talent from Bollywood. The makeover in the industry was evident with the use of improved camera sets, costumes, sound and choreography due to a considerable hike in budgets, possibly enabled to a large extent by SVF initiatives.

Goutam Ghose's *Yatra* (budget Rs. 4 crore) starring Rekha and Nana Patekar, produced by SPS Arts and Entertainment, and Moxie Entertainment (P) Ltd.'s Hindi film *BBD*, directed by Anjan Dutt featuring Naseeruddin Shah, Kay Kay Menon, Jimmy Shergil, Sonali Kulkarni and Rituparna Dasgupta, allowed the budget of overall Tollywood ventures to take a quantum jump, the average budget in 2007 being a minimum of Rs. 1 crore, compared to the earlier average of Rs. 10-20 lakh. Rituparno Ghosh's *Utsav* had a budget of Rs. 20 Lakh in 2001, and Nabyendu Chatterjee's *Souda* in 1997 was made for Rs. 9 Lakh (ibid). Locations in Bengali films strongly showed a shift with locations in the US, London, Singapore, Bangkok and Dubai. For the first time, films looked trendier, sleeker and pulled the audience into the theatres. This was mandatory because Bollywood films were being shot abroad and even television had exposed the audience to a whole new world of visual variety and foreign locations.

The BIG Budget

An interesting case study titled "4 more such Tolly-Blockbusters could be made with Saawariya's promo budget"¹³ by *The Telegraph-t2*'s Kushali Nag on 6th november, 2007 throws light on the Tollywood filmmaking scenario. Tollywood's

¹³ http://www.telegraphindia.com/1071106/asp/entertainment/story_8517766.asp

average budget was well below the Rs 1-crore mark. For a small film with newcomers, producers hesitated before shelling out more than Rs 50-70 lakh. For a big film with a big star cast (e.g. Mithun Chakraborty or Prosenjit), the budget would be raised to Rs 1.25 - Rs 2 crore. Producer Nishpal Singh, whose Surinder Films made *Hero* and *Ghatak* with Jeet and Koel, remarked that:

Star presence determines how fat the budget will be. With Mithunda in a film, it is never less than Rs 1.25 crore. Of course there are exceptions like *I Love You*, which introduced newcomers Dev and Payel and had a budget of Rs 2 crore,

About twenty per cent of the total budget was being allotted for artistes, and eight to ten per cent for the director and technicians. The film shoot would use up forty five-fifty per cent of the budget and the producer's budget came under serious strain if Tollywood decided to go places (though the farthest it had gone till recent times of low-cost airfares had been Singapore-Thailand or Dubai, for *Ghatak*, *Hero*, *Bandhan* and *I Love You*). The far more popular shooting spots were Hyderabad's Ramoji Film City, shopping malls, Aquatica (a water park in Kolkata) and the SRFTI campus in the suburbs of Kolkata. Around Rs 4-5 lakh was kept aside for post-production. Editing accounted for Rs 1 lakh, dubbing another lakh, mixing Rs 40,000, background score Rs 75,000, optical work Rs 1 lakh and special effects Rs 50,000. Often the producer doubled as distributor, saving on distribution costs. Screening rates depended on the theatre. If the rent was Rs 1.4 lakh a month for the Minar-Bijoli-Chhabighar chain and Rs 1.7 lakh a month for Prachi-Darpana-Bharati, it was Rs 4 lakh per month at Priya.

Most producers worked on a fixed budget for the minimum visibility needed, which was about 10 per cent of the total cost. So, the publicity cost could range from Rs 5-7 lakh to Rs 20-40 lakh for big banner Tollywood films which would however be miniscule compared to Bollywood. But the bigger the name, the smaller would be the publicity budget. Mahendra Soni of SVF mentioned that

We spent only Rs 25 lakh to promote *Minister Fatakesto*, which had a budget of Rs 2.5 crore. For a Mithun film, a few posters a week before release were enough to pull in the crowd, But while launching newcomers, we go for aggressive publicity. The strategy is to ensure 99 per cent footfall in the first three days, after which it is word-of-mouth. We generated a lot of hype before *I love You*. The SVF spent Rs 40 lakh out of the film's Rs 2 crore budget on promotion. In case of a romantic film, the music release was generally done in a big way, followed by TV promos. But an action film was not always so lucky — it had to make do with some radio and TV promos (Nag, 2007: *The Telegraph* (V))

The countdown to *The Bong Connection*, Anjan Dutt's Rs 2.25 crore box-office hit, was marked by out-of-the box planning. Soumya Ganguly of Moxie Entertainment expressed that:

When we sat with the post-production work of *The Bong Connection*, we realised that the film's USP was its music. That set the tenor of the publicity. We decided to hold live concerts at Barista and Cafe Coffee Day outlets. We also had premieres in Delhi and Mumbai, apart from Calcutta. We spent Rs 25 lakh out of Rs 2.5 crore for the promotion and we are happy with the results. (ibid)

The channels of communication were also beginning to grow beyond the conventional mix of television-radio-billboard-poster-print advertisements. Dev and Payel of *I Love You*, for instance, hit suburban roads to get up close to their target audience. *The Bong Connection* road-shows invaded college and university campuses, even after its release.

The changing nature of content and treatment in Bengali cinema

Monaik Biswas in his essay "Changing Scenes" for *Sarai Reader 2008: Fear*, focused on a few films from the last few years that drew from the 'spectacle' and 'sensation' of certain political street events that had implications directly and indirectly on popular public imagination, that inspired directors like Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty and Raj Chakraborty to make films that represented these political expressions (Biswas 2008). Biswas looked at films like *MLA Fatakesto* (Swapan Saha, 2006), *Minister Fatakesto* and *Tiger* (Swapan Saha, 2007), and Haranath Chakraborty's *Tulkalam*, and the more recent box-office super hit *Chirodini tumi je amar* (*You'll be mine for ever*, Raj Chakraborty, 2008), produced by SVF. All these films drew generously from the contemporary political scenario of mass protests, spectacle and sensation in their narratives from Nandigram, Shingur, Lalgarh to the Rizwanur Rahman¹⁴ incident.

¹⁴ Kushali Nag's 'Spot light'

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080809/jsp/entertainment/story_9666418.jsp

See Shoma A Chatterji's review on <http://www.upperstall.com/films/2008/chirodini-tumi-je-amaar>

Reshmi Sengupta's review

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080820/jsp/entertainment/story_9713945.jsp

Biswas comments that these films make a consistent effort to break free from the *bhadralok* aesthetics of Bengali Cinema and popularize a kitschier, *bazaar* or street culture in their narratives and treatment, drawing from the present political upsurges in the streets of Kolkata and elsewhere in Bengal¹⁵. Reshmi Sengupta's review of *Chirodini tumi je amar* in *The Telegraph* on August 20th, 2008, was titled "Love in the time of hate"- making a clear connection to the Rizwanur-Priyanka tragic love story, though she analyses that the connection to the real life incident was limited to a rich girl marrying a poor guy, much against her family's wishes. But the film does not deal much with the police and political connections that were important in the real life story. Similar in plot line to *Qyamat se Qyamat Tak* (Mansoor Khan 1988) and several other tragic teen love stories that have been seen on Indian screen, *Chirodini*....(mainly 'inspired' from Tamil film *Kaadhal* (2004), by Balaji Shaktivel) was Raj Chakraborty's directorial debut. Along with SVF, he managed to make a lengthy film packed with entertainment, barring the tackiness, sloppiness and meaningless melodrama typical of mainstream Tollywood.

Chakraborty candidly agreed that his film was

loosely based on the Rizwanur-Priyanka case, it is a real story and there are glimpses of the tragedy. But it is also about all those teenagers who make mistakes; who do not know what to do when they fall in love, it will be a lesson for youngsters to not get carried away, when in love, it will also be a lesson for the older generation" (Nag, 2008: *The Telegraph* [vii]).

The film launched two newcomers Rahul and Priyanka, with a story line that was crisp, smart and racy with detailed shot divisions, life-like realistic situations and convincing characters performed by a whole range of wonderful actors.

The film is set in Siliguri where Pallabi (Priyanka) meets motor mechanic Krishna (Rahul) on her way to school. They fall in love and elope to get married. Pallabi is the daughter of a rich businessman who has underworld connections. Krishna is a school drop out living in a shanty. Their runaway marriage does not have Pallabi's family's approval. The father and his goons set out on a chase to hunt down the pair and separate them. Krishna and Pallabi land up in Kolkata. They take shelter

¹⁵ See Hemchhaya De's "Filming Ferment Tollywood has a new buzzword — political films that capture Bengal's state of political unrest in recent times. Hemchhaya De goes behind the scenes to find out what fuelled the trend", http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110515/jsp/7days/story_13983689.jsp

in a shabby old mess hostel full of bachelor boarders, with the help of Krishna's friend Ali (Rudranil).

Chakraborty's eye for detail and realistic production design (Preetam Choudhury), locations, costumes, and picturization of song sequences (cinematographed by Premendra Bikash Chaki), with fresh music by Jeet Ganguly and an item number by Dev probably worked perfectly to create the film's immense popularity. All this led to the film turning out to be one of the highest grossing Bengali films in Tollywood over the last two decades. *Chirodini...* was produced with a budget of Rs. 1 crore. The overall gross turnover was more than Rs. 2.5 crore, and it was released with more than 40 prints. Shrikant Mohta still believes that it was the turning point in their career. He believes that it is difficult to achieve the kind of phenomenal success and popularity that *Chirodini...* received and earned¹⁶

The pervading influence of 'foreign locations' in Bengali cinema

Inspired from Allu Arjun's *Bunny*, a 2005 Telugu film, Raj Chakraborty's second film with SVF was *Challenge*, an action-comedy starring Dev and new comer Subhashree. The film was marked for its stylization and attitude and catapulted Dev's career to new heights. *Challenge* managed to avoid cliches like excessive howling, screaming and hysteria popularly associated with romantic-action genres in Tollywood. Though the plot and storyline of the film was not original, the treatment by Chakraborty made the film different and engaging. The film was about an obsessed father who is the boss of local goons. His mission is to protect his daughter Subhashree from the male gaze. Dev and Subhashree meet and fall in love, from where the film takes a turn and becomes more of a mission of the hero to win the father's heart than to win it with brain and brawn. *Challenge* actually belonged to Dev, and his character, attitude and look were specially designed to give him an extra edge and panache (Nag, 2009: *The Telegraph* [viii]).

The film also roped in SVF's most trusted music director Jeet Ganguly, who composed a hard-rock style kirtan '*bhajo gourango...*', where Dev dances with

¹⁶ Author's interview with SVF's Shrikant Mohta 18.10.2011, Kolkata.

foreign background dancers, shot in an up-scale Mumbai studio, stylized as a music video. The other songs were jazzy and grundgy (M. Das,2009: *The Telegraph*). *Challenge* was cinematographed by Mumbai-based Shomak Mukherjee, who used a super 35mm camera and hi-tech Arriscope 435 camera for the song and action sequences, a first in Tollywood (Nag,2008: *The Telegraph* [ix]). The film was extensively shot in Dubai, Australia and New Zealand, generating ample hype and curoosity among the audience. The promotions were aggressive, ranging from pre-release publicity, through photo shoots, actor-director interviews, and repeated song trailers in Sangeet Bangla. *Challenge* also ran in multiplexes and drew substantial footfall.

The Bengali film industry picked up the trend of foreign locations begun by SVF and the biggest competition was from SVF's toughest rival Ashok Dhanuka of Dhanuka Brothers Private Ltd. (earlier Easkay videos). Dhanuka produced Tollywood's costliest film ever *Bhalobasha Bhalobasa* (2008), directed by Ravi Kinnagi, starring newcomer Hiron and Shrabanti. The film had a budget of more than Rs. 3 crores and was shot in Vienna and Salzburg in Austria. "In Dreamland" Kushali Nag mentions three films that flaunted foreign locations (2008: *The Telegraph*). The first one among these is *Mon Mane Na* (Ravi Kinnagi) produced by Nishpal Singh, made with a budget of Rs. 1.5 crore, with two song sequences shot in Singapore. Singh believed that since most Bollywood films were shot in Europe and America, foreign locations added an extra shine to the film.

The second one was *Shukno Lanka* directed by Gaurav Pande and produced by Mumbai Mantra-the production wing of Mahendra and Mahindra. It was a Bengali film shot for the first time in Berlin, capturing the Berlin International Film Festival. The budget was close to Rs. 2.5 crore and the Berlin shoot took 20 per cent of the total budget.

The third one was *Lakshyabhed* directed by Raj Mukherjee and produced by Pankaj Agarwal, starring Swastika Mukherjee, Rachana Banerjee, Tapas Pal shot in Pattaya in Thailand, on a budget of Rs. 65 lakh. The three-day Pattya shoot cost about Rs. 5 lakh. Ashok Dhanuka remarked that the Bengali audience was curious about the release of *Bhalobasha Bhalobasha* as it had been shot in unexplored locations like

Austria. So he chose Pattaya in Thailand because no film in Tollywood was ever shot there; it most certainly added to the variety and novelty (“Europe Calling”, 2009: *The Telegraph*).

The print media which was otherwise very critical and condescending about Bengali cinema and the industry, for the first time in the recent past acknowledged the growth and improvement that could be sensed around the years when SVF had clearly made its presence felt, and emerged as one of the strongest and most powerful production houses in Tollywood. The year 2008 witnessed one of the biggest outputs of Bengali films, with more than 30 films made within the budget range of Rs. 50 lakh to Rs. 1 crore. most of which broke even within two months of their being released and continued to run successfully in suburbs. The factor that made the public and the press rise was the publicity and marketing thrust that production houses invested in during this time. *Bhalobasha Bhalobasha*, one of the most expensive Bengali films till 2008, had its own website to mainly target the urban audience, that cost around Rs. 20,000 to launch, another first time in Tollywood.

Production houses like Nishpal Films (it later became Surinder films Pvt. Ltd.), Moxie Entertainment, T Sarkar, Mumbai Mantra and Screenplay Films in association with Shemaroo Videos, were investing in youth-centric films and concentrating on the glamour quotient by making foreign locations mandatory.

The Marketing and Promotion Mix

With extensive marketing, song promotion, television promos, print and radio publicity, SVF managed to earn 55 per cent of its revenue in the first week of its release. The Feluda film *Tintoretto Jishu* directed by Sandeep Ray, released with Sharukh Khan starrer *Rab ne Bana Di Jodi* but managed to command equal occupancy across the multiplexes, and at more or less similar ticket pricing. *Tintoretto Jishu* made on a budget of Rs.1.5 crore, released with 29 prints managed to do noteworthy business in the first week of its release, compared to *Rab ne Bana Di Jodi*, that released with 1200 prints worldwide. Sumita Bhattacharjee of T Sarkar Productions managed to bag sponsorship from Shalimar Coconut Oil, while telecom

service provider Aircel was the communications partner. Star Ananda and Radio Mirchi were media partners, with Kingfisher as the spirits sponsor and ilovekolkata.in as website partner. Rituparno Ghose's first Tollywood English-language film *The Last Lear* starring Amitabh Bachhan and Preity Zinta, produced by Planman Motion Pictures was made with a steering budget of Rs. 11 crore. But the film ran in theatres only for three weeks. SVF's Mahendra Soni argued that as the film was in English, very few watched the film, apart from the urban elites in multiplexes.

Other films like *Ghar Jamai* (Rs. 1.5 crore) an expensive film by Tollywood standards ran for five weeks in Kolkata with 40 per cent occupancy. Bangla Talkies production *Bor Ashbe Ekhuni* (Rs. 90 lakh) ran for a month in Kolkata and continued to run for another month in the suburbs, with an occupancy rate of 40-45 per cent for four weeks (Mukherjee, 2008: *Business Standard*).

The Next Big Stars in making

In the midst of this slight and sudden upsurge, Tollywood desperately sought its next big stars. SVF was a production house that perhaps the industry, public and the media were constantly looking towards, as their films time and again introduced new faces. SVF's Mahendra Soni, hinting at Dev, their new found favourite hero, mentioned that a new hero of Tollywood had "to be a bit of everything, chocolatey yet rough-and-tough, boy next door yet an angry young man." (Nag, 2008: *The Telegraph* [x]).

Soni emphasised how the new generation was conscious about how the hero would represent the new youth and its consciousness. He was hopeful that Jeet who they launched in *Saathi* (2002) would emerge as a hero and star along with Dev. The other two newcomers in 2008 were Hiran (*Bhalobasha Bhalobasha*) and Soham (*Bajimaat*). When Prosenjit, Tapas Pal and Chiranjit ruled the industry during the 80s and 90s, the urban, English-educated Bengali youth despised Bengali popular cinema completely. This happened because possibly these stars did not bear the slightest resemblance to the Hindi film stars they identified closely with. But with the

emerging of stars like Jeet and Dev, the urban young people got interested in Bengali films and were curious about these new faces.

The article referred to above namely “Hero Hunt...” by Kushali Nag, *The Telegraph*, quoted viewers’ choice from young professionals in Kolkata, who over the last two to three years were intrigued with what was happening in Tollywood. Pinky Bhattacharya, 29, a computer teacher in a South Calcutta school preferred :

a mix of macho-chocolate-boy looks. Toned body and good height are very important, but if one meets the other requirements (like good at dancing) then the height is immaterial. Heros should be able to dance well, the Tollywood heroes look appalling when they shake a leg in garish costumes on those tacky sets.

She voted for Dev, who according to her looked okay and promising.

Sonia Banerjee, a post graduate student, at an University in Kolkata, wanted Tollywood heroes to turn out in style, both on and off screen, discarding their orange shirts and blue pants. A toned body was definitely desirable, though not necessary, besides being realistic in their acting, avoiding overacting and less melodrama. She picked up Jeet, for his good height and better looks off screen than on screen. Prosenjit now a veteran suggested that the new crop of heroes would have to hone their acting skills, maintain their physique, to be able to convince the urban audience that they were also part of their family. He urged them to understand the economic structure of the industry and how it worked, shoulder responsibility for both success and failure and keep good relations with people in the industry.

Copy, Inspiration or Plagiarisation?

Another media discourse attacking the Tollywood industry in general and SVF in particular underlined the ruthless copying of commercially successful South Indian (mainly Tamil and Telugu) and Hindi films. Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay in *Houseful* (2009) takes on this Tollywood phenomenon where his protagonist, Prosenjit (who has also worked in several unauthorised remakes of South Indian films) is a failed filmmaker, and his assistant constantly pressures him to succumb to the norm of the industry where a frame-to-frame copy of a South Indian film is the only way to box office success.

In 2009 SVF's *Poran Jai Joliya re* got into a major court trouble, when *Namastey London*'s director/producer Vipul Shah filed a copyright violation case in the Calcutta High Court on 10th August 2009. The Calcutta High Court decalred that *Poran Jai Joliya Re* was a "frame-by-frame" copy of *Namastey London* (2007) (Bureau, 2009). Justice Nadira Patheriya held the producers Mahendra Soni and Shrikant Mohta, along with director Ravi Kinagi responsible for infringement of the Copyright Act by copying the sequences and costumes of *Namastey London*. Within hours of the stay order, Mohta and Soni, moved the High Court Division bench challenging the legality of the trial court order. The film however, had already been running for two weeks in more than 115 halls across Bengal, and had been declared a box-office hit. SVF invested a handsome amount to get the film polished at Mumbai-based Futurworks Media, which did the post-production for *Aladin*, *Aa Dekhen Zara* and *8x10 Tasveer*.

The case was later settled out of court with an amicable arrangement between Vipul Shah and SVF producers. Mohta and Soni paid Rs. 75 lakh and an acknowledgement in the title sequence. This was a result of the Calcutta High Court order that the Bengali film be pulled off screens (Bureau, 2009: *The Telegraph*). Most producers backed the accusation of being called 'copycats' with strong logic that in a revenue-starved industry like Tollywood, most remakes garnered good business and it was necessary to consider that Tollywood films released simultaneously with Bollywood, Hollywood and Bhojpuri films in Kolkata, which was tough competition indeed and was difficult to get through. Perhaps this became a dominant practice as a readymade script saved time and had a higher chance of faring well at the box-office, critiqued Moinak Biswas, Associate Professor of Film Studies at Jadavpur University . Industry officials claimed that popular films were mostly purchased unofficially, because before the *Poran Jai Jolia re* case, there was no report or conflict on copyright issues with producers from south or Bollywood. Film critic Samik Bandyopadhyay said that Bengali films were trying to be different in terms of look and style, following Bollywood films. Their main audience resided in small towns and villages. The bulk viewers were still dominated by the lower-middle class from the mofussils, who identified more closely with the structure, characters and plot of the

films remade from the South, as they too have a similar target audience (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2010: *The Telegraph*).

One of the primary reasons for Tollywood not aspiring to officially remake Hindi films has been the budget constraint. While a big budget Bengali film could be made within Rs 2.5 crore, a big budget Hindi film would cross Rs 50 crore. Hence buying the official rights of a big budget Hindi film was difficult and recovering the costs of a Bengali film made on such a huge scale was risky. Actor Tota Roy Choudhury, remarked

Buying the remake rights of hit Hindi films costs anywhere between Rs 20 lac and Rs 30 lac. That's almost 10 per cent of the budget of a Bengali film. In contrast, the remake rights of a Tamil or a Telugu film comes for anywhere between Rs 1.5 lac and Rs 2.5 lac. Keeping the size of market for Bengali films in mind, it's obviously more judicious to invest and expect to recover costs if one is spending Rs 2.5 lac and not beyond (Dasgupta, 2010: *The Times of India*).

The politics of language is another reason for Tollywood not encouraging Hindi remakes, as most Hindi films did not get proper releases in the South. There was a novelty factor in remaking them. Telugu and Tamil films are hardly released in Bengal. So, there is anonymity in remaking them in Bengali. Director Raj Chakrabarty felt that the novelty factor of remaking a Hindi film is much more in the South than it is in Bengal.

Who would want to take a risk of remaking a Hindi film for a much smaller Bengali market when most people here have already watched the original? The industry down South is big and so is Bollywood. But interesting enough, both industries are mutually exclusive. Hence, both the industries can afford to indulge in official remakes and make profits, (ibid)

When SVF's Shrikant Mohta was asked repeatedly by me during my interview with him about copying most of their films from South Indian films, he said that at present they officially purchased the rights from producers of Tamil and Telugu films, and that they were professional remakes and not mere copies, and he insisted that the subject, characterization and other elements of the films were changed and tweaked according to the demands of the Bengali audience. He also added that *Poran Jai*...was an exceptional case, and it will never happen again with SVF¹⁷.

¹⁷ Author's interview with SVF owner Shrikant Mohta, 18.10.2011, Kolkata

New ‘Adaptations’, ‘Tributes’ and changing scripts- the ‘classes’ cinema attracts the masses, mainstream a classy affair

A fact that needs elaboration at this point is why did SVF decide to break into off-mainstream, niche-audience films like *Chokher Bali* with more cerebral than entertainment value when they, as businessmen, were raking in big profits on the one hand and pulling in a huge audience across the state with films like *Shasurbari Zindabad* and *Chirodini Tumi Amaar*? The answer to this possibly is that if *Chirodini Tumi Je Amaar* raked in the profits and inspired them to go on with more and better productions along similar lines, their films were missing out on international visibility, presence at international film festivals and awards in India and abroad. Besides, they needed the patronage of the elite Bengali audience – intellectual, educated, artistic and affluent. They wanted their films to be internationally recognized on the one hand, and be commercially viable on the other. But *Chokher Bali* and *Raincoat* gave them minimum box office returns, limited international and festival visibility and media praise. Undaunted by these failures, they set out a new strategy which will be explored in the following segment.

The audience profile was changing from a homogenous whole to being split along the lines of class, mass and economic status. Realizing the potential lying latent in the audience of multiplex theatres that had grown by leaps and bounds within a few years the middle-of-the-road Bengali cinema now found a stable market alongside the brazen commercial films. SVF turned its attention to a new director, Srijit Mukherjee, who had a script ready as a ‘tribute’ to Satyajit Ray’s masterpiece *Nayak* (1966) that featured Uttam Kumar in the title role. SVF quickly fathomed the tremendous pre-publicity, marketing and publicity potential this project would generate and took on Srijit’s script with Prosenjit stepping in to replicate the top matinee idol in Tollywood. This was a kind of relocation of the hero in contemporary Bengali cinema. The pre-release, during-shooting, music launch and other paraphernalia was so huge and mesmerizing that *Autograph*, the film, ensured a very good run at the box office though it did not have the mainstream ingredients of an unpretentious commercial film like the other productions of SVF at that time.

The story revolves around Arun Chatterjee (Prosenjit), the biggest star of Tollywood, who sets out to take up a challenge when his run-of-the-mill commercial films are not faring well. He is persuaded by a debutant passionate director Subhabrato (Indraneil Sengupta), with his script '*Aajker Nayak*', an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's *Nayak*. It is a self-reflexive film (film-within-a-film), where Prosenjit plays the fictionalised super star of Bengali cinema. The name of the character has rhetorical and symbolic implications as well as it is Uttam Kumar's real name.

Srijit manages to enrich the film with his directorial touches and presents a story and film that bear little resemblance to the Ray film. *Aajker Nayak*, the film-within-the film carries over and modernizes a few physical realities such as the hero travelling on a flight where a co-passenger gets introduced to him from Ray's *Nayak*. While *Nayak* described in detail, the inner struggle of the star Arindam Mukherjee during a train journey to get the National Award, *Autograph* deals with the brutal reality of how the film-making process can unwittingly bring up ghosts from the past, making the *numero uno* come face-to-face with his utter loneliness, his not very happy past, his desperate search for love that eludes and escapes him even when he feels it is just within his grasp.

Arun Chatterjee, one discovers in the end, is more sinned against than sinning – a feature common to all top stars of the film industry who the media floods with negative qualities that may not be real at all, says Arun. It would be interesting to find out how autobiographical Prosenjit discovered the film was for him, both as the biggest star of Bengali cinema as well as portraying a top star in a film being made within the film. How these emotional and professional overlaps affected him and his relationships within and without the industry are issues that perhaps got blended into the script of the film

Debajyoti' Misra's outstandingly brilliant musical score complimented by the inspiring and humming lyrics composed by Sreejato, Srijit and Anupam Roy became very popular around the city with its audiences and listeners. The number *amaake amaar moto thaakte dao* that literally carries the spirit of loneliness at the core of all three character's lives in the film is notable, while *Benche thakar gaan* is equally haunting and was possibly another distinguishing point of departure from the film's

original inspiration, *Nayak*, which was a song-less film. Shoumik Haldar's cinematography attempted to achieve a classic model of how a film should be cinematographed to support the film's ambience and story and also become an aesthetic statement in itself with the characteristic signature of the author who manned the camera. The long-shots shot from far above of Arun's car driving at great speed across a national highway are dotted with a bunch of white pigeons captured flying in the opposite direction, one after another. Haldar's camera captures Arun in large close-ups most of the time and it is a pleasant touch with reality when we find Prosenjit's wrinkles up front, highlighting his sense of loss through a thin veil of arrogance and complacency.

Hence *Autograph* marks possibly the beginning of fashionable, stylized, sleek and polished films from the SVF house. Prosenjit in his character of the super star is invested with double innuendo, signifying Prosenjit's star value and power equations, who, in the contemporary context is one of the biggest stars of Tollywood.

In February 2011, Cine Central Calcutta published *Autograph Chitranatya Ityadi* (Autograph, Screenplay etc.), a book edited by eminent film critic Nirmal Dhar. In his preface to the book, he mentions that he does not qualify the film *Autograph* to be a classic like Ray's *Pather Panchali*, or *Charulata*, neither Ghatak's *Ajantrik* or *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, but he firmly believes that Srijit Mukherjee definitely has the potential of being a new found auteur, and Tollywood's popular star/actor Prosenjit being re-discovered with an image that is larger than life. The book is a compilation of the screenplay, and many published reviews of the film in the print media, along with discussions in blogs, interviews of director and producers, actors and other important crew members. Nirmal Dhar acknowledges that *Autograph*'s tremendous popularity could not be surpassed and thus a book like this was possibly required to make a small contribution to the largely undocumented contemporary history of Bengali cinema.

The Book also had the note from the producers Shrikant Mohta, Mahendra Soni and Madhu Mantena of Cinergy Pictures, with whom SVF had an association for production and distribution. The note gauges the film *Autograph*'s position in Tollywood and what it has done for SVF:

When we heard the script of the film *Autograph*, we felt that here we had a flawless writing before us and were very impressed with the vision of first time Director Srijit Mukherjee. The entire film was very well conceived and presented. At the very onset we wanted to do this film and we are very proud to say today that we are more than happy with the final outcome of the film. The accolades and attention that our film has garnered both in the Domestic and International market, makes us believe that good content presented well and honestly will surely touch the hearts of millions....we would like to thank all the people associated with the making of this film and specially the audience who have loved our film and made it what it is today” (Shrikant Mohta, 2011)

The film earned record box-office returns for the makers (interview with Shrikant Mohta). *Autograph* premiered at the Abu Dhabi International Film Festival 2010 and MIAAC 2010 at New York. It was officially selected at the Glasgow International Film Festival 2011.

SVF produced two films in 2010, Aparna Sen’s *Iti Mrinalini* and first time director Sanjay Nag’s English film *Memories in March*, starring Rituparno Ghose. *Iti Mrinalini* was the director's first venture that was in association with a production house, mainly engaged in mainstream cinema. Sen, on the other hand saw herself as experimenting with the new genre of cinema that aimed at targeting both the masses and the class audience. The film was on the life and times of a yesteryear mainstream Bengali cinema star-actress, which looked back at her life. Sen played the older Mrinalini while her daughter Konkona Sen Sharma portrays the younger version. Sen directed her daughter Konkona and also acted with her in the same film, another first for the mother-daughter duo that played the same character. The Hollywood Reporter gave a glorious tribute to *Iti Mrinalini* – “a deep dive into the lush melodrama of Douglas Sirk along with a dramatic examination of the transitory nature of romantic passions found in Max Ophüls all set in the world of the Bengali film industry” (Honeycutt, 2011: *The Hollywood Reporter*). Mainak Bhowmik in *The Telegraph* reviewed *Iti Mrinalni* as

The film transcends its regional mould and presents Bengalis as part of a bigger global existence. It breathes of a veteran who has the freshness of a debutante who gets immensely personal and goes all out to make that one good movie. This is a new-generation film which doesn’t need a hip youngster to make it contemporary (Bhowmik 2011).

Memories in March was a film scripted by Rituparno Ghosh and starred veteran actress Deepti Naval. A departure from the regular big budget commercial ventures of SVF, *Memories in March* is an intimate story of a mother’s coming to

terms with her son's sexuality post his death and an undefined bond with her son's same sex partner played by Rituparno Ghosh. Sangeeta Dutta's review in *The Telegraph* titled 'An ode to grief' on April 4th, 2011 stated "it is an enduring personal drama and it is heartening to see mainstream producers Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni of SVF back an art house film such as this". The film fared moderately at the box-office, but gained positive critical responses from the press and public, and the film was also awarded the National Award in 2011 in the category of Best English Film.

Thus the current cinematic practice adopted by SVF becomes slightly complex and interesting as they bring in the idea of 'difference' and 'diversification'. They were now interested in capturing both the markets that had divided the industry and the audience. The mainstream at one side was being made classier and the classy films were being given a twist to be able to cater to both the multiplex and the non-multiplex audience. This could be SVF's horizontal integration, which is to diversify across genres.

Dui Prithibi and Baishey Srabon – Studies in Contrast

SVF's mega budget *Dui Prithibi* (a remake of the Telugu *Gamyam*, 2008, by Sharwanand Allari Naresh), directed by Raj Chakraborty, and starring Dev, Jeet, Koel and Barkha Bisht Sengupta, was a first-time road movie in Tollywood, drawing inspiration from films like *Motorcycle Diaries*. The film paired the two reigning Bengali superstars, Dev and Jeet. The road movie needed a large canvas and lavish mounting. For the first time, a budget of Rs.5 crore was commissioned for a Bengali film. The film was shot extensively in Kolkata and the rural belt of West Bengal like Lalgarh and Gopiballavpur, which are Maoist infested areas and places like Purulia, Bantala, etc. Some song sequences were filmed in Venice. It was the first Bengali film to be shot in Italy and the second mainstream Bengali film to be shot in Europe, after *Bhalobasa Bhalobasa* (2008). While the main film was shot by cinematographer Somak Mukherjee, Sirsha Ray came on board for the Venice schedule. It was released in 209 theaters across West Bengal on a Thursday during the festival of 'Durga Puja'. This was the first big extensive release to be distributed across the state. It ran for five

weeks in the city (“Tollywood 2010”, t2, 2010: *The Telegraph*), after which it had to make space for another release *Mon Je Kore Uru Uru*; though according to *The Telegraph*, the film managed to complete a six week run in the city.

The film had its longest multiplex run of four weeks at 'Bioscope', Axis Mall in Rajarhat and 'Inox Burdwan'. *Dui Prithibi* completed an extraordinary run of fifty weeks in distant rural theaters of 'Basanti' at Dantan and 'Haraparbati' at Jhatipahari. It is understood, that the producers, SVF deliberately withdrew the film from the city for *Mon Je Kore Uru Uru* since they share extremely friendly relations with the producers of Surinder Films-Nishpal Singh being the Cousin of Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni Surinder Films returned the favour to SVF by withdrawing *Mon Je Kore Uru Uru* from city-halls within five weeks to make room for the next SVF offering, *Sedin Dekha Hoyechilo* (Bhattacharya and Nag, 2011: *The Telegraph*).

Dui Prithibi was the highest grosser of 2010, according to a study conducted by FICCI & Deloitte (P. Dasgupta, 2011: *The Indian Express*). The film had the highest ever opening week collection for a Bengali film. It grossed almost Rs.5 crore in its first week, while the producers raked in almost Rs.2 crore. The film continued a steady run in the city till the third week. The rural collections though witnessed a fall from the 2nd week itself. Ultimately, after the less-than-expected five week city-run, the producers earned an impressive Rs.6.5 crore, as reported in *The Gulf Times*. Considering the budget and the massive cast and crew of the film, nothing less than a 'blockbuster' was expected. The overall collections would have been good enough to merit 'superhit' status for any other film, but the film's high budget of Rs. 5 crore, proved to be a deterrent. *Dui Prithibi* could not manage to become a 'superhit/blockbuster'; but the collections were good enough to adjudge the film a 'hit' and a considerable success (Roy and Nag, 2010: *The Telegraph*).

In 2011, SVF's 'Durga Puja' release was Srijit Mukherjee's second film *Baishe Srabon*- a musical thriller, starring Prosenjit, director Goutam Ghosh, Parambrata, Raima and Abir. The film had its plot line based on the Bengali avant garde hungry generation literary movement, of the 1960s. The story is based on two journalists and two police inspectors, who chase a psycho serial-killer. The Psycho killer leaves behind couplets of famous poets from the hungry-alist poets, at the spot

of every murder. Prosenjit who plays a suspended police inspector brings in the twist and turns in the story line with a very unexpected ending. *Baishe Srabon* broke all records at the box-office according to the press and media reports, and got extremely positive reviews from the critics across all medias (P. Dasgupta, 2011: *The Times of India*). The film though had an 'A' certificate from the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) for its explicit use of adult language. *Baishe Srabon* was the official selection at the Dubai International Film Festival, 2011 and it ran for a record 105 days in Kolkata with a stupendous opening, making it one of the biggest grossers of the year (ibid). SVF director, Mahendra Soni, reiterated that

We have always striven to present good cinema to a wider audience not limited to any geographical boundary and film festivals present us with the opportunity to do so. The kind of attention our films such as *Autograph*, *Memories In March* and *Iti Mrinalini*, have garnered across the globe, strengthens our belief that good cinema will have its audience. The acceptability of our films at the various film festivals is proof of the fact that Bengali cinema, as a medium, has no limited boundary. With more films such as Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada*, Sandip Ray's *Royal Bengal Rashaya* from the SVF camp gearing up to elevate the bar of quality cinema further, more appreciation for Bengali cinema seems on its justified way (S. Bhattacharya, 2011: *The Times of India*)

Critical Responses to Monopolization

This discussion on films produced by SVF has been an attempt to map the journey of SVF along with the changes that were taking place in the Bengali film industry-Tollywood. I have attempted to demonstrate that SVF pioneered new marketing strategies such as (a) separate publicity photo shoots, (b) hosting grand pre-release parties, premiere shows, and (c) television promotion with star appearances in specially organized programmes. Another innovation implemented by them was the digitization of more than 50 cinema halls across West Bengal which was then the fastest rollouts of digital cinema anywhere in India. Their financing and marketing strategies were also a marked change from earlier practices. Hence, on the basis of my industrial survey and research, it has been possible for me to conclude that SVF with their films played a central role in this change and have become emblematic of the positivist and over celebratory discourse of the press that has emerged as the popular discourse around Tollywood in contemporary times. Most media reports about Tollywood in print, electronic and internet portals are united in concluding that there

had indeed been a revival in the Bengali film industry and much of the credit for this revival was bestowed upon SVF. However, parallel to this discourse is a critical response to SVF which is contrary to the revival narrative of Tollywood industry.

In August 2007, *The Telegraph* projected a detailed report on Tollywood's changing look, titled 'Facelift'. The analysis showed seven ways how Tollywood films both commercial and offbeat were changing for the better, bit by bit. Some of the factors discussed were, (a) cinematography, (b) visual treatment, (c) experimentation that young camera men were pursuing with improved and advanced technology all of which were introduced in films produced under the SVF banner. Areas such as special effects, exotic foreign location shoots, experimental and out-of-the-box stories and thematic backdrops, music and dance, wardrobe and fashion and most importantly, promotion and publicity were classified. The data revealed that the films that had implemented these innovations were under the SVF banner. However, the studies added that a good number of films made by other small, independent producers also implemented these innovations with success. (Nag & Das, 2009: *The Telegraph*). According to Ratnottama Sengupta of *Times of India*, class' cinema was drawing the masses (e.g. *Autograph*, *Baishe Srabon*) and the mainstream had acquired a classy character. Alongside big banner Bollywood film releases in Bengal, films like *Moner Manush*, *Gorosthane Sabdhan*, *Arekti Premer Golpo*, *Autograph* and *Baishe Srabon*, ran for record number of days drawing a full house both in Kolkata and the suburbs.

The confines of the middleclass home had become an obsolete site for film exhibition. Contemporary Bengali cinema now captured the city with both its changing interiors and exteriors. The historical banner New Theatres revived itself and produced the National Award winning *Aami Aadu*. Television channels like *Tara Music*, *Mohua Bangla*, *Rupashi Bangla*, Rose Valley entered into film production to earn higher gross revenue profit as they also owned the satellite rights of the film (A. Nag, 2011: *The Economic Times*). It was as if a fine balance was achieved by moving from content-oriented to form-oriented narratives. The techniques of digital technology promotions (Facebook promotion, Twitter, mobile ring tone downloads, website advertisements), the marketing of films abroad (through Databazaar Media), uploading films on youtube, satellite sales, pre-release music launches, publicity press

photo shoots, added to the revival factor of Tollywood's films and the industrial change. Star/actor Prosenjit stated:

This is the right time to come back to the way New Theatres operated. We must do local cinema, at the same time national appeal cannot be lost sight of. L V Prasad, Gemini, they are lost for good but New Theatres has revived! That speaks of the strength of the filmmakers of Bengal. Still, I wonder, why didn't we make *Saptapadi* in Hindi? Why have we repeatedly missed the bus? (R. Sengupta, 2011: *The Times of India*).

He chalked out the statistics and figures by projecting that there were around 26 crore Bengalis in the world, of which if 20 crore shelled out one rupee each, the battle was won. Joint ventures according to him were not the solution; He added that Bengali films needed to be released in Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam, UK and USA. Prosenjit added:

I believe that mainstream is the bread and butter of any industry. And so I've always maintained that mainstream has to make state-of-the-art *jhaan chak-chake*(sleeker)films. Even when Tollygunge was going through its poorest patch, I insisted in doing only colour films and going cinemascope (with *Shasur Bari Zindabad*). Because I know that every technological change entails a change in the way we view films (R. Sengupta, 2010: *The Times of India*).

In the last few years Bengali films have found loyal audiences in countries such as China, Italy, Abu Dhabi, UK and the US, where the films are being treated as representing life on high quality celluloid, only with the original language being Bengali. Incidentally, some of the more recent Bengali films — *Memories in March*, *Autograph* and *Iti Mrinalini* — which made it big in the international platform, came from Tollywood's most powerful production house SVF. Director Srijit Mukherji, whose film made it to prestigious International Film Festivals, vouched

Definitely, Bengali cinema has carved quite a niche for itself globally. SVF, with a dedicated team of people, who understand the importance of sending films to various festivals, has played a key role in putting Bengali cinema on the world map. This team, led by Ravi Sharma, coordinates everything to perfection to ensure that these films receive their due recognition internationally. (S. Bhattacharya 2011)

Memories In March director, Sanjoy Nag, whose film was selected in the Pusan International Film Festival, Korea, and awarded the Best Screenplay Award at MIAAC, New York in 2010, elaborated

There was a golden era in Bengali cinema quite some years ago when films used to be recognized and awarded on the international platform frequently; then there was a lull, but, now again the momentum is picking up. But this should in no way make film-makers complacent. Even though the portrayal of the socioeconomic state of the

country remains relevant, I'd say the content in Bengali films have become a lot more contemporary with various genres being explored. In spite of their huge success in commercial cinema, SVF has always encouraged making of films which call for critical acclaim. When a film is selected in some international festival, a lot of backend support and coordination is required. With its immense experience and administrative capacity, SVF makes it so much easier for filmmakers.(ibid)

Running parallel to this over celebratory and positivist discourse of the press, were views expressing severely contradictory and critical view-points set against the revival narrative. According to Haranath Chakraborty, the marketing budget was too high in contemporary Tollywood industry, which could be afforded only by big production houses. Most big budget films were backed by powerful corporatized production houses that spend crores on publicity and promotion. This was rare and impossible for the majority of independent producers and small scale production houses¹⁸. Director Raj Chakraborty's view was that it wasn't enough to harp on the present success of Tollywood, and sit back and enjoy the revenues; what was more important was to have Script Doctors who could monitor and supervise better quality scripts and ideas, so that the stereotype of mainstream cinema can be broken (R. Sengupta, 2011: *The Times of India*).

Shekhar Das, the director of the film *Necklace* is of the opinion that the average producer and director of Tollywood selected subjects without any marketing strategy. There has been an absence of proper and responsible distributors. The state government has not been taking any initiative about promoting good cinema for over decades while all other state governments have been pursuing this very seriously, especially in the South and the North-East. Besides, the proportions of films produced are still far higher than the number of theatres available in Bengal. Ringo, director of films like *Love*, *System* and *Risk* remarked that the biggest problem in Tollywood is the acceptability of new-age Bengali cinema among the masses. They would only watch the off-beat or non-mainstream films on DVDs. They were not willing to spend money to go to theatres and watch these movies. Anjan Das, director, *Iti Srikanto*, *Bedeni*, is also very skeptical about the state of Tollywood and he states that the present scenario in Bengal is only ideal for big producers. But the smaller ones will not be able to survive, since at present, one needs a hefty marketing budget for a film to reach out to the masses before it releases in the theatres. This is not possible for the

¹⁸ Author's interview of director Haranath Chakraborty on 17.10.2011, Kolkata.

small producers who want to make small and content driven films. Somnath Gupta, director, *Aami Adu* (produced by New Theatres Studio) criticizes the contemporary industrial scenario because being a regional industry it increases the risk of films that attempt to experiment with form and content. The biggest worry for these producers is where their films will get sold since to be on the safe side getting audiences into theatres seems now dependent too much on support systems like marketing of songs, satellite rights, and overall on media publicity and promotion. While there was always a parallel trend earlier, now even that has been jeopardized by the industrial and media structures that operate currently within Tollywood. The other important reason is the easy accessibility of alternative audio-visual media, like television. The few theatres and their pathetic conditions are still valid reasons for concern, and hence whatever the media is reporting about Tollywood's development needs to be scrutinized more appropriately and more critically (P. Dasgupta, 2011: *The Times of India*).

Spandan Bhattacharya in his unpublished M.Phil dissertation titled *The Post Liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' cinema: Bhadrakok Nostalgia, the Politics of Pastness, and the discourse of 'Difference'* (JNU, 2011) while writing about the state of Bengali cinema during the 90s and the contemporary period points out that the emergence of the production house SVF had a large part in the survival of a crisis ridden industry and the establishing of a stable Bengali film market based on an idea of a 'class' of audience. However, he also points out that there was a clear operation of a 'vicious circle' and the logic of monopoly especially in the Bengali mainstream area of film production. Bhattacharya interviewed director Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay who gave him an account of how production houses like SVF 'controlled' the industrial scenario totally. He further mentioned that SVF is not only the leading production house of Tollywood, but also the owner of more than half the total number of cinema halls in West Bengal (roughly out of the 260 odd single screen cinema halls, more than 140 of them are owned by SVF) and thus they also control distribution and exhibition. According to Bandyopadhyay, if SVF spend Rs. 3 crore on a film, they secure its market by roughly aiming to earn Rs. 20 Lakhs back from each of their 140 odd halls. Some of the halls would perhaps earn this amount in two weeks, and some in six or seven weeks, and since they are the owners of those 140

halls, and in most of the cases distributors too, it is not possible for any other distributor to release their films in those halls. However, when I posed this question to Shrikant Mohta during my interview with him, he denied the fact, saying that SVF only has some 50 halls on lease, and they can't exercise that kind of control. This was what Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay called the 'vicious circle' and the monopoly over the Bengali film market and of the Bengali commercial cinema chain (S. Bhattacharya 2011, 43-44). Bhattacharya also interviewed veteran film journalist Aniruddha Dhar who mentioned this 'unholy nexus' in Bengali film production-distribution practice and confirmed that in some cases SVF while permitting other hall owners to exhibit their films made them agree on the basis that the hall had to run their films for at least four weeks even if it was a flop in the first week (ibid).

SVF operates across various verticals within the media and entertainment space including, film production, film distribution, film exhibition, television content production, broadcasting, music label-as V music-releasing, film, non-film and music videos and digital cinema projection and exhibition. In my interview with director Swapan Saha, he mentioned that SVF was dictating the terms of the industry; that they were setting the trends, and a lot of people were following it blindly without understanding the repercussions; hence in the last ten years many small production houses that wanted to follow the footsteps of SVF have disappeared and shut down¹⁹. National award winning actress Rituparna Sengupta has stated that though it cannot be denied that SVF has brought in several changes to the Tollywood industry that has professionalized the scenario, it has also exercised tremendous control over their stars and actors, sometimes directors, thus forming a camp, so that their team would only work with each other, destroying healthy competition and forcing smaller production houses to fade away. However, Sengupta was optimistic that with the success of films like *Icchhe* and *Jio Kaka*, (both were presented by her) smaller films, with better content and independent producers would time and again alarm the industry strongmen²⁰.

¹⁹ Author's interview with director Swapan Saha, 15.10.2011, at Technician's Studio, Tollygunje, Kolkata.

²⁰ Author's interview with actress Rituparna Sengupta, 16.10.2011, Kolkata.

Moinak Biswas, Associate Professor of Film studies at Jadavpur University and co-director of the film *Sthaniyo Sambaad*, and his colleague Subhajit Chatterjee, engaging in an online chat, that was later published in *The Times of India*, Kolkata, discussed the lack of variety in the content of contemporary mainstream Bengali cinema in terms of the entire range from deadpan humour to boisterous fun. Biswas, referring to the kind of films that were being released one after the other said that

Contemporary Bengali films make you feel that there is no thickness of community in them. There are almost no believable social embodiments..... I'd point to another aspect of cultural change in Bengali cinema. It has to do with the decline of the vernacular. A certain humour, even if it is physical comedy, becomes possible when there is a sizeable section of people sharing vernacular codes. It is difficult to imagine good humour in a situation where one doesn't read Bengali, or write much in it. There has to be a depletion of resources of not only verbal wit but of humorous idioms of relating us to the world (Biswas & Chatterjee,2010: *The Times of India*).

Hence a large volume of discourse can also be identified that has emerged with the growth of SVF and the transformation of the Tollywood industry. As SVF gradually established itself as one of the most powerful corporatized production houses of Tollywood²¹, its control and monopoly politics was also being sensed by the people across the board, and the monopoly was not limited to just film production-distribution and exhibition, but there was also a certain degree of homogeneity and uniformity in the content, theme and narrative of their mainstream films. The Bengali community, language, mannerisms, social milieu, class, and the overall presentation of Bengalines was far from what the people of Bengal were. However, this point of view is also subject to contestation, as the whole dynamics of class has also undergone drastic changes and transformation in the past two decades, and is still transitory. Post the economic liberalization there has been a blurring of lines within communities, regions and classes both in terms of cultural differences and economics with the success and popularity of certain kinds of films from Tollywood. Moinak

²¹ See Kushali Nag's article on *The Telegraph* "Power List: The People who matter the most in the studios of Tollygunje", July 11, 2008. In her article SVF ranks second only after star/actor Prosenjit. For SVF she writes "The cousin brothers behind the hit factory of Tollywood, Shree Venkatesh Films, have produced big films and bought the rights of films stuck in disputes, launched new faces and backed a Swapan Saha and a Rituparno Ghosh film with equal gusto. Having set out to make Tollywood more happening while keeping both mass and multiplex appeal in mind, brothers Mani (that's what Mahendra is known as) & Srikant have pumped money into movies as diverse as *Minister Fatakesto* and *Chokher Bali*. They are also credited with giving the likes of Jeet, Koel Mullick and Dev their first break. Shree Venkatesh has also launched its sister concern V Digital to screen films digitally in as many as 100 theatres at a time — a popular practice in Bollywood, a first for Tollywood. It also has four music channels on TV: Sangeet Bangla, Music India, Music UK and Sangeet Bhojpuri".

Biswas, in his article “Changing Scenes,” questions if the *bhadra* circle exists in the same form any more. At the same time, he also suggests the fading away of the stark difference between *bhadralok* elites and the non-*bhadra* due to the centrality of television in middle and lower middle class lives, as well as the Bengali language itself getting hybridized mostly by *bhadralok* urban citizens. Moreover, he argues that television has also picked up this hybridity in the form of language and cultural content. Biswas also draws a parallel with the changes that took place in the then opposition party leader Mamta Banerjee’s party that was accused of being full of hooligans, but changed as more and more intellectuals joined her protests to fight for a change (Biswas 2008).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to analyze how the films in Tollywood began to change gradually as the system of production and exhibition of films transformed. SVF as a corporatized production house, developed into a powerful entity in the industry, and played a crucial role in bringing about key changes in content and visual aesthetics, marketing strategies, introduction of new actors and stars and producing films with a range of diverse filmmakers. However, with this process of change in the industry, there emerged two dominant paradigms and narratives: on the one hand, the revival of the glorious history of Bengali cinema, and on the other, the excessive control and monopoly that SVF was exercising over the industry. I have selected a range of films produced under the SVF banner, only to map the microcosmic changes that can be traced alongside the journey of SVF’s formation and growth over a period of almost two decades. However, I have avoided detailed textual analysis of films, but rather looked at novelty factors like technical prowess, aesthetic treatment, cinematography, marketing, promotion strategies, music, new stars and actors and media reviews of the films selected and discussed.

As it is difficult to grasp the complete scenario of a contemporary moment and phenomenon, I have been able to make limited observations, though I have made considerable efforts to engage with the micro-details and not produce a meta-narrative. As much of the materials for my research related to this chapter were press

articles and newspaper reports, it is interesting to note how a whole range and volume of discourse arises out of the English and Bengali press, that largely celebrates the present scenario of Tollywood and has a very optimistic and positivist tone. At the same time, the fact cannot be denied that all local and regional Medias most certainly require a local culture-industry parallel to the social-economical and political life, in order to produce content, views and critique. Thus, Tollywood re-shaping and re-emerging as an entertainment and culture industry post liberalization is also possibly a result of the convergence in media and the paraphernalia that is generated in the public sphere. The mediums of print, television and radio have wholeheartedly allied with the Tollywood fraternity and symbiotically formed a nexus and circuit that has overlapped and converged to become one, but have yet maintained their own distinct characteristics, which I shall explore in detail in my following and last chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Media Convergence and the Discursive Proliferation and Consolidation of Tollywood

Introduction

Along with the economic liberalization of India and the negotiations with neo-liberal conditionalities of economic development, there is a more subtle change that I would like to engage with in this chapter. I consider this relevant to the subject of my chapter- the vital role of the cultural economy and more specifically that of Bengal in the rapid transformations that followed the opening up of the economy. The coming of satellite television and the rise of surplus electronic media intensified the processes of transition and transformation. In contemporary cultural economy, nothing happens without communication. The constant flow of people, images, information, ideas, technology and capital are consumed and perceived as a ‘convergence’ of beliefs, attitudes, values and images involving all forms of media.

In order to describe this phenomenon, I have borrowed the idea of ‘media contagion’ from Amit S. Rai, who uses the Deleuzian concept of ‘assemblage’ as a model for understanding the complex constellation of technological, historical and physical processes that enabled Bollywood cinema to be representative of the transforming situations of media reception and consumption in the environment of globalization. According to him, media as a form of contagion endlessly mutates and spreads, connecting human bodies, organizational structures and energies, creating an inextricable bond between ‘affect’ and ‘capital’ (Rai 2009). In this context, it is interesting to explore and analyse the media’s role in the formation of Tollywood as an overall media and entertainment industry. In the post liberalization era, the business of media in Bengal experienced a firm capitalist intrusion, similar to the forces constitutive of Bollywood.

Anustup Basu’s study of popular Indian cinema in the age of globalization, new media and metropolitan Hindu fundamentalism, focuses on the period between

1991 and 2004, when popular Hindi cinema took a spectacular turn from the early nineties to a more characteristic or signature ‘Bollywood style’ that evolved during post liberalization with the growth of global ecology in India. There was a rise in the featuring of post-global tendencies and an ‘informational geo-televisual aesthetic’ in the films of this period (Basu 2010). The Bengali film *Dui Prithibi*, (Raj Chakraborty, 2010) is relevant here, in the same way as Basu’s example of the Hindi film *Haqeeqat* (Sandesh Kohli, 1995) is. It featured poor working class protagonists, but romantic musical sequences transported them abruptly to Switzerland, with actors dressed in designer suits. In Raj Chakraborty’s *Dui Prithibi* (2010) we see a similar situation almost fifteen years after the release of *Haqeeqat*, where a song sequence is shot in Venice for the first time in the history of Bengali cinema in a plot that otherwise deal with friendship and misunderstandings in the context of the Maoist troubled state of west Bengal¹.

It is this industrial landscape of the Bengali film industry at the present moment that is affected by the omnipresent and omnipotent media convergence of television, radio, print and new media that I would like to examine and map in this chapter. I will look into the content of new global alterations, newer circuits and complicated pathways that need detailed comprehension to explore the industrial frameworks and processes that have produced the discourse of Tollywood, through which a cultural identity is created and ascertained. In this chapter I would also like to focus on the rise of new stardom, and especially how stardom is created and circulated through mediums like television, radio, print and new media. The inclusion of Tollywood celebrities, content, films, gossip, news, talk shows, interviews and the regular promotion of films and stars in television programmes like *Sangeet Bangla’s Tollywood Reporter*, and FM radio stations popularized the new stars, and in a way paved the way for the construction of Tollywood by media and public discourses. Media convergence altered the perception of the public and the press to a large extent, and this is what I see as a shift in attention from the focus on Bengali cinema to one that foregrounds the film industry-Tollywood.

The obvious question is - why film? More so, why the film industry? I believe that cinema lies at the heart of media convergence. . As Hamid Naficy mentions:

¹ See Kushali Nag’s interview of Raj Chakraborty, ‘Point Blank’, October 16, 2010 http://www.telegraphindia.com/1101016/jsp/entertainment/story_13062524.jsp

Cinema as an industry, an institution, and a set of practices has evolved, adjusted, adapted, adopted, assimilated, and grown vertically and horizontally. It has taken over, has been taken over, and has been privatized, nationalized, divested, diversified and synergetically converged in myriad ways. In what might be considered as a great operational example of Gramsci's theorization of 'hegemony', it has changed in order to remain the same-CINEMA (Naficy, 2009:3).

As a medium, film has remained not only relevant but has also proliferated widely and deeply by a process that Marshall McLuhan identified decades ago. He said that old media survived by becoming the content of newer media, "The 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (1964, 23). Today therefore, it is apt to talk about this under the rubric of convergence or in the words of Bolter and Grusin- 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 2000). Or in the words of David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins who point towards a conscious cyclical progression that we may see as especially significant in the Indian context,

Old media rarely die; their original functions are adapted and absorbed by newer media, and they themselves may mutate into new cultural niches and new purposes. The process of media transition is always a mix of tradition and innovation, always declaring for evolution, not revolution. (D. T. Jenkins, 2003: 12)

Post the 1980s and 1990s when the 'crisis narrative' had engulfed the Tollygunge film industry, liberalization initiated a slow but somewhat steady process of evolution and modification within the industry, which then Shree Venkatesh Films capitalized on and initiated major changes in cinematic aesthetics and the overall production, distribution and exhibition system. The past decade, however, has ushered in a new chapter in Bengali cinema. With a few renowned directors taking the lead, the mindset for experimentation has grown, resulting in an increase in the number of films made for urban audiences. Also, the idea that experimental/thought provoking films are 'art' and, therefore, non-commercial is gradually fading away because of films that are content-rich, yet commercially viable

Tollywood in the contemporary Media Landscape in West Bengal

In 2010, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) certified 110 Bengali films, two-and-a-half times the increase from forty two films in 2006. This was probably possible due to an increase in the gripping content in films, an element that has greater commercial viability (Deloitte, 2011). The present state of affairs in Tollywood is that a healthy mix of experienced and new filmmakers who are tapping

into the demands of their urban audiences correctly. Though SVF still remains one of the strongest and most powerful production houses exercising excessive control and monopolization across the various phases of film production and exhibition, recently, a group of young filmmakers have collaborated with newer producers and production companies to make films that have surprised the audience, the media and the industry with the technical finesse and sophistication of approach in their films. Much of the laurels Tollywood is earning from critics and the media are due to these filmmakers and their films are doing exceptionally well.

In 2010, regional films constituted 82% of the overall films certified by CBFC. Bengali films constituted 9% of that total, almost doubling its contribution of 4% in 2006. At present, the average production cost of a Bengali film varies between Rs. 60 lacs and Rs. 2 crores, excluding print and publicity costs (ibid). Tollywood films continue to have lesser marketing expenses compared to other regional industries (especially Tamil and Telegu) and Bollywood, where talent (artistes and technicians) is a substantial component of a film's cost. Expenses in this area are still nominal in Tollywood, except a few exceptions for films produced by Shree Venkatesh films Pvt. Ltd. and Surrinder Films Pvt. Ltd.

The entry of television and satellite into the media-scape of Bengal has enabled a newer form of showcasing different genres of Bengali films and earning revenue from this form of exhibition. Post 1991, the presence of private television channels has created a complex relationship between television and contemporary Bengali cinema. Significantly, the one individual who played a fundamental role in initiating the launch of Bengali satellite television was actor/star Prosenjit Chatterjee. Prosenjit's career was shaped by the post 1980 Bengali cinema discussed in my first chapter. His audience base was concentrated in rural and small-town Bengal, where he is the present-day equivalent of what Uttam Kumar was to the Bengali middle-class *bhadralok* in the 1950s and 1960s. It was mainly through his efforts that Subhash Chandra Goel of Zee TV agreed to launch the first Bengali television channel, Zee Bangla. According to Kakoli Poddar in her piece "*Bengal's one-man Industry*

Prosenjit understood the potential of satellite television in the mid-nineties...In 1994-95, he concentrated on building the new generation television industry and also acted in some television serials (*Mama bhagney, Kagojer Bou*) himself (2006).

Through satellite television telecasts, Prosenjit's films and films in which his contemporaries were involved, which had had limited runs in city theatres acquired an audience within middle-class homes in Calcutta. Satellite television functioned as a boost to the Bengali film industry since the mid 1990s after *Zee Bangla* was launched. Many film stars began a parallel career in television serials. By 2007, at least eight (*ETV Bangla, Akash Bangla, Tara Muzic, Tara Bangla, Sangeet Bangla, Star Jalsha, Sony Aath, Ruposhi Bangla*) privately owned Bengali language satellite television channels were broadcasting into Bengali homes, and among these several included film based content. The West Bengal TV market has grown considerably in the past three-four years, riding on the need to 'connect' with its people. Television in West Bengal, once dominated by Hindi General Entertainment Channels (GEC), saw itself expanding significantly in Bengali once this inherent need to 'connect' was identified and addressed by Bengali GECs. In fact, West Bengal now stands the third largest with a 13% share of the HSM (Hindi speaking market) universe.

Further, it dominates 8% of the all-India TV viewership. The beginning of this resurgence can be traced back to the period when the Bengali GEC space saw interest from key national players such as the Star and Zee groups. The consequent increase in competition as well as programming standards resulted in the growth of the entire Bengali TV space. As a result, about four years ago, what was around 500-600 Gross Revenue Profits (GRPs) in the Bengali GEC space is now edging 1200 GRP levels. In line with other regional markets, GECs dominate the West Bengal TV market with Bengali and Hindi GECs commanding a viewership share of 35% and 14% respectively. High production values, an evolving movie bank and local programming continue to boost Bengali GECs. At present, after GECs, Hindi movie channels come third with a 9% viewership share. However, with the health of the Bengali film industry improving in the past three to four years, perhaps its viewership for TV is expected to increase as well. Consequently in another two-three years, Bengali films that have a share of about 2% currently could attain a dominant position in the West Bengal TV space in terms of viewership.

Television and Tollywood

The overall television industry in West Bengal has been estimated at Rs. 1600 crores in the financial year (FY) 2011. Subscription revenues constitute about 54% of the industry revenues while advertisement and content constitute 45% and 1%, respectively. The industry is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18% till FY 2015. The total subscription revenues in West Bengal were estimated to be Rs. 900 crores in FY 2011. It is expected to grow at CAGR of 16% during the period 2011- 2015. Cable-based subscription that has dominated the West Bengal market is expected to lead to the increased adoption of digitization through digital cable based subscription. The total advertisement revenues in West Bengal were estimated at Rs. 750 crores in 2011. This is largely driven by the growth of the West Bengal GEC space in the past four years. The entry of new GECs (*Sananda TV, Mohua Bangla, Ruposhi Bangla, Sony Aath*) and effective marketing of advertisement slots has seen the growth of this segment. Further, given the increasing strength of the viewership of the West Bengal market, the broadcasters are likely to push the advertisement rates upwards in the future. Hence, this segment is expected to grow at a steady CAGR of 20% during the period 2011- 2015.

Launched in 2008 and 2011 respectively, *STAR Jalsha* and *Sananda TV*, both Bengali entertainment channels by the media house *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (ABP Ltd.), have striven to carve out a share for themselves of the West Bengal GEC market. In March 2011, STAR announced its plan to launch the Bengali entertainment channel, *STAR Jalsha* in West Asia, with the Arab Digital Distribution (ADD) pay TV platform. The Bengali general entertainment channel was aimed at being exclusively available on the *pehla* bouquet that caters to the expatriate South Asian population in the region. In September 2010, GEN-I (Globesat Entertainment), in the business of the distribution of ethnic television networks in North America and the UK partnered with Media Content and Communications Services India Pvt. Ltd. (MCCS) to distribute *STAR Ananda* (now renamed *ABP Ananda News*) the twenty four hours national Bengali news channel, in the U.S and Canada. It is important to note here that *STAR Ananda* (now renamed *ABP Ananda News*) has several time slots exclusively dedicated to content and programmes on Tollywood (for instance *Holly-Bolly-Tolly*), and the channel has also collaborated as media partner for numerous

popular films of Tollywood in the recent past, for instance *Kailashe Kelengkari*, *Antaheen*, etc. The channel regularly features panel discussions and chat shows with the cast and crew members of films before their release and they also feature a post-release evaluation. In June 2011, Sony Entertainment Television Network (SETN) announced its intention to expand the reach of its Bengali movie channel *Sony Aath* in the international market. The channel, already been launched in the U.S and Canada, was slated to reach the U.K and Australia as well. *Sony Aath* specializes in the latest and classic Bengali movie screenings, tele-films and movie-related magazine shows (Deloitte, December 2011: 22-24).

Revenue from the content segment is yet to develop to the extent it has in other regional markets due to the limited number of independent production houses developing Bengali content. A large portion of the content for Bengali TV channels is still derived from commissioned production houses. However, this segment could see greater growth if large national production houses focus their attention on both fiction and non-fiction categories in Bengali. Almost all the GEC channels have dedicated segments that showcase Bengali films - both contemporary and classics. Therefore, where on the one hand, television snatched the film industry's Kolkata market to a substantial extent, on the other, it was largely through satellite TV that mainstream Bengali cinema, its stars, directors, technicians, and music made their entry back into middle-class homes. Television as a medium has provided the film industry with a steady presence in the public domain and has gradually established Tollywood in the public and press discourses. Elaborating on the symbiotic relationship between the film and television industries, Padam P. Govindan and Bisakha Dutta state:

Satellite channels offer the film industry an exponentially increased ability to promote and market their films through television previews, programming the features song and dance sequences, and the purchase of telecast rights to popular films. Television shows (as well as print media) in turn depend on the film world-its music, award ceremonies, and celebrity gossip-for programming and articles (Punathambekar 2009)

Fiction continues to dominate the Bengali GEC market. However, in a market that has appreciated good content across categories, it may not be long before other genres and content evolve. Though TV viewership in West Bengal is tilted towards the thirty five-plus age group, the fifteen-twenty four years category commands a substantial share of 20% of the viewership. This category not only assumes

prominence due to its viewership share, but is also most receptive to new programming content. This age group offers huge potential to experiment when compared with the thirty five-plus age categories. Nonetheless, the latter group has been receptive to innovative content given the better education, intellect level, and aspirations of the middle-aged population in the state. As a result, the regional GECs have consistently seen news show formats, fresh talk shows, game shows and other non-fiction content. Non-fiction genres such as quiz shows and game shows are almost comparable in their Gross Rating Point (GRP) contribution to popular categories such as film-based content.

In 2011, soaps and films dominated the GEC viewership with 59% and 14% GRP shares, respectively, while quiz shows and game shows followed them with an 11% share. Further, this is similar to the trend in 2010 (Deloitte, December 2011: 23-26). *Sangeet Bangla*, the twenty four-hour music channel part of the Media Worldwide bouquet owned by Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd. was launched on April 14, 2005. The channel basically promotes film songs from the SVF and Surrinder Film banners, along with non-film music and a very popular magazine show *Tollywood Reporter* where news, interviews and gossip from the Tollywood industry are presented to viewers every week (Sengupta 2005). The other popular programme is *Tollywood Topper* which runs back-to-back Tollywood hits, popular songs and a special feature, where anecdotes of shooting and behind-the-screen details are provided as running texts in Bengali to generate more interest about the stars, actors, locations and a youthful interest in the content and industrial news that is otherwise not reported in newspapers and television programmes.

The rise in the non-fiction content in the television sector also tapped in to the Tollywood talent pool. Reality shows that comprise a large section of the programmes on GEC channels include hosts, weekly special guests and judges from the Tollywood fraternity. Reality shows have become a potential site for film promotion where the cast and crew make a special appearance on the show before the release of a particular film in the theatres. Bengali television channels also telecast awards, both live and recorded, and the Bengali film industry's most prestigious award ceremony, which happens to be the oldest film award in Bengal, the Bengal Film Journalist Association (BFJA) award was a gala event that celebrated and honoured the Bengali film and

television fraternity. However, the award has not been taking place since 2007. Some popular awards ceremonies are the *Anandalok Awards*-one of the most prominent film events for Bengali cinema in India; the *Kalakar Awards* recognized as one of the topmost awards ceremonies of the eastern region; the *Tellysamman Awards*-organized by *Sangbad Pratidin*, a Kolkata based Bengali daily; the *Zee Bangla Gourav Samman*- an award that is designed for the people and by the people. *Zee Bangla* honours the rich culture and traditions of the land, felicitating evergreen personalities from theatre, film, music and its own television shows. Recently added to this list of Bengali award ceremonies has been the International Bangla Film Academy Awards (IBFA), pitted as Tollywood's answer to Bollywood's International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFA) awards, which conferred awards in nineteen categories on actors and technicians for their contribution to Bengali cinema in 2011. IBFA is an association to support, develop and promote art forms of the moving image. The event was organized by Jet Setters, in association with Amazing Thailand, Ramada Plaza, a regional vernacular news channel and a vernacular music channel (Gupta, July 4,2012).

Television's role in highlighting the new stars of Tollywood in the public sphere and providing them with a constant and consistent platform of visibility is relevant to an understanding of television's role in establishing Tollywood's identity as a culture industry. The satellite medium has generated a discourse that foregrounds the presence of a local entertainment industry countering the hegemony of Bollywood.

John Ellis argues that 'television fame' is a more immediate form of stardom that creates a 'personality' instantly and gives one overnight stardom through repeated appearances on the television screen (Ellis 2000). In the last five to six years, whole new breeds of actors and stars have been appropriated by the press and for the public sphere as Tollywood celebrities and stars. Mir, for example, who began his career in media as a news reader has now become the host of a very popular comedy show, *Mirakkel*. Mir has become one of the most popular anchors and stand-up comedians; there is hardly any award show or Tollywood event that Mir does not host. Recently he has also been getting acting offers and has acted in few Tollywood films. Similarly, actors like Jisshu Sengupta who acted in several serials, mega soaps and

tele-films earlier has now achieved star status both in films and on television. Actors who only work in Tollywood films have also realized the potential of the television medium. A lot of them now dabble between the two mediums². Jeet for instance hosted the Bengali version of *Kaun banega crorepati-Koti Takar Baji (who wants to be a millionaire? and Pound Drop)* (Dasgupta 2011). Tollywood's superstar-Prosenjit, after 35 years of his film career, is presently hosting the game show *Banglar Shera Poribar* in Zee Bangla; this is his first venture into television as an anchor (PTI 2012).

Another common practice by television channels in Bengal is to invite at least one or two Tollywood celebrities or actors for panel discussions and debates on issues outside the area of cinema and entertainment. During the last West Bengal state assembly elections in 2011, when the Trinamool Congress and the thirty-four-year-old ruling Communist Party were contesting a historic election, all the Bengali twenty four hours private news channels telecast programmes in the form of debates and panel discussions with Tollywood actors/stars like Aparna Sen, Debashree Roy, Tapas Pal, Satabdi Ray, Ranjit Mullick, Shaheb Chatterjee, Parambrata Chatterjee, Swastika Mukherjee, Hiron, Rituparno Ghosh, television actors Badsha Moitra, Sudipta Chakraborty, et al. This gave a different dimension and added glamour to what might otherwise have been a dull and drab political debate. It also attracted greater viewership by means of drawing in more people who were interested in the discussions with the celebrities.

Christine Geraghty argues that the categories through which stars are examined and understood need to be re-thought; she claims that in the present time the representation of the 'famous' differently shape "how film stars make meaning in contemporary cinema and culture". She identifies three meta categories through which stars generate meaning, firstly through 'star as -celebrity', secondly 'star as-professional' and thirdly 'star as- performer'. Tollywood stars, especially the ones like Dev, projected by the industry and the media as a super star is simultaneously a celebrity, a professional and a performer, and so are his contemporaries like Koel

²Actress Rituparna Sengupta has set up her production company *Bhabna Aaj o Kaal* around 2005, which has produced TV shows like *Dance pe chace Boudimoni* for Rupashi Bangla, Actor/star Prosenjit's *Ideas Creation* produced the serial *Gaaner opare* in collaboration with director Rituparno Ghosh for Star Jalsha; actor Jisshu Sengupta's *Blue Water Pictures* produced the chat show *Ghosh and Company* for Star Jalsha (Guha 2009).

Mullick, Hiron, Soham, Shrabonti, Jeet and Subhashree who have become celebrities in the public domain, professional stars and regular performers at television shows, award ceremonies and public functions. The mofussil areas host 'Dev nights', and 'Jeet and Koel nights' where huge numbers of fans sway to chartbuster songs to which these stars perform. These shows are currently managed by event management companies and are heavily sponsored by corporate funding and advertising. The local media, cable channels and newspapers also report these events generating an abundant volume of publicity and awareness about the Tollywood industry.

Cable and Satellite channel rights for Bengali cinema – a Point of Mutual Support

Cable and Satellite (C&S) Rights have emerged as an important channel of revenue allowing the Bengali television to capitalize promptly on the rising popularity of Tollywood films. Bengali broadcasters benefit from the purchase of movies that result in high TRPs amongst audiences. Interestingly, Bengali films have been able to garner high TRPs among rural and semi-urban audiences too. The number of Bengali channels (including Doordarshan) has risen from around four-five (A. Nag,[a] 2011: *The Economic Times*) in 2000 to around fourteen-fifteen Bengali channels. With new Bengali general entertainment channels (GEC) entering the TV market, the competition for quality content has increased.

A typical GEC channel needs at least six hours of fresh software every day. (A. Nag,[b] 2011: *The Economic Times*) Films are one of the key content sources that fill this need. Hence, films have become one of the prime routes for entertainment channels to draw audience attention and push TRPs up. As a result, broadcasters have contributed significantly to the revenues of the film industry through the purchase of satellite rights at significant prices. This has caused a mutually profitable cycle where production houses are now more confident of recovering their costs that could have led to a rise in the number of Bengali films produced. Cable and satellite (C&S) revenues are cited as one of the primary reasons for the growth in the size of the industry in recent times. The contribution of cable and satellite distribution and exhibition to the industry in 2010 is estimated to have been about Rs. 35 crores

(Deloitte. December 2011). The existing trend of garnering revenue contribution from the C&S segment is expected to continue to progress.

The Print Industry- providing maximum visibility to Tollywood

The West Bengal print industry is pre-eminent in eastern India, with Anandabazar Patrika Ltd. (ABP) as the leading publishing house in this sector. Its leading Bengali newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* is the fifth largest vernacular daily in the country with a readership of 60 lacs. It is also one of the most widely subscribed and read Bengali newspaper outside Bengal and India. The second most widely read Bengali daily is *Bartaman* with an average issue readership (AIR) of 30 lacs. The popular English daily *The Telegraph* is the third most widely read daily with an AIR of 10.4 lacs (Survey 2011). In 2011 the print industry in West Bengal was estimated to be Rs. 900 crores. Bengali magazines and newspapers dominate the print industry accounting for 60% of the market share. As of today, the combined readership of the two Bengali dailies- *Anandabazar Patrika* and *Bartaman*- is more than five times the combined readership of the state's top two English dailies- *The Telegraph* and *The Times of India*, Kolkata though *The Telegraph* and *The Times of India* are the two most circulated English dailies in Bengal and highly popular among young readers (Survey 2011).

The size of the English publications market is estimated to grow at a CAGR (Compound annual growth rate) of 9% to reach a value of Rs. 500 crores by 2015. It is common knowledge that the major revenue stream for the print industry comes from advertisements. Advertisers have targeted youth-based magazines and the supplements of English and Bengali newspapers like *Calcutta Times*, *HT city*, *t2*, *Saptahik Bartaman*, *Patrika* et al. to reach out to their potential consumers.

t2 – A Case Study on Mutual Symbiosis

The Telegraph introduced a new lifestyle supplement *t2* in tabloid form from February 2nd 2007 in a bid to connect with a wider reader base and popularize content

on the Bengali entertainment industry among English language readers. *t2* for the first time had a whole page dedicated to Tollywood with a page titled ‘Tollywood’ in bold. This page deals extensively with content on Tollywood films, stars and stories from the overall entertainment industry, and their weekly focus stories like ‘*From the Floors*’ that goes straight onto the shooting floors. It became very popular among its target readership with the launch issue. Weekly and fortnightly magazines mainly from *Anadabazar Patrika*, publications like *Anandolok*, *Unnish Kuri*, *Sananda* and Rose Valley Group’s *Cinema Ebong* have been consistently popular, featuring regular content on Tollywood and are profitable mediums for publicity and promotion of the Bengali entertainment industry.

With the launch of *t2*, the Public relations officers who started working with Tollywood production houses began to promote the films, interview the cast and crew of these films, and organize exclusive photo shoots with the main protagonists of the film for wider publicity and promotion. This trend has now become an established norm and is practiced by all leading dailies, both Bengali and English. Clearly then, there is an invisible nexus between the print and the Bengali film industry that symbiotically benefit from each other. Tollywood is at present heavily dependent on the print industry for constant visibility, publicity and promotion, and similarly the print industry manages to get a constant supply of voluminous entertainment content and advertising revenue from Tollywood. Everyone knows that ‘paid news’ and sponsored features in newspapers have become a common phenomenon. Leading production houses of Tollywood and publicists have used this opportunity to push certain kinds of content related features with films and stars. Dev, one of the top stars in Bengali cinema is an example. Hailed by the media as the next generation super star after Prosenjit, Dev has exclusive photo shoots, interviews, shooting updates, and even full page coverage of his personal life featured in newspapers and magazines. There is a new format for this coverage that is conversational and somewhat similar to the format of audio-visual chat shows. The director of a film usually post release, is made to brainstorm in an informal conversational manner with another contemporary director or actor to dissect the film-its merits and demerits. This format has gained popularity because of *t2* which has been continuing this form for over a year now. When *Aparajita Tumi* (2012)- directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, completed four weeks in the theatres, a conversation was organized by *t2*, where three other

directors-Kaushik Ganguly, Suman Mukhopadhyay and Suman Ghosh discussed the film and aired their opinions, views and comments about the film, putting director Roy Chowdhury in the ‘hot seat’ (Das 2012). The conversation also led to topics related to other Tollywood films of the period, their content and relevance. This was later followed by another similar exercise, when Kaushik Ganguly’s *Laptop* (2012) released; the film was ‘decoded’ as the newspaper title mentioned, where director Ganguly and Anik Dutta (Director- *Bhooter Bhobishyot* 2012) engaged in a free flowing and uninhibited discussion about each other’s films (Nag 2012). It is thus striking to see this phenomenon as a joint attempt by industry insiders and the media to thrust the new films of Tollywood into the public domain. These efforts contribute to the perception and discourses around Tollywood films and the parallel changes in the industry, which further facilitate and reinforce Tollywood’s brand image and brand value.

Anandabazar Patrika and *t2* have also begun the practice of getting Tollywood films reviewed by celebrities, actors and directors, probably with the vested interest of gaining readership mileage and attempting to raise the industry’s standard within the purview of the educated middle-class *bhadralok* audience. Such reviews also attract letters to the editor and public opinion and views later published in respective newspapers. It is perhaps too early to say what this trend does to the actual task of film criticism and reviewing, as it cannot be denied that when industry insiders review a film, it cannot be unbiased, although the counter argument to this could be, that, this form of reviewing gives rise to healthy competition within the industry and adds to the novelty value of the brand Tollywood. However, Kaustav Bakshi an avid film blogger (<http://kaustavsarden.blogspot.in/>) in an unpublished letter to the *t2* editor vehemently criticized this practice of Tollywood celebrities reviewing films. He wrote:

A practice which you have of late adopted is rather disappointing for film buffs like us. I am extremely disconcerted by the fact that you are commissioning industry insiders to review Bengali films: Barun Chanda, Parambrata Chattopadhyay, Suman Mukhopadhyay and Mainak Bhaumik for that matter. I have no issues with the individuals; but the problem is none of them can be honest with their analysis. Of course, the names mentioned above do have dependable critical acumen when it comes to cinema, but I do not believe they can be unpretentious with their true feelings about a film they are reviewing. For instance, an upcoming director such as Mainak Bhaumik would not even have the guts to write that *Aparajita Tumi* was nothing but a collage of beautiful frames. He cannot help but eulogize the film for more than his honesty towards appreciation of art, the fate of his *Bedroom* is of

course a greater concern. If he gives a positive review of *Aparajita Tumi*, some other big-shots would similarly extol his *Bedroom!* The poor guy needs that badly...he has a lot (at) stake! Therefore, this is nothing but mutual back-patting in the name of reviewing a film. Is this any better than paid reviews? Actually the kind of stuff we get to read in the name of review is just another promotional.

With the ‘page 3’ format in newspapers gaining popularity nationally, the Bengali print industry has begun to follow the newspaper formats of national dailies that prioritize Bollywood content: for instance, full page coverage with ‘photo caption’ of events, star/celebrity birthday bashes, wedding parties, film launch parties and award ceremonies, premiere show parties from Tollywood. This is now a common feature visible in *The Times of India* supplement-*Calcutta times* and *t2*.



Radio and FM: Tollywood’s Aural Presence

Anandabazar Patrika Ltd. (ABP group) owns an exclusive FM radio station- 91.9 MHZ *Friends FM*; the station caters to a more mature audience and plays a mix of Bengali and Hindi film and non-film music, both contemporary and retro. *Friends FM* regularly invites Tollywood talent and celebrities for talk shows, interviews and pre-release film promotions; the radio station also airs film and television show promos. Other popular FM stations are 92.7 MHZ *Big FM*, 93.5 MHZ *Red FM*, 94.3 *Radio One*, 98.3 MHZ *Radio Mirchi*, 104.0 MHZ *Fever FM* (owned by Hindustan Times Media and Entertainment), 106.2 MHZ *Amar FM* and 107.8 MHZ *Power FM*.

Radio Mrichi has also become a very popular radio station, which exclusively dedicates shows to Tollywood, like *Kolkata Express* and *Dawsher Desh*; these two shows play a large number of contemporary Tollywood film music, with quizzes and games related to Tollywood celebrities, films and music. These two shows also invite Tollywood celebrities and stars for chats, interviews and film promotion. A common feature has telephonic requests from fans who can talk directly to the stars, actors and celebrities present on the show. Another FM station is *Amar FM*, the only 100% Bengali FM radio station that describes itself as ‘the radio station built for Kolkata by Kolkatans’. *Amar FM* plays music from the 70s, 80s, 90s and contemporary films, ranging from popular films to non-film songs. The station also frequently holds contests, quizzes and interviews with Tollywood celebrities. It is important to mention here, that over the last four-five years, popular films of Tollywood have had a revival in terms of their music. Compositions of Jeet Ganguly, Indradeep Dasgupta, Raja Narayan Deb and Debojyoti Mishra have generated satisfactory levels of interest and curiosity for contemporary Tollywood music especially amongst the youth. This has led to Radio FM stations tapping into this genre and designing shows and content that can accommodate contemporary Bengali film music (Biswas 2010). Furthermore, content delivery in the new age of distribution has gone digital.

New Media- Tollywood’s tryst with digital technology and the world wide web

If television, radio and the print media individually act as vehicles for the Bengali film industry, Tollywood, to foreground itself in the press and public discourse, then the relatively new entrant in the media arena has to be the internet and the cyber world. The shrinking of the world around us with perceptions of people changing, getting blurred and even distorted through repetitive bombardment of images and information through the world of virtual reality signals the new media’s emerging popularity. This furthers possibilities of representation and image construction and the reach of content and identities beyond regional boundaries.

For Tollywood, this is achieved mainly through its visibility in the virtual world that is increasing everyday. The launch of film websites, though restricted to a limited number of films released every year, and individual websites of Tollywood

celebrities and stars have added to the popularity and web presence of Tollywood. In the recent past, new media has ushered in new prospects for the Bengali film industry in terms of revenue, promotion and publicity. Idol worship has taken on a new dimension on the Internet. Communities have been created on social networking sites like Orkut and Facebook that can operate without any physical identity. It is overwhelming to see the sheer number of blogs and web pages devoted to Tollywood news, gossip and fan activity (e.g. <http://tollyfanzone.blogspot.in/p/fan-clubs.html>), and a phenomenon totally non-existent before four-five years.

Fan Club Rituals and Fandom

Dev and Jeet, the two young generation stars have huge fan followings and their official fan web pages are meticulously maintained, followed and subscribed to by a large cross-section of the Bengali population from both urban and semi-urban regions³. A film release spurs fans into action. Fan clubs organize *pujas* and rituals in Jeet's name praying for a hit at Dakshineswar and Puri; Somnath Kar, who runs Jeet Fans Club in Kalighat at south Kolkata, proudly expressed this to the members of the Jeet fan club. The ritual at the theatre is as important. Jeet's cut-outs in every city hall are garlanded, 51 coconuts are broken to bring luck, sweets are distributed among the audience and confetti bombs are burst. A fan club, says Babua Bhowmik, who organizes live shows with actors, is of great help when the star goes to the districts for shows, for instance, to smaller towns in northern Bengal like Coochbehar and Malda; the star's fan club members give the team protection in the face of mob frenzy.

A fan club boosts the celebrity's ego according to Jeet, as no amount of success matches "the roar of a crowd of 15000-20,000 people when they see an actor or star step out on stage". Jeet often has fans waiting outside his New Alipore house. Sayantan Roy, a 21-year-old amateur web designer and a fan of Tollywood's 'newest heartthrob' Dev, has built www.devthesuperstar.com. Earlier, he had created an Orkut and Facebook community, which proved to be very popular with 8,180 members. So

³ <http://devthesuperstar.com/fanclub.html> is the official fan page of Dev, Sayantan Roy who is the founder of this page and website explains elaborately as a quintessential fan the whole journey of how he began this journey of developing, designing and promoting the fan page of Dev the super star. On the other hand <http://www.itimes.com/public/jeet.madnani> and <http://jeetfanclub.blogspot.in/> claim to be the official fan clubs of Jeet.

he created this website and approached Dev to launch it. He actively manages the blog with participation and followers even from Bangladesh. The site is the base for a fan club with paid membership. Identity cards, T-shirts and tickets for Dev films are sent to members. He also approached Dev with a request to start a blog on the site. A video portal plays Dev's bytes on occasions like Independence Day. Taking a cue from Sayantan, fans of other Tollywood stars have turned to the Net. Aritro Roy, a class twelve student of Bangur Boys School, created *www.tollyqueenkoel.com*. The boy went to Koel Mullick's Golf Club Road house on April 28, her birthday, to get her to launch the website. The website includes updated news on Koel collected from media reports. The site has already recorded 55,000 hits. The interactive zones on these sites show what passion is about. Requests to the stars for their contact numbers are aplenty.

Producers have realized the potential of this new platform. Some have come forward to channelize this passion to help their films. A contest specific to the site ran on Koel's 2012 film *Prem by Chance*. Sayantan also received requests from Dev's producers to help promote films that do not feature Dev (Banerjee September 5, 2010). Recently director Srijit Mukherjee personally called Kaustav Bakshi, ardent film blogger to review his latest film *Hemlock Society* (2012), after he found out that Kaustav's blog had received the maximum number of 'hits' by readers when he reviewed *Baishe Srabon* (2011), Mukherjee's earlier film (<http://kaustavsarden.blogspot.in/> and Author's interview with Kaustav Bakshi).

Exploring Markets beyond Borders through Technological Strategies

The Bengali film industry has made an attempt to look beyond domestic theatricals and cable and satellite C&S rights to achieve its true potential in size and reach. At present, the key objective is to target alternative and innovative distribution techniques and cross over to overseas markets. However, given their existing budgets, Bengali films may not be in a position to replicate other regional film industries such as Tamil and Telugu that reach out to global markets on the strength of their international theatrical distribution platforms.

At present, the Bengali film industry taps international markets through Bengali associations and clubs where the films are screened. A few prominent directors and producers take their films to international film festivals and film markets for exhibition and promotions. Films today are not just seen in theatres, but also on screens such as mobiles and iPads. Emerging platforms such as IPTV and Internet streaming services continuously stream films to consumers worldwide. Such services are also accessible on a number of devices and platforms.

This provided ample opportunity for Bengali films to reach out to these audiences through digital distribution platforms and overcome marketing and distribution limitations. In September 2010, Databazaar Media Ventures, the US gateway for Bengali films, presented the producers of the first four Bengali movies (*Angshumaner Chhobi*, *The Japanese Wife*, *Jodi Ekdin*, *Ekti Tarar Khonje*) a release of their films in North America, with the producer's share adding up to US\$ 20, 000. Notably, this represented only about thirty days of revenue from the US market, thus, indicating the potential for Bengali films in these markets⁴

Washington Bangla Radio: Reaching out to the Diaspora Market

An international avenue to exclusively promote Tollywood is Washington Bangla Radio, a registered trademark and service of Washington Bangla Radio on the Internet (WBRi) Inc. incorporated in the State of Maryland, USA, an established and respected technology pioneer with a long list of ground-breaking internet firsts,

⁴ “We at Databazaar Media understand the need of Indian content producers to find additional revenue sources from global markets and next-generation platforms. The NRI market is an obvious target for you, but this huge market is not being properly tapped due to the lack of an organized channel for multi-platform distribution. We act as an exclusive gateway for Indian content to North America, combining the latest in digital technologies with the best in traditional methods in a new, fusion distribution model that will maximize North American revenues for you. We are the missing link that ensures the most effective marketing of your Indian films and TV shows. Once selected by our Film Review Board, our distribution system will ensure that your film or TV show is available in North America in all traditional and digital distribution methods like theatrical screenings, DVD sales, IPTV channels and Web Streaming to PC & Mac. The entire range of potential viewers in North America is covered by this unique and revolutionary distribution channel. Databazaar Media Ventures, LLC., is a part of the US-headquartered Databazaar Group of companies with businesses in such diverse verticals as e-commerce, technology distribution, software development, outsourcing and entertainment media”- Producer's note on Databazaar Media venture website <http://www.databazaarmedia.com/producer-corner.aspx>

including the first internet Bangla Radio, the first Bengali online music store, the first live concert internet broadcast from India, and so on.

WashingtonBanglaRadio.com is also a news website covering Bollywood, Hollywood and Indian regional films with special emphasis on Bengali cinema. For over six years WBRi has been publishing exclusive interviews with the popular singers, musicians, film stars from Kolkata and the world. WBRi covers all established and upcoming Bengali artists, musicians, and albums, cinema releases with promos, trailers, stills and reviews. The goal of WBRi is to promote Bengali music and films worldwide. Their Tollywood film news and reviews have been reported to be the most popular Bengali cinema blog accessed outside India; WBRi also allows broadcasting of one's own new albums on the website's live Bangla radio for global promotion, selling of one's own music as digital downloads from their exclusive online store, promote movies among the global audience via exclusive movie news and announcement service, and contact them directly if one wishes to explore electronic promotion and digital distribution of Bengali films in the USA and Canada. WBRi broadcasts under direct license from record companies, and is also the internet's first 100% legal Bengali music streaming and MP3 download web-site (WBRiInc. n.d.).

Television, print journalism, radio and new media thus carry the 'four-pronged' imprint of a changing 21st century affecting the cultures of everyday life, irrespective of areas in urban, suburban, or rural India. Media, as Grossberg argues has penetrated into identity formations based on location, profession and various other factors:

At the same time, the sense of unity among people, created by such powerful identities as were defined by religion, nationality, and work, have themselves been increasingly undermined by the powerful representations of difference that have come to define the media's cultural content, even as the media has come to shape social life. Ultimately, the media's ability to produce people's social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect. (Grossberg 1998, 206)

Conclusion – On Mediations and Convergence

In the context of the virtual world of the media in the free market, the problematized zone of the 'hyperreal' that Jean Baudrillard draws our attention to is

of relevance here. Baudrillard asserts that images are about the ‘hyperreal’, the world of ‘simulation’⁵ that has been widely discussed, from the simulations of Disney Land and the filmic medium, giving rise to a state of collapsing of binaries and polarities through the process of ‘implosion’-(a process in which objects are destroyed by collapsing or by squeezing in on themselves). Milan Kundera has also given a possible new semantic dimension and interpretation of the simulacra through the use of concrete samples and descriptive details. Kundera offers a theoretical question:

Imagology! Who first thought up this remarkable neologism?...what matters is that this word finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many names: advertising agencies, political campaign managers, designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists, barbers, show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey (Kundera 2011, 127).

According to Kundera, the new paradigm of the ‘imagologue’ which is media-constructed, has replaced the role of the ‘ideologue’. He reiterates that “‘imagology has gained historic victory over ideology” (ibid). The connection between this idea and the ubiquitous presence of the media and the outburst of ‘celebrity culture’ is noteworthy here, as Meera Khera, London based publicist for Hollywood actor Jude Law and Sadie Frost adds:

The new generation of celebs know that certain key events in their life are now a commodity-marriages, births and I hate to say even death...Every part of yourself can be sold to the highest bidder. That’s a trend soon going to be seen in India (Khera 2011, 23).

⁵ According to Jean Baudrillard, what has happened in postmodern culture is that our society has become so reliant on models and maps that we have lost all contact with the real world that preceded the map. Reality itself has begun merely to imitate the model, which now precedes and determines the real world: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" . According to Baudrillard, when it comes to postmodern simulation and simulacra, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real”. Baudrillard is not merely suggesting that postmodern culture is artificial, because the concept of artificiality still requires some sense of reality against which to recognize the artifice. His point, rather, is that we have lost all ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice. To clarify his point, he argues that there are three "orders of simulacra": 1) in the first order of simulacra, which he associates with the pre-modern period, the image is a clear counterfeit of the real; the image is recognized as just an illusion, a place marker for the real; 2) in the second order of simulacra, which Baudrillard associates with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the distinctions between the image and the representation begin to break down because of mass production and the proliferation of copies. Such production misrepresents and masks an underlying reality by imitating it so well, thus threatening to replace it (e.g. in photography or ideology); however, there is still a belief that, through critique or effective political action, one can still access the hidden fact of the real; 3) in the third order of simulacra, which is associated with the postmodern age, we are confronted with a precession of simulacra; that is, the representation precedes and determines the real. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only the simulacrum (Felluga 2011).

In the recent past Tollywood celebrity marriages, birthdays, divorce controversies, personal affairs and even sexual orientation have been reported by the press and covered by the television. Thus, images, stories, print visibility, publicity, self-promotion, and commodification of self-talent have been fractured and reduced to triviality or sometimes excessively hyped giving newer meanings to stardom and media. Tollywood's formation in this invasive world of image constructions could possibly be a reverse cultural imperialism countering the excessive and dominant hegemony of Bollywood being synonymously recognized as an all-encompassing category for Indian cinema and for the overall entertainment industry.

The sheer rise in the number of films produced in Tollywood and the ability to fuse the two dominant practices of film making (the popular/commercial with the 'good' content and 'art') in a celebratory spirit, suggests the confluence of these categories of films produced rather than the age old emphasis on the mere cinematic aspect of Bengali cinema. In other words, there seems to be a blurring of the binary between art and commerce on the one hand and on the other, a kind of a convenient and happy marriage for all kinds of films with the mass audience and logically, with the box office as targets. In other words, this signifies how what was earlier termed 'art' films are now infusing high-end technology on high budgets to give their films a glossy, glitzy finish, without compromising on the storyline. The off-midstream filmmakers like Aniruddha Roychoudhury are also taking in top stars, roping in the best technological crew and musicians and lyricists to ensure that their films hit the mass audience across the globe. This has worked very well commercially and critically for films like *Icchhe* and *Ronjona Ami Aar Ashbona* in 2011 released alongside *masala* mainstream films.

This chapter therefore, is an attempt to look at the evolving nature of Tollywood as a culture industry. It is perhaps clear that media convergence is at the crux of this consistent rise in the discourse about the Bengali film industry. The relationship between the television industry and the film industry indicate the tight imbrications of Tollywood content and television TRPs. The growth of both the industries is mutually dependent on each other. The visibility that the print medium has provided to Tollywood has also been crucial for Tollywood's discursive presence and diffusion of the imagination of Tollywood in the public domain. This presence of

Tollywood within the print media space has repeatedly propelled the establishment of a film industry that has evolved from its lowest period during the 80s and 90s and is now in a state of resurgence. However, popular press and the heavy influx of content and discourses on Tollywood are overtly celebratory and it is evident that a large volume of content is trivializing and diluting the actual project of putting a regional film industry into perspective. There is possibly a total lack of a critical framework that pushes the discourse beyond celebration of Tollywood's rise and engages in analyzing the issues of labour, plagiarism, copyright, subversion of genres, professionalizing the bottle-necks and bureaucratic practices that interrupt the processes of film production, exhibition and distribution. Foregrounding of issues related to monopolization by particular production houses, mis-leading or manipulative box-office and trade reports and unethical industry practices have been absent from the media and press discourse for most of the time. However, for an industry reeling under severe pressure for a long period, the present is perhaps the moment when Tollywood is witnessing encouraging times from the perspectives of content and commercial success. The slow but steady entry of few individual producers and independent production companies has triggered the growth of healthy competition in the film industry, finally putting Tollywood on a cusp of transformation that would possibly facilitate its establishment and identity as a prominent, thriving and dynamic regional film industry in India.

Conclusion

This dissertation has been an attempt to investigate the post 1980s scenario of the Bengali film industry in Tollygunje, with a systematic and chronological analysis of the various factors that were responsible for the ‘crisis’ in the cinematic tradition of Bengali cinema. However, I found that much of the published work on this period or for that matter on the ‘crisis narrative’ of the 80s and 90s was confined to the decline in cinematic values and aesthetics of a certain tradition and concept of Bengali cinema, voiced by a particular class and section of the audience. The major concerns expressed were that Bengali cinema had turned into a blatant imitation of cheap Bombay formula films, with cheap elements of ‘masala’, and as a consequence, Bengali mainstream films had transformed into a ‘crass’ affair.

This was a discourse that was heavily invested in the cinematic text and gave precedence to the Bengali middle-class *bhadralok* perception or ideology of ‘good cinema’. In my exploration, I was able to observe that the situation in the post 1980s was a complex one. On the one hand, the death of super star Uttam Kumar led to the fading away of a certain tradition and imagination about mainstream Bengali cinema that also caused a severe financial setback for the industry. On the other, one could see the rise of an alternative cinematic practice. Much of this complexity was a result of the entry of television and the video cassette recorder (VCR) into the city and middle class households. Consequently, the film distribution and exhibition system for Bengali cinema across Bengal was severely affected.

Directors like Anjan Chowdhury, Sukhen Das followed by Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty et al. gained prominence in my reading and analysis of the cinema of this very low phase to its present form, Tollywood, which was significantly marked by the gradual transformations and alterations in the functioning and dynamics of the film industry. However, I have not been able to focus much on the cinematic texts of films made during the 80s, 90s and early 2000s, because my intention was to primarily foreground the circuits and networks that operated within the industry and how these affected the production, distribution and to a certain extent, the reception of Bengali films. The tensions that exhibition policies and the

shifting of audience tastes generated during these two decades have been my major concern.

Hence, industrial economics of this period has been my focus, and I have not been able to fully engage with the textual analysis of films that were being made by a specific group of filmmakers like Anup Sengupta, Bablu Samaddar, Arabinda Mukherjee, Biresh Chattopadhyay et al. The cinematic text, though important, has been largely skirted over because the emphasis in this project has been to focus on material and research related to the industrial processes and dynamics-mainly exhibition and distribution that have been largely sidelined by academic research for a long time

To look into the 1980s and 90s films in terms of their 'crassness' is not enough because one needs to understand that the industry was in a desperate need to develop a cinematic practice that could offer something different from Hindi films and television, and in the process create 'a more localized form of content that could be most closely identified (with) by an audience segment which had never been directly catered to' (Gooptu 2008, 159). Thus audience and class have both been very vital for my project. But within the limited scope of this dissertation, I have not been able to work on a proper study of audience reception or do a 'cultural reading' of the films that fall within these periods. Rather, I have problematically looked at the categories of class and audience, questioning the relevance of issues related to the popularity or success of films that could form subjects of further research and analysis.

The period following liberalization further complicated the situation and functioning of the Bengali film industry, but also created several transformed strategies of film production, distribution and exhibition. Most importantly, the effect of corporatization in the Bombay film industry slowly made its entry into Tollygunge. This process took almost a decade after the economic liberalization in 1991.

The effects of a neo-liberal market and urban life style mainly popularized by television and Bollywood films began to shape and influence the overall business and economics of West Bengal. Though there was a limited and sluggish entry of capitalistic forces into the market of Bengal, it managed to create ripple effects in the

entertainment scenario of the state. The proliferation of Western content through television and internet drastically altered public notions of image, ideas, content and genres. Bengali cinema began to lose out in competition to Bollywood films and world cinema. The creation of multiplex theatres within shopping malls ushered in a revolution in terms of new exhibition spaces mainly in the cities and big towns, creating in the process, a niche audience demanding form and content that would represent this post global life and world view. Independent and floating producers in Bengal had realised by then that their form of cinema was losing its audience even in segments they thought were their main customers.

Shree Venkatesh Films Pvt. Ltd.(SVF) entered into film production but chose to produce films of directors who were already popular and successful in the mainstream. It took them almost a decade to change their *modus operandi* and experiment with a director who was being celebrated by the *bhadralok* middle class for bearing the legacy of ‘good cinema’ and with promises of taking on the mantle Satyajit Ray.

SVF became the first fully corporatized production house in Bengali cinema and initiated the influx of increased finance into film production. They steadily adopted the vertical integration model that enabled them to create and sustain control over all the sectors of film business - production, distribution and exhibition. Mainstream films produced by SVF with an increased inflow of budgets began to imitate the visual aesthetics of Bollywood and South Indian mainstream cinema. This was a visual aesthetic that represented the vision of a global world, drawing in from spaces away from the city of Kolkata. Song and dance sequences were shot in foreign locations and film cities.

However, the content of these films remained a subject of constant criticism for being neither completely ‘Bengali’ nor entirely Bollywood. This is strange because in reality, these very films began to reclaim the lost audience. Box-office reports and the success of these films problematized and rendered ambivalent the actual segment of audience that appropriated and appreciated these films. SVF began also to diversify horizontally by tapping into the multiplex crowd cautiously, choosing directors and films that would not only give them a different market, but also elevate their reputation as a genuine production house of Tollywood.

By the end of 2008, SVF emerged as the most powerful film business unit of Tollywood. The film industry in Bengal experienced a resurgence. The NRI Bengali population began to grow creating a new potential market to be taken into account. Filmmakers like Anjan Dutt followed by Aniruddha Roychowdhury (who came from advertising films) made optimum use of this audience segment with their ‘crossover’ films.

My chapter on SVF has mapped the journey of Tollywood for more than a decade, emblematically using SVF and their films as a template to look at the changing contexts and towards an understanding of the creation and reconstruction of Tollywood as the revamped Bengali film industry that was on its way to becoming a culture industry. I have focussed on aspects like budget, box-office figures, publicity and promotion strategies, new stars and technical upgradation of films produced by SVF to highlight factors that majorly effected the reconfiguration of Tollywood films.

It is interesting to note here, that this entire aspect of improving the style of film production and the introduction of novelty features in the mainstream provided fodder to the English and Bengali press that produced a voluminous discourse on the resurgence of the Bengali film industry and foregrounded the new face of the industry as Tollywood.

This continuing media discourse can be labelled as being overtly celebratory. Very recently however, alternative opinions and analyses have also emerged that look at the success of SVF and their films critically. It is now common knowledge that over the past one year (between mid 2011 to 2012), almost all mainstream films under the SVF banner have been by and large, commercial and critical failures. Yet, SVF continues to project manipulative figures that state otherwise, so that its image of being at the top remains undented. In a magazine called *Cinema Ebong*, Arindam Mukherjee elaborately illustrates the downfall of the romantic genre films of SVF, and vehemently criticises its exercise of excessive control over the industry, new actors, directors and technicians. He provides a detailed study of SVF’s recent strategy to re-establish their main revenue generator genre, which is to import ‘sex symbols’ from Bollywood and the South Indian film industry to sleaze up the films, so that there is renewed curiosity and interest in mainstream romantic genre films. Mukherjee gives credit to small budget films and the cinema of the present day

Tollywood, by new directors and producers. He categorically chooses films like Anik Dutta's 2012 release *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, Anjan Dutt's *Bomkesh*, Sandip Ray's *Royal Bengal Rahashya* as films that will stay and become the marker for Tollywood's identity (Mukherjee, 2012: 37-45). However one must also note that the film magazine, *Cinema Ebong*, is owned, managed and controlled by Rose Valley Productions of which Gautam Kundu is CEO and owner. Rose Valley is one of the prime new rivals whose films are providing very stiff competition to SVF with their productions that are polarised between *System*, a plagiarised film directed by Riingo, whose films do not do well commercially but create a lot of pre-release hype, and Gautam Ghose's *Moner Manush* which won the Golden Peacock at the Goa IFFI in 2011.

In this context, one might critically look at the glossy film magazine *Cinema Ebong* as a political strategy by Rose Valley with the axe-grinding purpose of promoting its own films, television serials, actors, technicians. Although SVF has never ventured into the press media in this way, but stories abound that they have some 'special' journalists in the mainstream media to do the needful. This however, does not throw any negative light on Arindam Mukherjee's insightful analysis backed by solid figures and data.

Over the past two years, the print and television media have been devoting generous space and air time to Tollywood-related content and information. The fact that a local culture industry allows the local media to feed into it strongly, reinstates the deep nexus and imbrication that the media and the Tollywood industry have developed. This symbiotic relation has definitely worked in favour of the industry by generating huge amounts of information about and providing visibility to the Tollywood industry.

This resurgence narrative however, tactfully chooses films that have mostly worked across city and semi-urban audiences, and enjoyed critical appreciation and satisfactory box-office earnings. Speaking to industry insiders, however, I have discovered that figures related to trade and the box-office are still very speculative. There is no formal or professional body in Tollywood industry that keeps records of these areas. Even reputed print media houses like *Anadabazar Patrika* have stopped mentioning box-office figures while writing about recent Tollywood films. There is

an absence of trade weeklies and magazines like *Trade Guide* in Bollywood which exclusively dedicate themselves to the distribution, exhibition and production market of Bollywood films.

The present situation in Tollywood is an ambivalent one. It is not yet clear what shape and form it will take in the immediate future. The number of films being released are on a constant rise which is alarming in a sense as very bad films fall within these numbers with one time producers, directors and actors who disappear after a film or two, pulling down the average quality and content of the contemporary Bengali film. Categories have become mixed and blurred creating genres such as ‘middle-of-the-road’, ‘experimental’, ‘formula-based’ ‘parallel’ or ‘arty’.

Classification into categories and genres have become vague, ambivalent and ambiguous. Tollywood is in the process of ‘becoming’ so its characteristics are not clearly definable at this moment. The new genre of films (*Bedroom* by Mainak Bhowmik, *Godaye Gondogol* by Aniket Chattopdhyay, *Mahanagar@Kolkata* by Suman Mukherjee, *Hemlock Society* by Srijit Mukherjee, *Aparajita Tumi* by Aniruddha Roychowdhury, *Laptop* by Kaushik Ganguly et al) reflect the fast-growing consumer capitalism that has transformed the boundaries of class identity, especially that of the middle-class.

At the same time, this ever changing and evolving transformation has changed the circumstances for the *bhadralok* class forcing them to develop a boundary of its class identity and its representation. The new genre of Tollywood films, that I have not been able to focus on much is a reflection of this attempt . Examples are films like *Antaheen*, *Abohomaan*, *Autograph*, *Charulata 2011*, *Ranjana Ami ar Ashbona*, *Aparajita Tumi*.

Interestingly why a certain range of filmmakers have emerged in Tollywood who help create and establish a cinematic practice and style remains unclear. At the other end of the continuum we have an entire range of filmmakers and films that hardly get proper theatrical release or draw public and media attention (for example the films made by Kaushik Mukherjee-Q, Mrinal Lahiri’s *Brishtir Chayachhabi*, Shyamal Karmakar’s *Chokher Pani* etc.) . This raises critical questions like - why are such films made? Who finances these films? Where is the audience for these films?

Does this scenario push films, audiences and the market into more niche brackets? It is a challenge to decode this contemporary condition, which seems like it were in a limbo. There is a constant and on-going overlapping of mediums and content.

In spite of being touted, projected and promoted as the all-encompassing entertainment industry of Bengal, Tollywood needs to introspect its individuality and identity seriously, that is, as being both counter-hegemonic to Bollywood and yet distinguishable unto itself. Moinak Biswas in “*Neo-bhadralok Darpan*” (neo-*bhadralok* image) on the ‘neo-*bhadralok* cinema’ (according to Biswas this form or genre of cinema is not ‘new’ but *neo*, because this genre of film-making is in a process and all of its characteristics are not clearly definable or defined) talks about the emergence of a new genre of films in Tollywood. Biswas analyses some repeated motifs in these films like interior spaces of multi-storeyed apartments, action sequences mostly centered in living rooms, bedroom spaces, private hospitals, highways, the centrality of marital and/or extra marital relationship themes, and a kind of mundane reality. This genre almost erases the heterogeneity of city life and urbanity and repeatedly focuses on a homogeneous upper middle class community and some specific signs of this community. Apart from the apartment or location spaces, two other popular spatial and locational features in these films are - North Calcutta household spaces and picnic spots. While the former invests the films with a sense of nostalgia, the latter strips the spaces from confined boundaries. The new film genre and its classification initially claimed for themselves the realistic charge of earlier realisms. Strangely though, this genre is almost silent about contemporary socio-political realities. For example, these films never react to issues like Nandigram and other contemporary movements. Biswas thinks that it is not a coincidence, and that this genre became popular in Kolkata when a certain kind of community culture became relevant in this city. Therefore, the question of identifying this ‘genre’ also becomes crucial and immediate raising questions like whether it falls under the binaries of ‘parallel’ or ‘mainstream’? Or does it further problematise the idea of ‘parallel’ and ‘mainstream’?

These are discussions and analyses that perhaps do not strictly fall within the range of my dissertation but could become subjects of future research and analysis. This dissertation is an attempt to trace the journey of the regional film industry from a

period of crisis to its present form as ‘Tollywood’, partly as a response to Bollywood and to the media and public. I have tried to map the industrial changes and dynamics that enable the construction of Tollywood in the public sphere and in media discourses. The renewed interest and curiosity among film enthusiasts, cinephiles, the press and academics about Tollywood was my inspiration and motivation to try and unfold the various circuits and layers that operate within and without the film industry that resulted in the formation and establishment of Tollywood.

Filmography

Aparajita Tumi (Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, 2012)
Autograph (Srijit Mukherjee, 2010)
Bancharamer Bagan (Tapan Sinha, 1980)
Baishey Srabon (Srijit Mukherjee, 2011)
Bandhan (Ravi Kinagi, 2004)
Bhai Amar Bhai (Swapan Saha, 1996)
Bhalobasa Bhalobasa (Ravi Kinagi, 2008)
Bhooter Bhubishyot (Anik Dutta, 2012)
Bor Ashbe Ekhuni (Rangan Chakraborty, 2008)
Challenge (Raj Chakraborty, 2009)
Champion (Ravi Kinagi, 2003).
Chirodini tumi je amar, (Raj Chakraborty, 2007)
Chokher Bali (Rituparno Ghosh, 2003)
Choto Bou (Anjan Chowdhury, 1988)
Dada Thakur (Haranath Chakraborty, 2001),
Dadar Kirti (Tarun Majumdar, 1981)
Dakhal (Goutam Ghosh 1984)
Dooriyaan (Bhimsain Khurana, 1979)
Dui Prithibi (Raj Chakraborty, 2010)
Ekanto Apan (Bires Chatteropadhyay, 1987)
Grihayuddhha (Buddhadeb Dasgupta 1984)
Gurudakhina (Anjan Chowdhury, 1987)
Hemlock Society (Srijit Mukherjee, 2012)
Houseful (Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay, 2009)
Iti Mrinalini (Aparna Sen, 2011)
Juddha (Ravi Kinagi, 2005)

Khana Baraha (Bijoy Bose, 1981)
Laptop (Kaushik Ganguly 2012)
Ogo Bodhu Shundari (Salil Dutta, 1981)
Mayar Badhan (Swapn Saha, 1997)
Memories in March (Sanjoy Nag, 2011)
Minister Fatakesto (Swapn Saha, 2007)
MLA Fatakesto (Swapn Saha, 2006)
Mon Je Kore Uru Uru (Sujit Guha, 2010)
Mon Mane Na (Sujit Guha, 2008)
Poran Jai Jolia re (Ravi Kinagi, 2009)
Plot number 5 (Yogesh Saxena, 1981).
Pratibad (Haranath Chakraborty, 2001),
Rajashaheb (Palash Banerjee, 1980)
Saathi (Haranath Chakraborty, 2002),
Sedin Dekha Hoyechilo (Sujit Mondal, 2010)
Shasurbari Zindabad (Haranath Chakraborty, 2000)
Subho Dristi (Prabhat Roy, 2007)
Shukno Lanka (Gaurav Pande, 2010)
The Bong Connection (Anjan Dutt, 2007)
The Last Lear (Rituparno Ghosh, 2007)
Tintoretto Jishu (Sandip Ray, 2008)
Tumi Ele Tai (Prabhat Roy, 1999)
Sakhi Tumi Kar (Swapn Saha, 1996)

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