

**The Post Liberalization Bengali ‘Parallel’
Cinema: *Bhadralok* Nostalgia, the Politics of
Past-ness, and the Discourse of ‘Difference’**

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CINEMA STUDIES

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation titled "**The Post Liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema: *Bhadralok* Nostalgia, the Politics of Past-ness, and the Discourse of 'Difference'**" 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.

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Certificate


This is to certify that the dissertation titled "**The Post Liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema: *Bhadralok* Nostalgia, the Politics of Past-ness, and the Discourse of 'Difference'**" submitted by Spandan Bhattacharya 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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Introduction

Abstract:

This M.Phil dissertation project attempts to study the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema as a nostalgic film practice of the Bengali *bhadralok* intelligentsia. I use the term 'parallel' to indicate its distinctive aesthetics and limited release structure in relation to West Bengal's mainstream cinema in this period. I will try to demonstrate how an idea of the 'glorious' Bengali cinematic past, and an attempt to reclaim that 'lost' past became central to this film culture textually and also in terms of its production and publicity logic. Central to my study of this 'parallel' cinema's nostalgia discourse is the question of 'good taste' and how this is imagined in continuation with the earlier Bengali cinematic practice. My project aims to problematize this very notion of 'good taste' for this cinema focusing on how the idea was generated and proliferated through film forms, production-distribution chains, some specific exhibition sites, media institutions etc. The dissertation will try to map this 'parallel' cinema and its nostalgia discourse in post 1990s West Bengal recognizing its multiple origins in the film society movement, in the over valuation of realist film practice in journalistic and academic writings, in the late 1970s and 1980s 'crisis narrative' of Bengali cinematic practice and in the overall *bhadralok* anxiety in post liberalization Bengal. Relationally, I would also like to discuss how this 'parallel' film culture presupposes a kind of 'cultured Bengaliness' to be performed in film texts and their circulation, and how the informal middleclass intellectual machinery maintains and structures this notion as a 'difference' from the mainstream model in its networks and regimes of reception.

The discourse of 'our' lost film tradition and attempts to reclaim that loss

...films were more innocent then, more romantic, more magical. The stars of the 1930s were smarter and more elegant than those of today. Memories of adolescence, as Sally Alexander points out, bear the weight of possibility, those dreams of a better life, of a more beautiful self, that pervade the adolescent's intense wondering what might become. For the first movie made generation, the dreams were saturated with cinema; today their cinema is gone. But the dreams are not forgotten.

Annette Kuhn.¹

In *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, Annette Kuhn beautifully discusses how for the 1930s generation in Britain, certain patterns of remembrance of cinema going got associated with their memories of growing up, of adolescence and childhood. The memory of the film texts, and the memory of cinema going or the possibilities of cinema going was an important element of the shared 'dream' of a generation who lost their cinema but kept the dream alive with them. It is not rare for any generation habituated to a mode of film going practice and certain patterns of film culture to become disappointed when they encounter a newer film culture. The sense of lost perfection and disapproval comes when the new cinema for the new generation does not fit into the mould that the previous generation lives with in their memory and in their imagination. It is not exceptional for the cinema of any period or of any culture to be situated in a past/ present comparison, or for a generation to feel a sense of regret and loss about what the previous generation had. However in historicizing a film culture we only recognize something as a 'break' when the past/present trope or lamentation for something lost goes beyond the generational conflict. We may call it a break when the remembrance of 'something lost' acts not only in the registers of a generational difference but also in some other broader parameters- in larger socio-political-measures, in the patterns of the constitution of new elements of social class formation or in alternative patterns that 'reclaim' that loss. In the 1980s-1990s, Bengali cinema experienced a sense of 'loss', and the attempt at 'reclaiming that loss' in film texts, production and film discourse took place at a scale that can potentially be called a 'break' in the history of Bengali cinema. My concern in this dissertation is to explore that

¹ See Annette Kuhn, Ch. 5, "Growing up with Cinema" in *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris & Co, Ltd, 2002) p. 134.

narrative of reclamation in post 1990s Bengali cinema while relating it to the historical break of the Bengali film industry.

To recognize the break and the narrative of reclamation I have to very briefly mention the cultural dominance of a particular (*bhadralok*) class in Bengal and its relation to Bengali cinema.² The question of *bhadralok* taste and *bhadralok* film culture is central to the narrative of reclamation that I am concerned with in this dissertation. “Bhadralok” literally meaning ‘gentle folk’ in Bengali language is a term widely used in Bengal to refer to the educated, though not necessarily affluent middle and upper sections of society, and is often used not only as a socio economic category but also as a cultural entity. As scholars have explored, during British colonization in India (1757- 1947) an upwardly mobile section emerged in Bengal that was physically removed from the productive activities of both agriculture and industrialization, but gained a significant position as the ruling class. Western education, a certain kind of learnedness, a world of culture and the rhetoric about culture gave a unified identity to this heterogeneous category called *bhadralok* formed of principally Hindu ‘upper’ caste groups. And in the late nineteenth century they came to exercise social power and cultural dominance over both urban centers like Calcutta as well as the rural areas. The *bhadralok* class of pre-independence India that had received rents from the zamindari system, survived in the later period on Government service and other learned professions. It is interesting to note that this dominant class in Bengal did not represent the commercial interests either of the agrarian sector or of the industrial sector. And scholars have argued that one of the main aspects of Bengali culture is the “non Bengali nature of Bengal’s economic classes and also the non productive character of its ruling elites, the Bhadrakok”³. In the Bengali film industry however, this *bhadralok* presence gained significance in the 1930s with the remarkable success of New Theaters that continued in the later decades of the Uttam-Suchitra era. Sharmistha Gooptu has tried to explain the narrative of *bhadralok* cultural

² For this brief narrative of *bhadralok* history in the following lines I drew from Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

³ See Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan* (Indiana University Press, 2005) p. 185.

dominance in 1930s Bengali cinema in an article where she has argued that the (economic) marginalization of the *bhadralok* class within the Bengali province and in the country “led the *bhadralok* to better appreciate opportunities thrown up by newer, relatively unexplored avenues like the Cinema”⁴.

In *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Gooptu sees how the New Theaters’ success led to a Bengali *bhadralok* cinema supported by its close connections with Bengali literature, the literati and the discourse of Bengali culture.⁵ What she calls the “perfect marriage of economics and respectability”⁶ and the discourse of Bengali-ness is, according to her, continued in different generic practices, cinematic figures and directions in the later period of Bengali cinema. In her book, she sees in this Bengali-ness a desire to imagine Bengal as an alternative/other nation to India. In his critique of *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Moinak Biswas while recognizing its archival value has pointed out the limitations of this kind of an imagination – one that homogenizes the contradictory tendencies of Bengali cinema in a narrative of *bhadralok* culture and Bengali-ness.⁷ Biswas asks what then will happen to instances like Bengali directors and technicians working in the South Indian films shot in the studios of Calcutta during 1931-1935, or how should one see the influence of Kashmiri or Parsi theater figures in films like *Jhinder Bandi* or *Khudhita Pashan*. Even in popular New Theaters films like *Vidyapati* or *Chandidas*, Biswas finds the art direction, acting style, and background music in many ways much closer to other regions of India than *bhadralok* Bengali culture. The problem arises when this Bengali *bhadralok* class or *bhadralok* culture is seen and treated as an ahistoric, fixed category that remains stable across time. We must remember that in the being and becoming of the *bhadralok* class, the changing idea of the self, socio-political transformations, the emergence of newer belief systems and other major and minor social phenomena have always acted on this category as in the case of any other social and cultural type. A problem arises if we completely ignore the slipperiness of this term while using it in history writing. And yet, this term is a necessary

⁴ See Sharmistha Gooptu, “An Appeal Beyond Aesthetics”, *EPW*, June 14, 2003, p. 2413.

⁵ See Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2010).

⁶ Gooptu, “An Appeal Beyond Aesthetics,” p. 2414.

⁷ See Moinak Biswas, “Jatiyota O Atmaparichayer Taan,” *Anandabazar Patrika*, 2nd April, 2011, p. 6.

signifier in Bengal's cultural history, and simply because of the heterogeneous tendency that the notion and the idea that the '*bhadralok*' carries we can not restrain our self from using the term. I believe it is wise to use this term as a provisional unity, while being aware of its limitations, and also of the possibilities of plurality that this term can refer to.

The historian Sumit Sarkar sees this self defining term '*bhadralok*' serving as sociological shorthand and also as a broad charismatic authority for itself in the class' self-perception.⁸ This idea of *bhadralok* self-perception is useful to me for understanding the 'break' that I see in cinematic practice and to map the narrative of reclamation that I want to explore. The discourse of *bhadralok* culture and the notion of a certain kind of Bengali-ness that was a dominant feature of Bengali cinema experienced a break in *bhadralok* perception in the 1980s. Here it would be valid to ask whether this was essentially a real 'break' in the history of Bengali cinema, or if, and how much this was based on a certain perception. And more importantly, whose perception and perspective should we take as the standard perception and perspective. It seems to me that this is a question that can be debated over endlessly and we may never find any final answer. Hence, I would like to start with the question of a belief system and its dominance in structuring a cultural history. Bengali cinema in the 1950s and the 1960s and partly in the 1970s may represent and carry multiple cultural influences, but in the dominant belief system, it was a cinema of the Bengali *bhadralok* class. The popular imagery of the Uttam-Suchitra romance, or the narratives based on Bengali literature possibly had an audience also in the non *bhadralok* section of Bengal's population, but largely the pleasure it provided, the world it represented is close to the *bhadralok* world and is identified as 'our cinema' in the *bhadralok* belief system. Moreover, in the period that I take as the context for my narrative of post liberalization Bengali cinema, the 1980s' Bengali public sphere strongly identified this cinema of the previous decades as the cinema of 'our' *bhadralok* Bengali class and recognized these decades as the 'glorious past' of Bengali cinema. And at the same time, the 1980s is seen as a 'break' in *bhadralok* film history with the emergence and popularity of a certain kind of Bengali

⁸ See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 169.

film that caused the 'crisis phase' of Bengali cinema in this period and the decades that followed.

The Bengali film industry in the 1980s experienced a 'new phase' of Bengali cinema with a new group of film makers and producers and their imagination of a 'new' target audience with films like *Shatru* (Anjan Chowdhury, 1984) or *Gurudakshina* (Anjan Chowdhury, 1987). The narrative frameworks heralded by directors like Anjan Chowdhury in the earlier 1980s were followed by filmmakers like Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty in the late 1980s and 1990s with films like *Mangaldeep* (Haranath Chakraborty, 1989), *Bedenir Prem* (Swapan Saha, 1992), *Ajker Santan* (Haranath Chakraborty, 1997), *Pabitra Papi* (Anup Sengupta, 1997) or *Baba Keno Chakor?* (Swapan Saha, 1998). While being extremely popular, these films earned widespread criticism from the Bengali *bhadralok* intelligentsia for their 'vulgarity' and the 'crudity' of their narrative model. Popular newspapers and magazines published letters of a dissatisfied Bengali film audience, and the opinion of industry persons regarding this 'crisis' of Bengali Cinema. Perhaps the main reason for *bhadralok* discomfort was that the mainstream model of Bengali cinema started incorporating 'masala' elements⁹ like song and dance sequences, stereotypical villains, modes of hyper melodrama which were seen as closer to Hindi film aesthetics in the *bhadralok* public sphere. There were instances when Hindi films were dubbed in Bengali¹⁰ and Bengali films like *Tinmurti* (Prmod Lahiri, 1984) had a Bombay star cast. Bangladeshi film production houses also made films like *Beder Meye Josna* (Motiur Rahman Panu, 1991) or *Swami Keno Asami?* (Manowar Khokan, 1997) that became hugely popular in the Bengali mainstream film market. The popularity of these films caused a strong sense of disapproval and anxiety amongst the *bhadralok* intelligentsia.

⁹ I must refer here to an essay by Sharmistha Gooptu, "Changing contexts, new texts" in the book *Television in India: Satellites, Politics and Cultural Changes* ed. by Nalin Mehta (Taylor & Francis, 2008). In this essay Gooptu talks about these films' emergence in the 1980s in the Bengali film industry and she uses the term 'masala' films.

¹⁰ For instance the dubbed version of Hindi films like *Mastan* (Aseem Samanta, 1989) or *Dalal* (Partho Ghosh, 1993) had parallel releases in Bengal.

In this context I identify some films like *Unishe April* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1996), *Asukh* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1999), *Paromitar Ekdin* (Aparna Sen, 2000) *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* (Subrata Sen, 2001), *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* (Anjan Das, 2002) etc that emerged in the mid 90s in a direct oppositional stance towards the mainstream and constructed the paradigm of the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema, not only in terms of their use of particular aesthetic devices or their cinematic appeal but also their imagination of an audience, their marketing structure, their production patterns and the logic of their publicity. Popular press columns appreciated these films (by filmmakers like Rituparno Ghosh, Anjan Das and others) for regenerating a 'lost' pleasure and reclaiming the lost (*bhadralok*) audience of Bengali cinema. The dissatisfaction with the mainstream model however continued in the press and in public sphere discussions.

One of the very first writings that appeared in *Sattar Dashak* (The decade of Seventies), is an essay by Someshwar Bhomik called "Sattar Dashaker Bangla Chhabi"/ "The Bengali Films of the Nineteen Seventies" where he observes 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.¹¹ 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 a totally unrealistic, lower standard film made its silver jubilee at the box office, it expressed our shameless nature in our cultural characterless-ness."¹² It's interesting to note that like Ghosh, the opinions expressed in many other books and articles saw the popularity of certain kinds of films as a marker of the 'crisis' of the Bengali film industry. Ghosh later even laments the popularity of a filmmaker like Anjan Chowdhury. He writes about Chowdhury,

(I have heard that) he (Anjan Chowdhury) has broken the records of many of the earlier filmmakers. He has become so famous that even other directors are keen on having their film scripts written by him. But it is difficult to digest his

¹¹ See Someshwar Bhomik "Sattar Dashaker Bangla Chhabi" in *Sattar Dashak* ed. By Anil Acharya (Kolkata: Anushtup Publication, 1981) p. 28-43.

¹² See Somen Ghosh, Ch. 7 "Natuner Sandhan?" in *Bangla Cinemar Palabadal* The Changing Phase of Bengali Cinema (Calcutta: Shyamali, 1990) p.135. Translation mine.

films for any educated Bengali with proper taste. His films are not only unreal and bizarre, but full of a kind of tasteless vulgarity. It is really a matter of research, which class of audience makes these films hits.¹³

Ghosh laments the loss of the 'characteristic purity' that Bengali films once had and their efficient expression of 'clean reality' that was rare in other regional films.¹⁴ It is not only Ghosh but also in the writings of others like Partha Raha or Rajat Roy that the 'cultural superiority' of earlier Bengali films compared to both other regional films of that period and contemporary Bengali films is discussed. Raha for instance develops his comparison of Bengali cinema's 'now' and 'then' narrative not only in terms of the deterioration of film quality, but also with reference to the emergence of the control of Tollywood by the Bombay mafia or the underworld dons of the coal industry and that of the non Bengali film producers chain (with surnames like Kejriwal, Agarwal or Khaitan)¹⁵. Rajat Roy in his book similarly recognizing the 'declining' quality of Bengali films, studies the fragmentation of the Bengali audience¹⁶. Most of these writings present a crisis story of Bengali cinema from the perspective of the "educated Bengali *bhadralok* class", who feels distanced from the 'crudity' and 'vulgarity' of the contemporary mainstream model and the target audience of this model.

Sharmistha Gooptu going beyond this narrative of lamentation, identifies the 1980s as a departure from the order of 'bhadralok Bengaliness' and tries to focus on the logic of its emergence¹⁷. She identifies the reasons for the emergence of this cinema as the financial crisis of the industry, the emergence of TV culture as an alternative to the cinema going habit of the middle class audience (especially of middle class women whom she sees as until then, "the industry's most stable audience segment"¹⁸), and the death of Bengali cinema's top star Uttam Kumar that resulted in "a profound transition"¹⁹. She maps her argument in terms of firstly, the changing scenario of West Bengal's socio political situation when the Left front government came to power in 1977

¹³ Ibid, p. 162. Translation mine.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Partha Raha, *Bangla Chalachchitra Kathakata o Anyanya Prabandho* (Kolkata: Ratna Publication, 2004) p. 80-81.

¹⁶ Rajat Roy, *Bangalir Chalachchitra O Sanskriti* (Kolkata: Sristi Publication, 2001).

¹⁷ Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Op. cit, p. 254.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 263.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and how they transformed 'public imagery' from the better sections of society to the 'subaltern classes', and secondly the changed strategy of the marketing of Bengali popular cinema that could provide "a unique local brand" to the people who "had never been so directly addressed".²⁰ It is true that the Left secured its electoral base in Bengal for more than three decades by using the strong support of the rural population and the 'uneducated' urban labor classes. But scholars have also shown how the leftist regime was based on the *bhadralok* leadership of Bengal and party leaders and ministers mostly 'represented' the *bhadra*, educated, urban class²¹. So the transformed imagination of the 'subaltern classes' as the cinema going public might not follow the simplistic logic of the overpowering presence of the 'subaltern class' in the Leftist regime. Parallel to the popularity of a certain kind of Bengali cinema amongst a certain audience base, a dissatisfaction and disapproval about them also emerged in the public sphere quite significantly, and a strong sense of Leftist rhetoric can be felt in these critiques. Even the initial years of the Leftist politics of Bengal took the cultural aspects of Bengali society quite seriously: the West Bengal Film Development Corporation Limited was established in 1983, the foundation of Paschimbanga Natya Academy in 1986, the Paschimbanga Bangla Academy in 1987, and the establishing of Nandan, the West Bengal Film Centre in 1985 reflected the state's idea of 'educating the masses', to develop their 'art sense'. The expansion of Calcutta during this period and the emergence of a new city bred class in this expanding city definitely had its impact on the idea of film entertainment but that might not be explicated or comprehensible in a linear causal chain.

Gooptu very interestingly observes how the narrative logic of cinema changed during this period for a new film market: bringing in 'action heroes' who were almost absent in the earlier decades of Bengali cinema, or offering the story of a "domestic servant's romance and marriage with his employer's daughter" whereas in earlier Bengali films the figure of the servant had been used only for comic relief.²² The marketing

²⁰ Ibid, p. 266- 267.

²¹ For details see Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: the Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Also see Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Aseema Sinha., *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

²² Gooptu. *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Op. cit, p. 264-265.

question was central to the film aesthetics and plot development behind this 'transformation' of Bengali cinematic practice, but along with it we also have to understand the newer production system and its operating logic.²³ Moreover, in this transformative narrative, the imagination of a certain type of spectator was more important than the actual/ real audience. For me to explore the break and the reclamation narrative, this idea and imagination, memory and perception of the past and the present plays a much more important role than what 'real changes' occurred in the audience base. One brief example that I want to give here to problematize the narrative of the newer phase of Bengali cinema that 'exclusively' served the subaltern mass of Bengali cinema is the role of television. If it is taken for granted that from the 1990s onwards, television provided *bhadralok* entertainment that caused the decline of *bhadralok* spectatorship of Bengali cinema and that in turn resulted in a certain kind of Bengali film being exclusively made for a certain kind of film audience who did not have television sets at their homes, then how do we deal with the question of the increasing visibility of the new kind of mass cinema on television as well? Is it the same *bhadralok* public who are fine with this kind of film practice on TV, but are reluctant to visit the film theatres to watch these films, or is there something in the production/distribution/exhibition logic beyond the textual logic that caused this middle class reluctance. The question of technology is also important and hence needs a serious discussion.

Thus in my narrative, to understand the 'break' in *bhadralok* cinema I rely on the perception of the *bhadralok* belief system, and whether the same *bhadralok* hegemony that denied the emergence of a new Bengali film culture were fine to be habituated with it on TV or not is a spectatorship question that is difficult to establish, and one that does not impact the *bhadralok* nostalgia for a cinema that is lost. What I am concerned with here for my narrative is the dominant *bhadralok* belief system and their position on the new mainstream cinema. And I trace from newspaper archives and my interviews of the people who experienced that moment as film directors, producers, film society activists, journalists or simply film viewers how the dominant (*bhadralok*) belief system rejected

²³ I have tried to explore this question briefly in my first chapter in my discussion of a figure like Swapan Saha and the production chain that he or his contemporary film makers of Bengal worked with.

this new phase of Bengali cinema. And in this very moment the various sectors engaged in the history writing of Bengali cinema posit the contemporary in a 'crisis narrative' comparing it to the 'glorious' history of Bengali cinema. From the regular section of newspaper columns to a change in the film society approach, from making documentaries on Bengali film history to the emerging habit of watching old Bengali films on the big screen (*Nandan* screenings) or small screen, the public sphere is going through a phase of gaining a 'historical' awareness of Bengali films. With a certain kind of Bengali film becoming popular with a certain kind of people, the *bhadralok* started contrasting their films and their film culture of the past with the culture that dominates in present moment with its 'crudity' and 'vulgarity'. Imagining the present moment as the dominance of the vulgar mainstream, the *bhadralok* public sphere discourse imagined a 'parallel' of the quality films of the past and present exceptions that carry a legacy of that past. And I believe that it is this serious attempt to recognize and differentiate 'our' films from 'their' films that led to the narrative of reclaiming 'our' (*bhadralok*) films. Here it is also important to mention that the cultural need for a *bhadralok* 'parallel' film culture and the 'parallel' film culture that came into being are not necessarily linked in a causal chain. Both these phenomena - the cultural need for a *bhadralok* parallel cinema and an emergent (parallel) film culture feed into each other. In this discourse of 'parallel' Bengali cinema, *bhadralok* nostalgia and a memory of the *bhadralok* cinematic past provided the perspective from which an idea of the 'parallel' came into being. Both in idea and in the practice of this 'parallel' film culture in the post liberalization moment, I see a significant departure from the earlier 'parallel'/'art house' traditions of Bengali films.

The idea of a Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema in the Post Liberalization Moment

Shoma A. Chatterjee in her book recognized a new wave of Bengali films in the 1990s with films like *Ek Je Aāhhe Kanya*, *Unishe April* or *Titli*.²⁴ She states that when the monotony and the lack of art of the mainstream made 'us' disappointed, a 'ray of hope'

²⁴ See Shoma A. Chatterjee, *Cinema Shudhu Cinema Noy/ Cinema is not only Cinema* (Kolkata: Parumita Publication, 2004).

could be sensed in this new stream of Bengali films that were 'good films' and were also commercially successful.²⁵ What she found 'new' in this new stream of (parallel) films was the 'new' point of view towards the 'not so new' subjects of their plots. In an *Anandabazar Patrika* article, Swapan Kumar Ghosh in recognizing this 'departure' of some new Bengali films saw them as carrying the legacy of good Bengali commercial films and described how these films remained 'parallel' to the contemporary mainstream.²⁶ In Bengal, the origin of the art/parallel cinema discourse can be traced back to the late 1940s film society movement and the formation of the *Calcutta Film Society* (in 1947) "spearheaded by Satyajit Ray, who with his associates underlined the significance of cinema as a recognized art form"²⁷. The film societies by organizing festivals, bringing out publications, arranging talks, took pride in "serving the cause of good cinema" and mobilizing the "hopes of a healthy film scene".²⁸ The 1950s witnessed the release and international recognition of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. The film had its theatrical debut and a special screening at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. It was widely admired in the international festival circuit and in 1956 received the 'Best Human Document' award at the Cannes Film Festival. In the writings of film society members then, the split between mainstream popular films and 'quality' films was maintained. Ray himself in his writings was critical of the 'quality' of average Indian films pointing towards their 'visual dissonances' and 'lack of maturity' in the fundamentals of film making.²⁹ In 1965 Cine Central was established in Calcutta with film director Madhu Bose as the President and Satyajit Ray as the Vice President of this organization, to 'increase appreciation for good films among the general public'.³⁰

The second generation of 'art house' filmmakers like Goutam Ghose, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Utpalendu Chakraborty and Nabyendu Chatterjee emerged during the Indian New Wave movement of the 1970s. In India 'New Cinema' directors influenced by the

²⁵ Ibid, p.11.

²⁶ See Swapan Kumar Ghosh. "Bangla Chhabite Ekhan Anek Vagavagi". *Anandabazar Patrika*, 4th October, 2000, p. 5

²⁷ See Prabodh Maitra, "The Film Scene; Summing Up", *Seven Decades of Bengali Cinema* (Calcutta: Nandan, 1990).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See Satyajit Ray. *Our Films Their Films* (Orient Longman Private Limited, 1976) p. 21.

³⁰ As referred in the memorandum of the association of the *Cine Central*, Calcutta.

auteuristic orientation of 1960s international art cinema engaged in an 'alternative' film practice that defined itself in opposition to the mainstream cinema.³¹ Aruna Vasudev points out how this new movement was born of 'governmental decision' and not from "the impetus of filmmakers rebelling against the existing popular cinema,"³² whereas critics like Iqbal Masud criticize this cinema's own version of orthodoxy and detachment from average viewers³³. Mira Reym Binford sees this cinema as a kind of second or alternative national cinema which demonstrates "the nation's progressive social commitments and modern cultural stance" internationally.³⁴ M. Madhava Prasad reads this cinema's realist aesthetics as a national, political project positioning it in the broader terrain of the state's ideological practice.³⁵ The New Cinema directors of India radically departed from the idea of the mainstream and the model of Indian popular cinema both in terms of film form and film content. For funding and distribution of their films in many cases they had to rely on state organizations like the FFC that later became the NFDC and other state bodies. The FFC or the Film Finance Corporation was founded by the government in 1960 with the aim of giving loans to directors who wanted to make films outside the commercial circuit and of supporting films with small budgets by talented and promising directors. In 1980 the FFC merged with Film Export Corporation to form the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC).

This period of 'experimental' film making in India coincided with the new political phase of Bengal when the Leftist front came to power and took special interest in 'developing' film culture in Bengal. Before the formation of the West Bengal Film Development Corporation, the Government of West Bengal produced films like *Ganadebata* (Tarun Majumdar, 1979), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (Satyajit Ray, 1980) or *Parshuram* (Mrinal Sen, 1980). In 1980 the West Bengal Colour Film & Sound Laboratory Corporation Limited was incorporated as a wholly owned Government organization in Bengal with the object of promoting and undertaking the improvement of

³¹ See Mira Reym Binford, "The Two Cinemas of India" in John D. H. Downing ed. *Film and Politics in the Third World* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

³² Cited in Yves Thoraval, *The Cinemas of India* (Macmillan, 2000) p. 146.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Binford, Op. cit, p. 164.

³⁵ See Madhava Prasad, *The Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 188-216.

cinema in the state. The name of the company was changed to West Bengal Film Development Corporation Limited (WBFDCCL) with effect from 1st July, 1983. Many remarkable films of the second generation of art house filmmakers were produced or co-produced by this organization on behalf of the government of West Bengal. For example, in 1981 with Gautam Ghose's *Dakhal* or in 1982 with Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Grihayuddha*, or in 1983 with Utpalendu Chakraborty's *Chokh* or Saroj Dey's *Koni* (1986), the West Bengal government showed its investment, both literally and metaphorically, in 'good cinema'. But most of their films failed to reach an audience for lack of proper distribution or lack of popular appeal. Kiranmoy Raha criticizes this 'second birth':

...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.³⁶

If writers like Kiranmoy Raha blamed their thematic concerns for not being crowd pullers, Someshwar Bhoomik explored the difficulties of state patronage in drawing a larger mass.³⁷

Raha quoted filmmaker Gautam Ghose saying that, "art filmmakers (like him) are stagnating for the last fifteen years".³⁸ Ghose stated that "films are being made, sent to the festivals and awards duly won- but that's virtually the end of it," implying that their films do not have audiences outside the limited festival and film society circuits. On the other hand, there were directors like Buddhadeb Dasgupta who did not believe in wider communication in their films. *Nandan* organized a face to face discussion with film maker Buddhadeb Dasgupta in 1993 where he was asked by someone why he or the second generation of art house filmmakers in Bengal did not get the minimum level of 'commercial success' that film makers like Satyajit Ray got. Dasgupta in this discussion said that he relied on a marginal film crowd that might watch his films and also said that

³⁶ See Kiranmoy Raha . *Bengali Cinema*. (Kolkata: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1991) p. 81.

³⁷ See Someshwar Bhoomik. *Bharatiya Chalchitra: Ekti Arthanaitik Pratibedan / Indian Cinema: An Economic Report* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1996).

³⁸ Kiranmoy Raha, Op. cit, p.81.

he or film makers like him knew that they might never get a large film audience.³⁹ And he clearly expressed that his concern is to 'communicate' through his films with however small an audience he gets, and not necessarily to 'survive' in the film market. Partha Raha has written about this newer generation of art house film makers that except Aparna Sen or Nabyendu Chattopadhyay no one else thought of the audience and preferred to confine themselves to the 'art film' maker category.⁴⁰ Raha has elaborated that earlier art film makers like Ray, Sen or Ghatak had producers like Pramod Lahiri, but contemporary film makers are not that 'fortunate' to have such producers. He has also pointed out that it would be a more useful step on behalf of the government if they would focus on the release of the art house films instead of just producing them⁴¹.

The art cinema discourse in Bengal since its origin has been engaged in the over valuation of realism associated with 'parallel'/'serious' cinema and a criticism of the melodramatic form of mainstream films. In film society writings, this idea of polarized forms resulted in constructed boundaries between the two cinemas which could not be trespassed and that seemed in their very nature irreconcilable. Gaston Roberge discusses this discourse of polarization in the film society approach to cinema in detail, and especially in Chidananda Dasgupta's writings. According to Roberge, Dasgupta has worked out "the artificial opposition between box office and art" so fully that "it is almost impossible for him to say anything significant about the commercial cinema beyond rejecting it."⁴² In the second generation of writers as well this split was maintained. And their focus was mostly confined to individual directors and their 'original work', aesthetic sense, auteuristic orientation, and art cinema's thematics that are of mature, intelligent, adult interest contrary to the thematics of escapism propagated by commercial film practice.⁴³ Going beyond this notion of cinema just as an individual

³⁹ Source: Nandan's publication of this conversation *Mukhomukhi (/ Face to Face) -Buddhadeb Dasgupta*. (Calcutta: Nandan, 1993).

⁴⁰ Partha Raha. *Bangla Chalachchitra Kathakata O Anyanyo Prabandho* (Kolkata: Ratna Publication, 2004) p. 36.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Gaston Roberge, *The Indian Film Theory: Flames of Sholay, Notes and Beyond* (Kolkata: Sampark Publication, 2010) p. 103.

⁴³ As in works of John W. Hood (*The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta*, Orient Longman, 2005), Shoma A. Chatterjee (*Paroma and Other Outsiders: The Cinema of Aparna Sen*, Parumita Publication, 2002) or some other works.

art work, my effort in my dissertation will be to engage with the idea of cinematic practice in its multiple dimensions. I would like to construct my narrative by examining the interrelation between the institutional and intellectual machineries that were in process to make this cinema 'parallel' in the cultural framework of a particular period.

Here, in my dissertation I use the term 'parallel' as associated with this film practice to indicate its distinctive aesthetics and restricted release in relation to the Bengali mainstream cinema of this period. I draw the term 'parallel' from its usage by the press and other media discourses, and especially in the way they distinguish a body of films by certain filmmakers from the regular mainstream to demonstrate how this category is constructed in the production logic of cinematic practice, by filmic apparatus and also in the discourse generated around these films. Thomas Elsaesser looks at the concept of 'art cinema' not only as a distinct, formal-aesthetic style of narration but also as an 'institutional-pragmatic category'.⁴⁴ Similarly in my dissertation, I would like to examine the role of social and cultural institutions in the constructed-ness of this category apart from its film aesthetics and narrative style. I will also look at the contradictory features of this construction. While discussing the body of films, their production-distribution-exhibition logic, their textual approach and the materials produced along with these films, I will also draw attention to and discuss films that do not quite belong, and are at the margins of the 'parallel cinema' practice. For instance in the case of films like *Herbert* (Suman Mukhopadhyay, 2006) the production economy and the discourse of parallel-ness follows the same logic as that of any other 'parallel' film. But in its filmic approach and politics of form I see it as a 'departure' from the nostalgia trope of the other films. On the other hand, the production and publicity logic of films like *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* (Subrata Sen, 2001) or *Hathat Nirar Janye* (Subrata Sen, 2004) are crucial to study in order to elaborate on the strategy of parallel-ness of this 'parallel' cinema discourse. But as individual film texts, I do not find them significant enough as exemplifying the nostalgia discourse that can be traced in other film texts. And finally in the case of the recent Anjan Dutta films like *Bong Connection* (2007), or *Madly Bangali* (2009), the

⁴⁴ See Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

nostalgia trope gets entangled with contemporary youth discourse in a way that 'distances' them from both the mainstream model and also the so called *bhadralok* parallel films. It is too early for me to conclude whether they form a 'third' category or represent the 'new' mainstream. I can only speculate that with this new generation of filmmakers there might be a shift in the 'parallel cinema' discourse in Bengal. But I feel it is too early to formulate an argument about this 'change'.

So in my dissertation, I construct my narrative with these contradictions and tensions within the 'parallel-ness' of this discourse. And I do not want to overlook the pluralities or the possibility of plurality in this discourse in the post liberalization period. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover see 'art cinema' as a category moving uneasily between the commercial world and its artisanal other.⁴⁵ They assert the elasticity of this conventional definition of art cinema, or the lack of strict parameters as not just the ambiguity of its critical history, but a central part of its specificity. This 'uneasiness' or flexibility does not however restrict my approach in reading this film culture; on the contrary, it widens my approach and enables me to argue that the 'parallel' film culture was not produced through a presupposed 'coherence' of filmic texts, production process and institutional policy, but rather that it was certain concerns in a particular moment when some attempts or ambitions of various sectors gave rise to this film culture. Andre Balian Kovacs argues, 'art films' are 'artistic' by ambition and not necessarily by quality. Thus something under the label of 'art cinema' may not be 'artistic' at all, just as 'commercial entertainment films' can very often be commercial failures and not entertaining.⁴⁶ I find Kovacs' formulation useful while locating my project in the context of the discourses of art cinema with the writings and the entire tradition of thinking of art cinema and its audiences as cultured and refined aesthetes. It's the ambition of being and becoming 'different' that was an important element in the constitution of the Bengali 'parallel' cinema discourse in the post liberalization moment. Kovacs' position and his analysis of what he calls a type of film that could not be categorized appropriately, 'social

⁴⁵ See Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶ See Andre Balian Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema 1950- 1980* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

fiction' which is serious and looks like 'art' to its audience, is both interesting and useful for my study. But at the same time there are a number of specificities in the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema that can not be generalized in this universal type. The New Wave movement in India in the 1960s was based on an art cinema discourse. In Bengal as well there is an entire context within which this discourse functions. In my dissertation, I will relate the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema to different moments and the multiple origins of the notion of 'good taste' and 'quality films' in the art cinema discourse in Bengal. The discussion regarding all those different moments and the 'parallel' cinema discourse has so far mostly focused only on textual work in their over valuation of 'quality films'. But the question of the quality of the 'parallel' stream is something that is taken for granted as an attribute. I propose this 'quality' is not something pre-given, but a conscious construct of its context. Since the earlier art cinema discourse has been about aesthetics and social concern, my intervention will be to examine the 'constructedness' of the notion of taste, and how important the question of class is in this 'construction'. Thus in this dissertation, I propose to study this very notion of quality/good taste in the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema by examining the cultural frameworks and networks of *bhadralok* intelligentsia within which this discourse is produced and its 'difference' from mainstream is maintained.

The earlier art cinema discourse in Bengal also articulated their self acclaimed 'difference' and superiority to the mainstream as the 'parallel' cinema discourse in the post liberalization moment does. What is new in the post liberalization moment is that the Bengali 'parallel' cinema discourse draws largely on not only the 'art house' tradition of Bengali cinema but also the earlier Bengali mainstream film practice. In an interview Mrinal Sen expressed how filmmakers in the New Wave moment shared amongst themselves a view that that none of them had gained anything from their earlier cinematic tradition, and that all of them including him had departed from their earlier generation.⁴⁷ In film society movements, and in the second generation of art filmmakers, the tradition of earlier mainstream film practice was never mentioned or consciously referred to in the discourse. But in the post liberalization moment, the earlier tradition of the Bengali

⁴⁷ As quoted by Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, *Kathapurush* (Kolkata: Papyrus, 2009) p. 76.

mainstream cinema of the 1950s-1960s is largely talked about as a 'lost glory' in public sphere discussions and media texts, and the 'parallel' stream imagines itself as a continuation of that tradition. The film texts on the one hand, in their narrative and apparatus logic tried to regenerate that much desired 'past-ness', and the production process on the other hand, tried to reclaim that 'lost' cinema of the Bengali film industry. The texts generated around this film culture engage in this narrative of 'reclamation' in multiple dimensions and diverse directions. And in this network of the imagination of reclamation, a certain kind of past-ness became important for memorializing the earlier cinematic tradition. The question I want to raise is how this memory discourse of Bengali 'parallel' cinema locates itself in the larger narrative of the 'historical awareness' of the Bengali cinematic past in contemporary public sphere discussions. At the same time, I am curious about how a certain narrative of memorialization and *bhadralok* cinema nostalgia plays upon the paradigm of parallel-ness that I am concerned with.

***Bhadralok* nostalgia and the politics of past-ness in the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema**

The 1990s is a period when a historical awareness about Bengal's cinematic past was developing in different sections of the Bengali public sphere. To begin with, in the film society scenario a major change came about with an awareness generated about the earlier Bengali cinematic practice. My personal interview with Shamik Bandyopadhyay and the interview of Bandyopadhyay published in *Silhouette* issue, 2009 revealed how in this period, film societies took an interest in earlier Bengali mainstream film makers and their technical excellence.⁴⁸ Veteran film society activists like Partha Raha or Surya Bandyopadhyay however sees this as a 'selective' awareness of some filmmakers like Tapan Sinha or Tarun Majumdar and an ignorance about others.⁴⁹ In popular press discourse, features about the earlier 'glory' of Bengali cinema became quite regular with a nostalgia discourse generated around an icon like Uttam Kumar or film makers like Asit Sen or Ajay Kar. Not only did this discourse circulate in a written form, but also many discussions and forums were organized remembering that 'cinematic' past. Apart from

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Shamik Bandyopadhyay, September, 2010. Also see interview of Shamik Bandyopadhyay, *Silhouette*, vol VII 10th November, 2009, p. 142- 156.

⁴⁹ Author's interview with Partha Raha, July, 2010 and with Surya Bandyopadhyay, December, 2010.

these, an exhibition center like Nandan made it possible to re visit that earlier 'glory' of Bengali cinema in its retrospective sessions. Television's growing presence and the telecasting of earlier Bengali films on Doordarshan's Bengali channel and later on other Bengali cable television channels contributed to foregrounding this cinema and making people aware of and remember a popular tradition. In this historicizing attempt, a sense of the lost past was generated in different patterns and through different mediums. With constant comparisons between the present and the past of Bengali cinema, a common narrative of Bengali cinema history was forming. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee, I feel that in the 'forming' of this bit of history, these different sectors were also 'making' that historical past in the public.⁵⁰ Chatterjee writes that while writing a history of the past, if the ways of writing "are inextricably entangled in the ideologies of the historian's present, is not the historian, by 'doing' history, also participating in the 'making' of it?"⁵¹ Because in this history writing, the 'present' was strongly present, and that was the crisis ridden 'present' of contemporary Bengali cinema, perhaps this historical awareness and historicizing was directly related to the 'transformation' of the Bengali mainstream scenario in the recent past. Its interesting to notice that when the news of the inauguration of *Nandan* was published on 2nd September, 1985 in three different Bengali newspapers (*Anandabazar Patrika*, *Dainik Basumati* and *Jugantar*) a particular article titled "Bangla Chalachchitrer Kramabikash"/ "The Development of Bengali Cinema" featured in three of these newspapers where a linear historical trajectory was presented tracing the initial years of Bengali cinema, then the glorious middle period of the 1950s and the 1960s and the decaying contemporary. This is the linear narrative structure that is mostly followed in all the other historicization attempts and that provided the basis of the rewriting of Bengali cinematic history.

As theorists have already problematized the concept of 'objective' history writing and the presence of the 'innocent eye' in interpreting the narrative of "what really happened", it is obvious that the historicizing discourse that I am pointing towards is not

⁵⁰ Here I draw from Partha Chatterjee's introductory essay of his edited book *History and The Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002) p. 12. Chatterjee uses the term 'by doing' history how one also takes part in 'making' that history.

⁵¹ Ibid.

devoid of any agency. The agency is demonstrated in 'finding' the 'provided' facts of Bengali cinematic past and 'selecting' and 'ordering' them in a generalized narrative. Drawing from Claude Levi-Strauss, Hayden White elaborates that 'History' is never simply history, but always 'history for', history written for some interests and with an aim.⁵² The 'aim' here is to locate the 'deterioration' of contemporary Bengali cinema that exists on a separate plane from the 'ideal' Bengali cinema that 'we', the *bhadralok* class used to have in the past. And at the same time, a legacy of the Bengali cinematic past is imagined in the 'exceptions' of the contemporary. Press features and other historicization attempts imagined films like *Unishe April* or *Paromitar Ekdin* as carrying that legacy. So the discourse of parallel-ness is imagined in these complex intersecting spheres of 'continuation' and 'difference'. On the one hand, past-ness works to imagine a continuing thread between the cinematic exceptions in the contemporary and the 'glorious' past of Bengali film history, and on the other hand, it differentiates them from the 'vulgar' and contemporary mainstream. This past-ness works in terms of film narratives - in the dominance of a narrative style that focuses a lot on the past of the protagonist or simply refers to past events. And on the production level, the exhibition set up and in the regimes of reception a kind of past-ness is also generated. The sense of the dominance of the past and its effects that are widespread in the parallel cinema of the present makes this a 'nostalgic film practice'.

Here I would like to mention what Fredric Jameson's argument about 'nostalgia films' is and especially his demonstration of how they reinvent past experience (of a generation) in the form of a "pastiche."⁵³ Jameson, differentiating 'pastiche' from parody argues that in 'nostalgia films' like *Star Wars* the film form instead of being a satire on the past satisfies a deep longing to experience that past again. Jameson explores how nostalgia works in films like *Body Heat* that are based on the contemporary period and that "conspire to blur that immediate contemporary reference and make it possible to receive this too as nostalgia work - as a narrative set in some indefinable nostalgic past,

⁵² See Hayden White, "Interpretation of History" in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) p. 56.

⁵³ See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in John Belton, ed. *Movies and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996).



an eternal '30s, say, beyond history"⁵⁴. It is interesting to observe in this connection how films like *Unishe Apri/ Nineteenth April* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1996), *Asukh/ Malaise* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1999) or *Paromitar Ekdin/ House of Memories* (Aparna Sen, 1999) erase the sense of contemporary in their narrative design. The story of the mother-daughter relationship crisis in *Unishe April* in its narrative style makes it work like a narrative that can be set off in any period or even anywhere. Similarly the protagonist Banalata's isolation in an old ancestral house in a film like *Bariwali/ The Lady of the House* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1999) or Paromita's remembrance of her mother in law Sanaka in *Paromitar Ekdin* can be set in any time period. The instance of *Dahan /The burning* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1998) is even more interesting. *Dahan* is based on a novel by Suchitra Bhattacharya which is again based on a true event in Calcutta when a journalist rescued a housewife from molestation. Rituparno Ghosh in this film focuses less on the contemporary charge of the event and the news story and engages more with the narrative of eternally compromised position of women in Bengali middle class society. Past-ness appears here in the different registers of intimate spaces and feminine intimacy- firstly the communication of letter writing between Romita, the woman who was harassed on the street and her elder daughter, and secondly Jhinuk's (the rescuer school teacher) conversations with her grand mother about the compromise women have to make for their families. The focus on past-ness makes the contemporary charge less significant and secondary.⁵⁵

One can thus say that the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema works in a nostalgia discourse. And it can be called a 'nostalgia film practice' in a broader way since the politics of past-ness works here beyond the film texts. The figure of the producer, exhibition sites like Nandan, the critical discourse of these films, or the publicity attempts all construct this as a nostalgia film practice. The nostalgia discourse works in the way in which this film practice inevitably reminds a viewer of the earlier Bengali films. The memory of the filmic past acts in the post liberalization Bengali parallel cinema discourse

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.193.

⁵⁵ On the contrary, one can think of examples from the contemporary where films like *Tulkalam* or *MLA Fatakesto* bring up contemporary issues like land accusation in Bengal, corruption in ministry, opposition party leader's fasting. Or even a film like *Chiradin e tumi j amar* by Raj Chakraborty that cashes in on the contemporary Rejwanur tragedy and the media stories generated around this.

within and beyond these films' textual logic. Whereas in films like *Bariwali* the cinematic past of Bengal and the contemporary present are talked about extensively, another film *Kaalpurush/ Memories in the Mist* (Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 2008) attempts to focus on the alienation of the *bhadralok* romantic self from the contemporary and its existence in the past through memory. This film forms a make believe world of memories in which one can live with one's past peacefully.

Scholars engaged in memory studies have problematized the concept of memory seen as recording a remembrance of an unchanged reality of the past. They have explored how memory can act as texts that can be deciphered. In my study of *bhadralok* nostalgia, I've attempted to explore how a certain imagination of the *bhadralok* Bengali cinematic past worked in the post liberalization Bengali cinema discourse. I have also tried to explore how this memory discourse was constructed and was institutionalized in the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema. And here the question of history, and the attempts at historicization that I talked about earlier in this section is also important. Perhaps the nostalgia discourse of 'parallel' cinema can be seen as a cinematic product of the emerged historical awareness of Bengali films. But at present, instead of seeing the history of Bengali cinema as connected in a linear chain, I would like to open this question for further exploration.

Methods of Reading

I have used Pierre Bourdieu's formulation as central to my methodological approach while engaging with the question of class and the politics of taste. Especially I have deployed the concept of class in my dissertation, as determined in a system of self-definition and self-differentiation.⁵⁶ The idea of 'pure' taste, central to my study of the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema, is related to the implementation of a cognitive acquirement of a 'cultural code' that also functions as a marker of a particular (*bhadralok*) class. Following Bourdieu I see this marker of class, in its 'autonomous'

⁵⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

field of cultural production, and the discourse generated around this cultural practice as fulfilling "...a social function of legitimating" social differentiation.⁵⁷ The notion of 'good taste' constructed around this cinema is a construct of a particular (*bhadralok*) class and is related to their notion of 'pure taste' and 'cultured Bengali-ness'.

The specificity of the film culture I'm working on lies mostly in the informal networks of Bengali *bhadralok* culture. In a way it's not only inadequate but also impossible to study even the film texts ignoring the constant interplay between the intrinsic and external factors of *bhadralok* culture. My project aims to focus on the reading and the analysis of individual film texts as well. Thus, along with an engagement with the networks of the Bengali *bhadralok* public sphere, social apparatuses and their institutional role; film texts, their narrative frameworks, the use of aesthetic devices, directorial style (if any) are equally important for my project to concentrate on. In my dissertation, textual analysis is crucially linked to the institutional histories and informal networks of discursive formations that I am attempting to understand - how taste is built and how it circulates. I see these films and *bhadralok* culture as always in a process of dialogic exchange and together generating the film culture from outside and from within. While studying these intrinsic and external factors relationally, the institutional role and cultural policies of social apparatuses cannot possibly be ignored by this dissertation. Especially while studying the Art Film Complex *Nandan* and its specific film crowd I must discuss how this film culture is embedded in a complexity of institutional matrices. Brian Larkin's study of Nigerian film theater for instance explores how the materiality of cinema theater functions in a film culture. I have been deeply inspired by Larkin's work while discussing the role of exhibition sites in my first chapter.⁵⁸

To analyze the vital role of these social and cultural institutions, I find Rita Felski's explanation of how they mediate between the art work and its meanings in the public sphere relevant to my methodological approach. The role of the Bengali Press and

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.7.

⁵⁸ See Brian Larkin, "The Materiality of Cinema Theaters in Northern Nigeria", in Faye D Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin ed. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002).

Nandan in shaping the notion of 'good taste' in this film practice is no less significant than the particular film texts' conscious use of aesthetic devices. The regime of reception of this film culture constructed by the Bengali middle class intelligentsia cannot be thought of without these brands of 'Bengali culturedness' advocated and embodied by Nandan or *Anandabazar Patrika*. Here I'll draw on Felski's idea of articulation in cultural practice to understand "how ideological elements come under certain condition to cohere together within a discourse."⁵⁹ So the 'unity' of this film culture is constituted of articulations of distinct unconnected elements and different institutions. And I'll demonstrate how these distinct articulations have contradictory approaches and the possibility of rearticulations in different patterns and different directions. Thus I'm not structuring my narrative in a causal chain because there is no necessary 'belongingness' between these different institutional practices and no preexisting coherence in their articulation.

For this dissertation, I have relied a lot on archival data, newspaper surveys, interviews of industry personnel etc. The importance of these materials is twofold. On the one hand, the news paper reports, reviews, published letters serve as important material in shaping my argument regarding this film culture; on the other hand, rather than reading them as direct reflections, I have tried to regard them symptomatically in my dissertation. Interviews of people associated with the film industry, media institutions or other social and cultural apparatuses are important not only in providing information but also in widening the perspective of this dissertation. And again I have tried to read and use these interviews with caution. For instance, while discussing the question of finance or the financial crisis of the film industry there is always a risk of relying on interview materials unless and until the researcher is provided with the actual revenue calculation. Moreover, one personal interview with the secretary of Eastern India Motion Picture, Mr. Ashis Banerjee revealed that even if one is provided with the mathematical data of revenue sheets it is impossible to comprehend the actual profit or loss figure in the film industry

⁵⁹ See Rita Felski , "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method" in *MODERNISM / modernity*. volume ten, number three, 2003. p. 511.

because of the network of lies that producers and directors use very purposefully.⁶⁰ That does not mean a researcher should stop working on the industry and the industrial logic, but rather that it is better to take the statements of the management personnel not at their face value but to read them symptomatically.

Chapterization

In my first chapter, “The Emergence of Post Liberalization Bengali ‘Parallel’ Cinema and the Discourse of Parallel-ness”, I engage with the economy of emergence of the post liberalization Bengali ‘parallel’ cinema mapping its modes of production, distribution policies, the limited release strategy and alternative market structure, and the importance of some exhibition sites. To begin with, I focus on the previous decade to explore how certain production processes emerged in the post Uttam Kumar collapse of the mainstream cinematic practice to fill up the ‘vacuum’ created in the industry in the 1980s. I will try to explain how with film makers like Anjan Chowdhury and Swapan Saha and a new group of producers, a shift in the imagination of the target audience base of the Bengali mainstream film occurred, and how the public sphere strongly reacted to this imagination and the dominance of a certain class of the Bengali film crowd. Then I focus on how the imagination of a ‘parallel’ stream for the ‘better’ (read *bhadralok*) class of audience who were allegedly marginalized in mainstream film practice worked in the production-distribution-exhibition logic of the Bengali film industry. Here I will mention this relationally to the changing scenario of Bengali cinema in the 1990s both in terms of the mainstream releases and the ‘parallel’ cinema circuit. In the 1990s, the Bengali film market experienced the emergence of *Venkatesh Films* which is a production house, the distribution arm and owner of a large number of cinema halls and according to industry sources ‘controls’ the Bengali film market both in Kolkata and in the suburbs. On the other hand, in the post liberalization period, NFDC and the West Bengal Film Development Corporation became irregular in engaging with the production and the promotion of Bengali films. In this context some small unprofessional production houses like *Deep Films*, *Spandan Films*, *K. E. Films* etc and the involvement of some persons ‘outside’ the industry became the primary sources of investment in the ‘parallel’ cinema

⁶⁰ Author’s interview with Ashis Banerjee. August. 2010.

circuit in Bengal. On the one hand, through the involvement of cultural institutions and the limited release policy, these films attained a certain 'artistic' quality suitable for a niche *bhadralok* audience as opposed to the mass appeal of the mainstream release. And though it could not penetrate the suburb, it maintained its market quite successfully within its limited release.⁶¹ On the other hand, this film culture from the very beginning imagined a Bengali film audience beyond the box office through television, the DVD market and overseas release for the diaspora. And finally, I attempt to question this process of 'reclamation' situating it on the plane of the 'crisis narrative' of contemporary Bengali cinema and the broader historicizing attempts in various sectors associated with Bengali film practice.

In my second chapter, "The Politics and the Poetics of Past-ness and the Post 1990s *Bhadralok* Cinema", I am interested in reading the film texts primarily to explore how the films thematically construct the idea of past-ness in narrative, film form and the formation of the *bhadralok* self. I will focus on how these film texts demonstrate an obsession with the past and in their use of aesthetic devices like the flashback correspond to the construction of the artistic and feminine self of the *bhadralok* protagonists in these films. This self image of the protagonists as primarily artists of their time serves the purpose of constructing these figures as rooted in the tradition of "Bengali culture".⁶² With the opening of the Indian market to the global economy in the 1990s, the Indian middleclass has grown impressively in terms of its income and access to consumer goods⁶³ which has had a definite impact on *bhadralok* culture. Relating to the cultural anxiety of the loss of the *bhadralok* -self in the post liberalization period, these film narratives indulge in nostalgia and mourn the present. Later films like *Ballygunge Court* (Pinaki Chowdhury, 2007) or *Kaalpurush* (Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 2008) try to present a

⁶¹ Author's interview with Ashis Kr. Banerjee, the secretary of Eastern India Motion Pictures Association (August, 2010).

⁶² Interestingly in later films like *Mon Amour* (Shubhajit Mitra, 2008), *Abohomaan* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2010), *Angshumaner Chhabi* (Atanu Ghosh, 2009) or most recently in a film like *Shukno Lanka* (Gaurav Pandey, 2010) the figure of an 'art' film maker became significant in the formation of a sensitive and artistic self opposed to the crudity and vulgarity of commercial film culture.

⁶³ See Jonathon Donner, Nimmi Rangaswamy, Molly Wright Steevson, Carolyn Wei. "Express Yourself and 'Stay Together': The Middle Class Indian Family". Link: <http://www.activesocialplastic.com/india/express-yourself-staytogether.pdf>. Access date 10th November, 2010.

'transcendental' criticism of consumer culture and the middleclass aspiration for life abroad through the formation of idealized, 'rooted' protagonists and their refuge in the romanticism of the past. So this chapter aims to discuss the politics of past-ness in these films in their narrative and apparatus logic, and how through the discourse of past-ness, they construct the urban, educated Bengali *bhadralok* self in this film practice. And in this context, I question this very idea of the homogeneous *bhadralok* self and *bhadralok* nostalgia to explore how contradictions and tensions appeared in this imagining.

After studying the film texts and the production–distribution–exhibition set up of this film circuit, in the third chapter, "Beyond *Bhadralok* Film Aesthetics: Extra Filmic Texts and the Construction of the Taste Discourse of Post 1990s Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema", I study the texts and materials that this film culture produces along with the films. Firstly, I focus on the publicity materials of these films to demonstrate how in their publicity logic, an idea of 'difference' is played out to separate these films from the mainstream. Secondly, I explore how critical discourse generated around this film culture situates this cinema going culture in a circuit of intellectual practice. Furthermore, I engage with the idea of a star director Rituparno Ghosh to explain how a stardom discourse is generated around him in other subsidiary media texts apart from films. This chapter explains how this film culture in its discursive domain constructs a strong support system for itself maintaining its 'distance' from the 'crude' and 'commercial' mainstream model. Newspapers like *Anandabazar Patrika*, or *The Telegraph* made it a regular practice of publishing reviews of these films written by well known Bengali poets, artists, and theater personalities and often a discourse was generated after these reviews were published through readers' comments, and sometimes the filmmaker herself/himself or part of the film cast intervened in these debates and discussions regarding her/ his films. Here I should also mention how the film directors of this 'parallel' cinema in their active association with the Bengali press and media houses 'influence' the regime of reception constructed around this film culture. Along with the popular press discourse, in this chapter I also focus on the role of television and the internet in the formation of the discourse of good taste of this film culture. I argue that these extra filmic texts are more

than just an excess to the films, and in fact, work in the broader politics, larger appeal and strategies of parallel-ness of this film culture.

I end this dissertation by referring to the present scenario of Bengali cinema, and focus on how changes in the production patterns, the exhibition set up, and publicity strategies are restructuring the contemporary film discourses in Bengal. Though I have not theorized the contemporary situation, I have pointed out some significant features. I wonder whether the 'change' in the *bhadra* circle and the emergence of a new media public is transforming the present scenario of the 'parallel' film circuit in Bengal and its politics and appeal. Therefore, I conclude my dissertation in an open ended gesture and look ahead towards further intellectual engagements and new interventions.

The Emergence of Post Liberalization Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema and the Discourse of Parallel-ness

In this chapter I propose to study the post-liberalization Bengali 'parallel' film circuit mapping its economy of emergence, production routes, release chains, marketing structure and some of the exhibition sites associated with it. Through these different aspects I shall attempt to construct my argument regarding a production process that consolidated into a set of films popularly known as 'parallel' in this period. At the same time my effort will be to explore how the idea of 'parallel-ness' associated with these films is a conscious construct of not just their aesthetic dimension or their ideology, but is also built into their regimes of production, circulation and institutional policies, and is essentially related to an imagination of a 'class' of audience distanced from and dissatisfied with the so called 'mainstream' of that period. My concern is to explore how the discursive domain called 'parallel' went through change(s) in the dominant imagination of production and consumption practices and how social and cultural institutions mediate in this film culture. In this chapter in my methodological approach I largely draw from Rita Felski's idea to understand how (in a cultural practice) different elements cohere together to form a discourse.¹ I believe that the realm of what is known as 'parallel' cinema is an extremely crucial idea that needs discussion. The discourse of Bengali cinema has always been constituted by the binary of art/parallel and commercial/mainstream. Hence my effort here will be to demonstrate whether and how this binary meant something else in the above mentioned period. I will attempt to explore how and from when the idea of an existing *bhadralok* niche instead of the agenda to 'educate masses through film screenings'² started acting as an important factor in film production, consumption, and reception in Bengali cinematic practices. If 'parallel' film culture in Bengal has always been engaged with the idea of a niche and 'educated' film audience and has maintained its market differently, then my intervention here would be to

¹ See Rita Felski, "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method", *MODERNISM / modernity*, volume ten, number three, 2003, p. 501–517.

² Film education has been an integral part of the film society movement in India. The film society culture in Bengal took this idea of film education seriously. Even in the initial years of the leftist regime of Bengal, behind the formation of the West Bengal Film Development Corporation or the foundation of Nandan the agendas of 'educating film audiences' and 'promoting film culture' were active.

investigate how the post-liberalization moment differs from earlier. Towards that end I would like to begin with two stories that I encountered during my research work on the Bengali film industry. These two cases of two different films made by two filmmakers during this period may provide me an entry point to my argument.

Bengali film director Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay in a personal interview recollects his experience of coming into film-making in the late 1990s when he had chosen Ramapada Chowdhury's story *Sampradan* (The Offering of the Daughter) for a 'mainstream release'. The film revolves around the story of a mother who brings up her two daughters on her own, without their father's name, and the trouble she faces during her elder daughter's marriage ceremony. While in Hindu marriage rituals it's compulsory to name the bride's father during *Kanya Sampradan* [the ritual of 'giving away' of the bride from her father to her would-be-husband] the mother desperately tries to convince others that there is no inevitable need of the father's name in one's life. Though Bandyopadhyay managed to make this film, when it was released the film was almost immediately declared a 'flop' (1998).³ According to him the reason behind the film's failure at the box office partially lay with the fact that contemporary Bengali cinema audiences were not familiar with the woman centric literary narrative tradition with its critique of patriarchal, patrilineal social structures, but more importantly, the failure can be ascribed to the fact that the film did not get a proper release chain and almost all of the cinema halls in West Bengal were unavailable for this film. The film was not properly distributed and just got three cinema halls including only one in Calcutta (*Aruna*). Post *Sampradan* Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay continues making Bengali films with *Shilpantar* (The Colors of Hunger, 2002), *Kantatar* (Barbed Wire, 2006), *Houseful* (2009) and although he has not got much commercial success in these cases either but they have given him creative satisfaction, a certain recognition, and he believes that these films, made him reach the niche audience that did not know his name or appreciate him during *Sampradan*'s release.

³ Author's interview with Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay, 3rd November, 2010.

The second story that I would like to share here is how Rituparno Ghosh's 'path breaking'⁴ Bengali film *Unishe April/Nineteenth April* (1996) was produced which makes us look back a bit earlier to the mid 1990s. Rituparno Ghosh, who came from an advertising background made his film debut with *Hirer Angti (The Diamond Ring)* in 1994. The film was produced by Children's Film Society of India and was shown on Bengali regional television several times but faced distribution obstacles and did not have a theatrical release. The idea for *Unishe April*, as Ghosh has said, grew within him much before *Hirer Angti* itself.⁵ Since lack of proper distribution and marketing affected the response to *Hirer Angti*, it made Ghosh determined to have a "ready market" for his next feature film. He first thought of making *Unishe April* in Hindi, with Waheeda Rehman and Shabana Azmi playing mother and daughter respectively. But the idea did not work out because NFDC rejected the script. When the script and the idea of making this film were rejected by more than seventeen sponsors including *Venkatesh Films*⁶ Aparna Sen introduced Ghosh to her friend Renu Roy who pitched in to help. As Ghosh says "Aparna, Renu-di and I formed *Spandan Films* and decided to take care of the distribution. It turned out to be a wise step when the film won the (National) award".⁷ Rituparno Ghosh's script was finally filmed at Response, Aparna Sen acted as one of the two protagonists in this film, the film won two national awards and was released in the Minar- Bijali- Chhabighar chain⁸ in Kolkata and it was a 'hit'.⁹

These two examples from the post liberalization Bengali film industry reflect two different situations and experiences of two filmmakers of contemporary Bengali cinema. But there is a similarity that lies in their approach towards a 'parallel' circuit, and the idea of a 'niche' *bhadralok* film crowd that would provide the base for a "ready market" for

⁴ Press writings praised the release of *Unishe April* as a remarkable intervention in the Bengali film scenario. One can see Swapan Mullik's review in *The Statesman*, 24th May, 1996. Shoma A. Chatterjee also in her book *Cinema shudhu cinema noy (/ Cinema is not only cinema)* praised this film as a 'new' experience in the monotony of the Bengali films.

⁵ As quoted in www.upperstall.com by Shoma A. Chatterjee. Link:<http://www.upperstall.com/people/rituparno-ghosh>. Access date 12th December, 2010.

⁶ Author's interview with Renu Roy, the producer of *Unishe April*. 14th December, 2010.

⁷ Shoma A. Chatterjee, www.upperstall.com, Op. cit.

⁸ This is a dominant single screen cinema hall chain in Kolkata operating from three different parts of the city.

⁹ Shoma A. Chatterjee, www.upperstall.com, Op. cit.

their films and in the process going beyond both the contemporary Bengali mainstream production circuit and the state sponsored film making practice. Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay while making his first feature film experienced the existence of a 'vicious circle'¹⁰ in the mainstream Bengali cinema circuit. This made him align himself out of the mainstream in his next series of films. And Rituparno Ghosh's never released *Hirer Angti*, and NFDC's rejection made Ghosh think of going beyond the state production agency in India to have a 'ready made market' for his second film. The idea of a parallel film audience in Bengal as well as in other parts of India has earlier been associated with 'cultured' and 'educated' niche audiences in film society writings as well. But one significant difference in film society writings and their approach lies in their emphasis to 'promote' and 'educate' people's taste to appreciate 'better films'. Even in the early 1980s just after coming to power, the CPI (M) ruled West Bengal government invested in better film culture.¹¹ In their idea of 'promoting' film culture, the film education of masses and particularly of the youth was their primary concern. The question I would like to pose is then what made post 1990s 'parallel' stream think of an already existing 'educated' niche audience instead of an audience to be educated by film screenings? Was it the state's 'departure' from the film scenario that made the idea of developing film taste/ educating film audiences obsolete in West Bengal? Or was it the alleged decline of film societies during the 1990s that caused a sharp decline in the idea of 'educating' audiences through films? Was it the phenomenal success of certain kinds of films aimed at a certain class that debunked this idea of developing 'film taste'? Or may be it was the idea of an urban, educated middleclass base as the target audience for television programmes that helped in the imagination of an already existing niche market. In the following sections I'll try to explore the probable reasons through and beyond all these possibilities.

¹⁰ Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay, Op. cit.

¹¹ After coming to power the CPI (M) government demonstrated a serious commitment towards the development of Bengali cinema. This is clear from their formation of the West Bengal Film Development Corporation, setting up of the *Rupayan* color lab, giving loans for quality films' to the new generation of Bengali film makers, and establishing exhibition sites like *Nandan* and *Deenabandhu Mancha*.

The Post Uttam Kumar Era: Industrial Collapse and the Beginning of a 'New' Phase in Bengali Cinema

During my fieldwork in Kolkata, while talking to different industry persons both from the so called mainstream and 'parallel' film circuits, and while looking at newspapers, interviewing film journalists and film society activists, I realized that the point they all emphasized was how the death of Uttam Kumar in 1980 gave birth to a new era in the Bengali film industry. To be more specific, historically the period of the 1950s and 1960s in Bengali (mainstream) cinema is known as the Uttam-Suchitra era. Even the films that these two stars were not a part of are often considered under this broader category of the 'Uttam-Suchitra films'.¹² This dominant generic film practice based on literary narratives, the idea of a couple space and romance and engaged with middleclass values slowly went through a change during the latter half of the 1970s when film makers like Shakti Samanta started incorporating low brow 'masala',¹³ elements into the body of films. In this period the star pair of these two 'reigning matinee idols',¹⁴ Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen failed to deliver at the box office. And more importantly Uttam Kumar, himself appeared in films like *Amanush* (Shakti Samanta/1974) or *Ananda Ashram* (Shakti Samanta/ 1977) that usually did not go with his star persona of a Bengali middle class matinee idol of the previous decades. So the changing face of Bengali mainstream cinema with the impact of the films from Bombay being closer than ever before, the fall of the matinee idols of the previous decade, the incorporation of low brow aesthetics and lots of other changes were very much a part of the last phase of the career of the star persona of Uttam Kumar. But somehow in the historicization of Bengali films, the death

¹² Moinak Biswas in his essay "The Couple and Their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now" (in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* ed. by Ravi Vasudevan) says that the term 'Uttam- Suchitra films' somewhat emblemizes this entire period in the history of Bengali cinema and it "can be used as a sign for a large number of films that did not actually feature the stars together." p. 122.

¹³ By this 'transition' towards incorporation of 'masala' elements I mean features like routine song and dance sequences, stereotypical villains etc. This new narrative framework and incorporation of low brow elements heralded by directors like Anjan Chowdhury in the 1980s had experienced cruder refashioning by popular filmmakers like Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty in the 1990s earning widespread criticism from the Bengali middleclass intelligentsia

¹⁴ Kiranmoy Raha observing this star phenomenon of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen claims that from their first hit (*Agnipariksha*/ 1954) in every succeeding films "they went their conquering way to establish their star value and their position as matinee idols, they bring back a sizeable section of the audience which had been succumbing to the entertainment Hindi cinema provided." See Kiranmoy Raha, *Bengali Cinema*, (Calcutta: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1991) p. 36.

of Uttam Kumar becomes a marker of the end of the 'golden period' of Bengali cinema and the beginning of a new era. The reason partly is that the death of this star in the popular imagination was taken as a sign of the death of a certain kind of Bengali film associated with him and a whole taste discourse attached to it. But more significantly, though in the 1970s Bengali cinema started experiencing these changes, it is from the 1980s that Bengali cinema took a significant and clear turn towards something 'new' with a determination never seen before. So this post-Uttam Kumar phase very well coincided with this new development and a 'beginning'.

Firstly, coincidentally or not after Uttam Kumar's death, the Bengali film industry experienced a vacuum not only in terms of stars but also in terms of film direction. Popular film maker, Pijush Bose died shortly after Uttam Kumar's death. Film makers like Asit Sen and Hiren Nag went to Bombay. Film makers like Ajoy Kar and film making groups like Agradoot became irregular after some box office failures. Then Ajoy Kar died and film maker Bijoy Basu also died immediately after. Only filmmakers like Tapan Sinha and Tarun Majumder survived in this situation with their films. Not only the filmmakers but during this period, the industry faced a vacuum in terms of sponsorship and film production. The alleged decline in film revenue might have stopped the experienced producers from investing in Bengali cinema anymore. Apart from some exceptions like R. D. Bansal, the producers/ production houses who were regular in the Bengali film industry earlier did not continue any more with the production of films. Interestingly in this period not even a second generation of film makers or producers had emerged. A film industry surviving for more than fifty years naturally gives birth to a new generation of filmmakers who come from within the first generation of filmmakers' families. But in the case of the Bengali film industry, we did not have any such generational continuation either in terms of film production or film making. Sandip Ray, son of Satyajit Ray being almost the single exception in this case that proves the rule.

So what was felt as a vacuum was slowly filled in by a new group of film makers and producers who in a way did not have their origin in the 'golden' period of Bengali cinema. And neither had they felt connected to the 'celebrated' history of Bengali films.

One personal interview with Swapan Saha, one of the most famous mainstream filmmakers of the 1990s, revealed his assistant film maker career in Bangladeshi film industry, then his business experience in Falakata suburb in north Bengal, and finally his joining the Bengali film industry as a film maker with *Ghorer Bou* in 1989 after he came to Calcutta in the late 1980s.¹⁵ It is important to mention Saha here, his rural origin, his familial background of small-scale business for a few generations, since it's related to the way he imagines film spectatorship during this 'crisis-ridden' period of Bengali cinema. It is not only his personal past of small scale businessman-ship or his rural background, but also that with his figure as a film maker, Swapan Saha brought about a significant break in the history of Bengali cinema. In addition, most of the producers of Swapan Saha films came from a different background of contracting and promoting business. This whole new chain of film makers-producers coming from a 'class' not considered as 'educated' or urban enough in the *bhadra* sense was felt to be a serious threat by a part of the industry, the Press and the *bhadralok* public sphere. The way the target audience of Bengali cinema was mapped out by this new group was essentially a 'break' in the history of the Bengali film industry. Saha says that in this period they consciously rejected the idea of an urban, educated middleclass audience and focused on the rural mass to provide them in cinema with the folk entertainment that they were habituated to.¹⁶

Film maker Haranath Chakraborty, another significant figure of the post 1990s Bengali mainstream cinema considers the release of Anjan Chowdhury's *Shatru/ The Enemy* (1984) and its box office success a lesson for contemporary film makers to become aware of the new cinema going class of Bengali cinema and what they wanted as entertainment.¹⁷ Chakraborty corroborates his thesis with statistics that seventy percent of the film viewers of Bengali cinema come from lower middleclass and middleclass backgrounds who enjoy the kind of 'masala' entertainment that their films provide. Interestingly in his imagination, education, awareness of the Bengali literary tradition and

¹⁵ Author's interview with Swapan Saha, 15th December, 2010.

¹⁶ What Saha meant by the idea of 'folk entertainment' is other form of rural entertainment that rural mass were familiar with. Bengali *Jatra* catered to rural and sub urban area of Bengal can be understood one such form of 'folk entertainment'.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Haranath Chakraborty, 9th December, 2010.

'culturedness' are not necessary markers to be middleclass. Ten percent, according to him were not interested at all in any kind of films, and only twenty percent would go for a Rituparno Ghosh or an Aparna Sen film and that is precisely the multiplex or *Nandan* going film crowd. In Chakraborty's words, he and his fellow popular filmmakers in Bengal were well aware of a class of audience who had stopped watching Bengali films at cinema halls after a certain point of time, but as commercial filmmakers they were least bothered because this dissatisfied audience was a minority type in the Bengali cinema going public.¹⁸ He uses an interesting binary of 'realistic films' and 'entertainment films' to differentiate his kind of films and the 'alternative' other, and claims that an average middleclass/lower middleclass viewer would go for an 'entertainment' film for relaxation after his strenuous day full of work pressure. In both Saha's and Chakraborty's imagination, this idea of the lower middleclass/ middleclass audience is different from the idea of the middleclass earlier imagined as the target audience of Bengali cinema in the 1950s or 1960s. What they emphasized is that to survive in the post Uttam Kumar collapse, it was necessary to understand the new (cultural) need of a new class of audience who might not be interested in watching an Uttam-Suchitra romance in a new form all over again.

What appears interesting to me is the way these two filmmakers frequently use the term 'middleclass' in their mapping of the new target audience for these low budget commercial films. Their imagination made me rethink my earlier formulation of the binary of a cinema for the middle class and a cinema for the 'lower class' while I was writing the proposal. In the imagination of film makers like Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha or Haranath Chakraborty this middleclass is different from what is traditionally thought of as the *bhadralok* middleclass of Bengal. What is this new class then, and when did it emerge? Historian Parimal Ghosh's article, "Where Have All the 'Bhadraloks' Gone?" (2004), and his ongoing research on the history of the twentieth century *bhadralok* answered my question partly. Ghosh in his article, while mapping the transformation of Calcutta neighborhoods, observes the change in the belief system that marked the term '*bhadralok*' from the colonial period to more recent times. He observes

¹⁸ Ibid.

the changed code of conduct about being and belonging to *bhadralok* culture during 1970s and 1980s in Bengal. According to Ghosh, a significant change took place in the *bhadralok* profile during this period since with the expansion of Calcutta as a city, a new section of the rural population created a new world of 'semi migrants' who increasingly started visiting the city as a source of work supported by the development of the suburban railway system connected to Calcutta.¹⁹ Ghosh argues that this massive number of people traveling to and from the city everyday is in clear contrast to what happened previously "when middle class *babus* instead of commuting daily settled down in the city"²⁰. Ghosh says about this previous migrating class:

They were the typical colonial merchant office employers, the clerks; also the school and college teacher and other poorly paid white collar workers, who could not afford to bring their families to the city. They constituted the rank and file of the *bhadralok*... Today however the new travelers often belong to a different social background: the domestic workers, the hawkers and peddlers in the city's market, the transport workers... in brief the daily wage earners of different categories. The city now has to cater for a huge number of people who previously had little access to it.²¹

So this historical narrative of this new city based emergent class might be useful in the narrative of the significant path breaking changes of Bengali Cinema. Along with the 'emergence' of a lower middle labouring class with the expansion of the city, a rural and suburban population also became important in the imagination of the target film audience of Bengali 'mainstream' films. For veteran film journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta who has been working with *Times of India* for more than twenty five years, this new emergent (middle) class became the ideal target audience of Bengali cinema from the mid 1980s.²² She points out another significant aspect of this new film culture. According to her this new film culture offered not just a new kind of folk entertainment and celebration of *Jatra*²³ aesthetics in films which were unconventional compared to earlier Bengali

¹⁹ Parimal Ghosh. "Where Have All the 'Bhadraloks' Gone?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 27, 2004.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 250.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Author's interview with Ratnottoma Sengupta, 23rd December, 2010.

²³ 'Jatra' is a category of Bengali theater that runs commercially in rural West Bengal. *Jatra* plays are usually performed on stages that are open all sides in open air. Use of minimal prop or no prop, extensive use of musical instruments and a particular kind of 'loud' acting style are some of the characteristics of *Jatra* plays.

cinema, but also these films constructed the pleasure they offered through a strong denial of the conventional 'bhadralok pleasure' of Bengali cinema. This was a denial of what was considered to be gentle, decent (literally the *bhadra* part of *bhadralok* culture) and sensible and targeted towards a 'better' cinema going class, and on the whole a denial of the Bengali literary and cultural tradition and the importance of education for the cinema going class. This newly gained access to the city and city bred culture by an emergent lower middle class which in turn generated new cultural needs of this class was seen as a serious threat in the press and by the urban educated public sphere. Furthermore, this resulted in a serious engagement with the 'crisis narrative' of Bengali cinema and a need to (re)claim the 'better class' of cinema going crowd through an 'alternative' cinematic practice.

The 'Crisis' narrative of the mid 1980s- early 1990s Bengali Cinema: the "Vicious Circle" and the Logic of Monopoly

In this period the press and public sphere discussions increasingly focused on the ongoing 'crisis' of the Bengali film industry and demonstrated a serious effort to understand the reasons behind this crisis and find probable solutions. I can refer here two or three newspaper articles specifically to explain how seriously the press (Bengali press particularly) took part in narrativizing the crisis story of Bengali cinema, and took sides against the vulgar 'mainstream' cinema. In an *Anandabazar Patrika* article on 5th November, 1986 focusing on the crisis ridden contemporary Bengali film industry, Swapan Kumar Ghosh wrote an article titled, "Bangla Chhabi Ekhan Kothay Ese Dnariyeche?" (What has Bengali cinema become now a days?). Here he quotes veteran film actors Rabi Ghosh and Alpona Goswami and film director Tarun Majumdar. Rabi Ghosh expresses his dissatisfaction regarding the contemporary Bengali film industry describing how the industry in this period went in to the hands of "amateur and unprofessional directors" who just came with a script in their hand and did nothing except instructing film crews with 'action' and 'cut'.²⁴ Actress Alpona Goswami on the other hand points out the uncertainty and job insecurity in her profession as a Bengali film

²⁴Rabi Ghosh quoted in *Anandabazar Patrika* article, 5th November, 1986.

actress and shares her plans to change her profession of acting to jatra and to television.²⁵ Incidentally in this period a number of Bengali film actors professionally shifted to jatra, theater and teleserial acting that includes names like Aparna Sen, Supriya Devi, Dipankar Dey and others. Not only actors but also many film makers joined television in that period as an *Anandolok* article points out.²⁶ Film maker Tarun Majumdar clearly identifying the situation concludes that contemporary 'mainstream' Bengali cinema has two different streams of film making and film makers. In the first type, a few directors while entertaining the audience still obey the rules of cinema. On the other hand, there is a group of film makers lacking any kind of 'film sense' who do not bother if their products finally become cinema or not. They just want a film to be a hit, that's all.²⁷

Significantly in this same article director Anjan Chowdhury while defending all these accusations against them agrees with whatever has been said about these kinds of Bengali films in the media. He agrees that if a film made by him can not be called a 'film' it's not his concern. He just wants a houseful board outside the cinema hall. So clearly the division between the two groups is not of different inclinations and ideas of good cinema. Not that they were not agreed over what an ideal Bengali film should be. But they were different in their very approach of film making. If filmmakers like Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha expressed their concern for the survival of cinema, for the other group and media the bigger question was whether/ how the tradition of 'good' Bengali cinema would survive in this situation. The on going discussion over Bengali cinema in the popular press points out other aspects of the crisis narrative of Bengali cinema including the influence of the mafia world and the black market economy in the Bengali film chain, the bad condition of cinema halls in Calcutta and other suburban localities, and even the presence of the black ticket racketeer outside the halls²⁸. If the imagination of the new class of audience and its newly gained access to the city and city based entertainment provided the basis for imagining a new breed of the target audience for filmmakers like Swapan Saha or Haranath Chakraborty it's the 'presence' of this class

²⁵ Alpona Goswami, *Ibid*.

²⁶ See Bipradas, "Chhabima ekhan khabi khacchhen", *Anandolok*, 7th May, 1994.

²⁷ Tarun Majumdar quoted in *Anandabazar Patrika* article, 5th November, 1986.

²⁸ For detail describing the black ticket sellers' presence in Calcutta's cinema halls see Shubhajit Majumdar's report "Black e ticket bikri bere giyeche", *Anandabazar Patrika*, 5th November, 1986.

that gave rise to discomfort and dissatisfaction for a part of the industry, press and a particular 'class' of the film audience. Columnist Prabhat Mitra writes in a newspaper article that it was unimaginable before that a class of *lungi* clad people with slang in their mouth could enter cinema halls situated at a place like Chouranghee in Calcutta. Mitra expresses his anxiety regarding this kind of people's presence as the dominant film audience for contemporary Bengali cinema. He laments that the 'class' of people that earlier did not dare to even think of coming to cinema halls is the class that makes a cinema hall full now a days.²⁹

When this decade of the 1980s passed, the discussion regarding the threat of survival, the declining revenue of Bengali cinema and the concern for the crisis in the Bengali film market took a backseat in press discourse to some extent. What remained and gained a much more serious concern was the 'quality' of the mainstream. On 2nd November, 1996 in an *Anandabazar Patrika* article Swapan Kumar Ghosh wrote that the industry had gone completely into the hands of not some film makers but merely some 'bioscope makers' who survive at the box office through their 'crude' film narratives and 'vulgar' dialogues. They are the star filmmakers of contemporary Bengali cinema. And not only that, Ghosh called them the owners of the film factory as he gave the example of Anjan Chowdhury as one of the sole proprietors of one of those big factories. He also 'praised' Swapan Saha as a new factory owner in the same chain.³⁰ The popular Film magazine *Anandalok* published a special issue on 28th December, 1996 focusing on the Bengali film industry's mafia connection. Another Bengali daily *Aajkaal* during this period (December, 1996) published a series of comparative analyses of the glorious past and the crisis ridden present of the Bengali film industry in its Friday supplements. In these articles columnist Seabratra Gupta analyzed in detail how the Bengali film industry since the last decade had slowly deteriorated in each and every part of film making including its technical quality, narrative pattern, script and film music.³¹ Not only film journalists and published editorial letters expressed their dissatisfaction regarding

²⁹ See Prabhat Mitra, "Kolkatar Cinema hall gulo baroi hatashree", *Anandabazar Patrika*, 5th November, 1986, p. 5.

³⁰ Swapan Kumar Ghosh, "Tollygunge er Lakhpatira", *Anandabazar Patrika*, 2nd November, 1996.

³¹ See Bengali daily *Aajkaal*, December, 1996.

contemporary Bengali cinema, but also a sizeable section of veteran film actors, directors, technicians felt a need to change the scenario of mainstream films. Film magazine *Anandolok's* special series "Bangla Chhabir Sankat Keno"/ "Bengali Films: Why this crisis?" published in its issues between April and May, 1995 became a testimony of how a part of the industry was unhappy with what was going on in the industry.

In that special series, cinematographer Soumendu Roy pointing towards the on going crisis of Bengali film industry concluded that bad taste and lack of education amongst the new group of film makers was one of the major reasons for the crisis.³² Veteran film actress Gita De said that the industry was full of callous, corrupt and incompetent people who were responsible for this crisis.³³ For film maker Bivuti Laha, the lack of good screenplay writers had caused this decline in quality whereas film producer R. D. Bansal considered technical backwardness as one of the primary reasons behind the crisis.³⁴ Pranab Basu pointed out the problem the film industry was facing because of the advancement of electronic media and the existence of other forms of entertainment.³⁵ Film actor Shubhendu Chattopadhyay came up with an interesting term 'Hingla film' while discussing the nature and quality of contemporary commercial Bengali films. What he meant by the term was the strange combination of Bombay cinema aesthetics and Bengali language in these films. For him in the scenario of Bengali cinema at that point 'uncultured' producers were making films for the audience of their 'standard' by some 'uneducated' film makers.³⁶ What was implicit in Chattopadhyay's comment and in many other public sphere discussions at that point was the closeness contemporary Bengali films shared with Hindi films and how unhealthy it was for Bengali cinema. The threat of a dominant (lower) class and their cultural need and taste were also associated with a non Bengali film producer chain and their 'complete ignorance' about the 'glorious past' of Bengali films. *Venkatesh Films* and its emergence

³² Soumendu Roy, *Anandolok*, 8th April, 1995.

³³ Gita De, *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bivuti Laha, R.D. Bansal, *Anandalok*, 6th May, 1995.

³⁵ Pranab Basu, *Ibid.*

³⁶ Shubhendu Chattopadhyay, *Anandalok*, 8th April, 1995.

in the Bengali film production-distribution-exhibition scenario is an interesting case to study here.

The year 1995 marked the inception of *Shree Venkatesh Films* instituted by two young entrepreneurs Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni, who transformed the company into one of the leading media and entertainment houses in eastern India. It is one of those companies in India that operate across multiple verticals within the media and entertainment industry that includes production, circulation, promotion etc and slowly it has become a brand name in certain kinds of Bengali films associated with it. It started as a distribution arm in eastern India that released Bollywood big budget films like *Bombay*, *Josh*, *Company*, *Baghban*, *Munnabhai MBBS*, *Hungama*, *Khakee*, *Tere Naam*, *Bhoot*, *Murder*, *Waqt*, *Black* etc and transformed itself into the leading production house in Bengali cinema. Not only that, it started owning cinema halls in this period both in Calcutta and the suburbs of West Bengal; and it now owns a television channel (*Sangeet Bangla*), co promotes music television channels (*Music India*, *Sangeet Bhojpuri* etc) and produces prime time shows for other television channels. In January 2008, *Shree Venkatesh Films* announced a partnership with industry leaders Real Image Media Technologies Pvt. Ltd. to exclusively bring their Qube Digital Cinema technology to eastern India. It has also pioneered some marketing strategies like separate publicity photo shoot etc. In the short-time span since then, *Shree Venkatesh Films* has completed the job of 'digitising' 50 cinema halls across West Bengal, making it one of the fastest rollouts of Digital Cinema anywhere in India.³⁷

Along with *Venkatesh Films* there are two other production companies that emerged remarkably during this period in film production and earned a name for themselves – *Surinder Films* and *Dhanuka Brothers Private Limited*. *Surinder Films* like *Venkatesh* though not on that large scale emerged as a production company during this time. *Dhanuka brothers*, on the other hand emerged as the leading house in owning and distributing video halls and video CDs. The emergence of these production houses surely

³⁷ For this brief history of *Venkatesh Films* and their 'achievements' in Bengali film industry I am grateful to Ahana, the PRO of *Venkatesh Films*.

has a 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. But part of the narrative is also a story about the rise of a 'vicious circle' and the logic of monopoly in the Bengali mainstream. It is also interesting to note that the reaction of the dissatisfied class of people is caused by a perception that Bengali cinema has gone into the hands of a non Bengali film producer chain³⁸ with their policy of control. Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay gives a useful account of how production houses like *Venkatesh Films* 'control' the scenario completely. He shares an interesting strategy of the leading production house, *Venkatesh Films* which is also the owner of more than half of the total cinema halls in West Bengal (out of a total 260 halls in Bengal, 140 of them are owned by *Venkatesh Films*). According to Bandyopadhyay if *Venkatesh Films* spends Rupees 3 crore on a film they secure its market by roughly aiming to earn 20 lakhs back from each of its 140 halls. Some halls perhaps will earn this amount in two weeks and some in six or seven weeks. And since they are the owner of those 140 halls, and in most of the cases distributors as well, no one can release their films in those halls. This is the monopoly over the Bengali film market, that Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay calls the 'vicious circle' of the Bengali commercial cinema chain.³⁹ Veteran film journalist Aniruddha Dhar also talks about this 'unholy nexus' in Bengali film production-distribution practice and confirms that in some cases *Vekatesh Films* 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.⁴⁰ In the following section I shall try to explain how certain industry outsiders and some distribution efforts tried to go beyond this monopoly logic of the mainstream chain of Bengali films. At the same time, I shall attempt to problematize how far these attempts were successful in terms of the production, distribution and marketing logic, and whether it did result in a 'parallel' film market for a body of films.

³⁸ Apart from organized production houses like *Venkatesh Films* or *Surinder Films* run by non Bengali producers, there are other not so significant non Bengali producers like Dilip Kankaria, Paban Kanoria or Robin Agarwal that added to that anxiety narrative.

³⁹ Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay, Op.cit.

⁴⁰ Author's Interview with Aniruddha Dhar, 30th June, 2010.

‘Floating’ producers, limited release and the parallel market of ‘better’ cinema for an educated mass:

Sandip Sen, the owner of National Advertising Agency was in fraternity with Calcutta based film makers like Goutam Ghosh and many others and was conscious of an going ‘crisis’ of Bengali cinema when Subrata Sen approached him with a Bengali film script based on the famous Hollywood film *Crush*.⁴¹ When Subrata Sen first came to him with the script and the idea of this film, Sandip Sen was not convinced. But then Subrata Sen made him feel that a sizeable section of the urban middleclass audience especially the youth with their back turned away from the contemporary mainstream Bengali films might provide a considerable mass of film crowd for his film and made him agree to invest in it. Subrata Sen himself calls this film *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* (There is a girl/ 2001), the first ‘urban youth film’ in the Bengali film industry.⁴² The idea of an urban film crowd was central to their imagination of the spectator in their approach while making this film. When I asked them how this idea came about, both of them confirmed that it was true that the ‘vicious circle’ of the leading production-distribution company made them go for a limited release in Calcutta. But this strategy was also consciously designed much before, in the film's narrative structure, promos, publicity chain for an audience which was city based and educated.⁴³ Even if they could release it in the suburban and rural spaces it would not have been a successful attempt. Sandip Sen confirmed that the distribution obstacle was very much there while releasing the film in cinema halls and hall owners were reluctant to show their film as it may not have matched the usual audience expectations of Haranath Chakraborty/ Swapan Saha films. However, they were pretty sure during the film production that it was not going to be served for the ‘mass audience’ of Bengali films but only the educated *bhadralok* niche audience of Calcutta’s metropolitan cinema halls including *Nandan*, *Priya* etc. Subrata Sen says that the emergence of one or two production house(s) definitely had an impact in imagining a kind of film market and its formation, but that did not restrict his films from reaching their target audience and neither have they ever faced any problem in finding producers

⁴¹ Author’s interview with Sandip Sen, 1st December, 2010.

⁴² Author’s interview with Subrata Sen, 2nd October, 2010.

⁴³ Subrata Sen, October, Op. cit. Sandip Sen, December, Op. cit.

for his films because he “can make films in unimaginable budgets” and a minimum number of prints made profit at the box office.⁴⁴

Sandip Sen gives a different account. According to him for *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* a total of 30 lakhs were spent to produce it, and from ticket sales and electronic media rights, it earned 19 lakhs and corporate house publicity earned 7 lakhs.⁴⁵ So clearly the amount of money spent did not return back; still Sen considers it a ‘hit’ because the film along with some other attempts like *Unishe April* or *Paromitar Ekdin* intervened in the idea of the Bengali film market that was active since the 1980s and pioneered in imagining a niche. When I asked him then why did *Deep Films* stop investing in Bengali films after *Ek Je Achhe Kanya*, he blames it on the lack of responsibility of the Bengali film industry, cast and crew and the makers themselves. I got a similar response from Renu Roy who produced *Unishe April*.⁴⁶ *Unishe April* made on a considerably low budget, mostly shot indoors and with a small cast, and with one of the main actors being a part of the production house (Aparna Sen), released with only eight prints. *Spandan Films* made the producer happy with the film’s critical recognition and financial gain. In spite of that, the production house did not significantly emerge in the post *Unishe April* period. Roy says that *Spandan Films* was not formed as a professional production house that would produce the run of the mill Bengali film. She has many other interests like running an art gallery, working in theatre, the responsibility of being the president of the prestigious Calcutta club and many other things, and she never really understood the complicated nature of film production. *Unishe April* happened quite accidentally just because her friends were involved in it and she was convinced by Ghosh’s talent and potential as a film maker. But post *Unishe April* when *Spandan Films* lost huge amounts of money with productions like *Shatabdir Galpo/ Stories of the century* (Raj Mukherjee) it “did not have the ability to sustain the loss”.⁴⁷ Probably that made Roy wary of taking risks with film making.

⁴⁴For instance he gave the example of his film *Bibar* (2006) that was released with only eighteen prints and made a profit.

⁴⁵Sandip Sen, Op. cit.

⁴⁶Renu Roy, Op. cit.

⁴⁷Ibid.

The idea of a 'floating producer' that senior film journalist Aniruddha Dhar talks about in the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' film circuit to some extent goes well with producers like Sandip Sen or Renu Roy who never had any film production experience, belong to the socially upward culturally elite background, and at a point invested in Bengali films quite accidentally on a 'friendly request'. The owner of *Piyali* distribution and the *Priya* hall chain, Arijit Dutta calls their approach unprofessional and amateur.⁴⁸ But significantly their social position and their association with art house film makers makes them different from what I have earlier shown in the case of the producers of the Swapan Saha films. These film producers had lost their faith in the mainstream market and the class of the dominant film audience and were consciously aligned with a non mainstream approach. Some of the producers were not only 'outsiders' with respect to the industry, but also live outside of Bengal and in some cases even outside India. Producers like Sutapa Guha who is a USA resident and one of the co producers of Rituparno Ghosh's *Utsab* (The Festival/2000), or names like Eldrige Rodrigue who co-produced Abhijit Dasgupta's *Dwitiyo Bassanto* (Beyond Tomorrow/ 2005) with Mumbai based Kesto Mandal are not even traceable in the Bengali film market. Film makers like Buddhadeb Dasgupta or Goutam Ghose who earlier had NFDC or West Bengal Film Development Corporation as sponsors of their films during the 1980s, had to depend on figures like Ramesh Gandhi, Chitrani Lahiri or Jhamu Sugandh in the post-liberalization period for producing their films.

In this period, the limitations of state initiatives in investing in 'good films' were realized, quite significantly, both by the state government and the film society writers. Someshwar Bhoumik in his book *Bharatiya Chalachchitra: Ekti Arthanaitik Pratibedan* (Indian Cinema: An Economic Report) discusses in detail how in the 1980s most of the state sponsored films in Bengal could not even reach theatres, and he points out that the reasons behind this were lack of any kind of market research, poor advertising strategy and no concept of secondary and tertiary packages for films produced by the West Bengal

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Arijit Dutta, 4th November, 2010.

Government.⁴⁹ In press discourse issues like corruption and favouritism also came up while discussing the ambiguity around the exact amount of state funds, its distribution and state policies. Here an *Anandabazar Patrika* article by Swapan Kumar Ghosh dated 12th October, 1985 is relevant where he discusses the bureaucratic obstacles and the ruling political party's malpractice in misusing state funds, and mentions a particular example of a Jochhan Dastidar film called *Pragaitihasik (Prehistoric, 1984)* that went through it. Not only state initiatives but also the film society approach of the previous decade came under criticism both from outside and from within the film society movement. Goutam Ghosh, programme coordinator of Eisenstein Cine Club of Kolkata who has been associated with this film club since its inception points out some reasons.⁵⁰ Firstly when one after another, the socialist countries started becoming non-existent in world politics, the easy and cheap supply of international art house films from all over the world came to a grinding halt. Secondly, Ghosh feels that the vote based electoral politics of the left front government was partly responsible for making people less interested in film societies. Significantly around this time the quarrel between the Film Federation of India and the Cine Central that resulted in the shifting of Film Federation's head quarters from Calcutta to Bombay came as an attack on Calcutta's film society culture. Thirdly and most importantly Ghosh asserts that film club organizers in this period came to know that a large part of their audience used to come for film society screenings for 'pornographic pleasures' of uncut European films. When these interests were easily accessed through the VCR/DVD market they left film clubs. Besides that Ghosh points out some other reasons such as the growing television culture, a market of pirated world cinema DVDs, and the callousness of the embassy people contributed to the decline of the film society culture in 1990s Calcutta.

The point I want to raise here is that the post liberalization 'parallel' circuit unlike previous decades, demonstrates a significant departure in terms of both State sponsored film production logic and the association with film club culture. Instead of a state body and a film society circuit being the sponsor and sites of circulation of the art/ parallel

⁴⁹ See Someshwar Bhoomik, *Bharatiya Chalachchitra: Ekti Arthanaitik Pratibedan / Indian Cinema: An Economic Report* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1996).

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Goutam Ghosh, 19th November, 2010.

cinema, it's the 'floating' producer chain, directors themselves or few television production houses that have become significant in this 'parallel' film circuit. The association of television production houses and the growing television industry are significant since it's the idea of television spectatorship that is associated with the 'lost audience'. First of all, *Rainbow Productions* in their post *Janmabhumi*, and *Khaas Khabor* success produced two Goutam Ghose films *Dekha* (Vision/ 2001) and *Abar Aranye* (In the Forest... Again/ 2003). Besides that there are television production houses like *Surabhi Productions*, (producer of *Paromitar Ekdin*), *Rosevalley Telefilms Private Limited* (producer of *Jara Bristite Vijechnilo/ Drēnched in the Rain*, 2007). If the growing presence and popularity of television in middleclass households is responsible for the dissatisfied, reluctant audience for Bengali mainstream films, it's the television production houses that started investing in this circuit. The parallel circuit directors and producers acknowledge TV's presence and the importance of television rights to bring returns on the investments of these films.

The late 1990s is a significant period when the Bengali television entertainment scenario experienced the popularity of Bengali cable television channels like *Alpha Bangla*, *ETV Bangla* or *Tara Bangla*. This is the moment in India when the media scenario transformed rapidly with the cable television boom and the phenomenal rise in television purchases. With the introduction of cable television in the early 1990s, the television scenario underwent a massive transformation. Indian television switched from black-and-white to colour in order to broadcast the Asian games in 1982. And in later years the purchase of colour televisions saw a phenomenal rise amongst the urban middle class population. And it is this presence of an alternative entertainment medium to cinema that was blamed for the middle class' reluctance to come out to the cinema halls to watch Bengali films. And interestingly many of the directors of the post liberalization Bengali cinema came from a television background. Directors like Rituparno Ghosh worked with the Bengali regional television *Tara Bangla* for quite a long period of time. Other directors like Kaushik Ganguly, Sudeshna Roy, Abhijit Guha, or Atanu Ghosh work for television serials or telefilms regularly along with making films for the big screen. And television provided some Bengali films a market beyond the box office

release. For instance Rituparno Ghosh's *Utsab* or Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Uttara* were shown on television before their theatrical release.

Along with the regular screening of these films on television, it's also interesting to note how this cinema appropriated television aesthetics to address its audience. The imagination of television space is quite central to the construction of the primary mise-en-scene of Rituparno Ghosh and many other filmmakers of this period. Moinak Biswas in his essay "Ray and the Shadow of Political Cinema" connects this 'interiority' of the "Bengali middleclass cinema that emerged as a genre from the nineties" with that of the late Ray films (*Ganashatru*, *Shakha Prashakha*, *Aguntak*).⁵¹ Investigating this feature of 'affinity for household spaces' in post liberalization Bengali cinema, I came across a number of possibilities: budget constraints or personal style, visual scheme of TV aesthetics or the politics of middleclass spaces and their mapping. My personal interview with art director Indranil Ghosh who worked with 'parallel' film makers like Subrata Sen, Anjan Das and most of the Rituparno Ghosh films, reveals that budget constraints was not a valid reason behind this visual schema of repetitive household spaces used in film after film.⁵² He argues that money spent on making studio sets of middleclass household spaces for the representation of domestic interior worlds is not necessarily always less than money required for outdoor shooting. Here I see this logic of space designing going beyond the question of film aesthetics, and I would like to argue that this might be seen as a marketing strategy of these films to address an audience that is already habituated to this form.

Along with the televisual address of these films, I would also like to mention the appropriation of other elements of popular middleclass culture as well - forms with which the audience was already familiar and hence their incorporation into the films resonated with the feel and experience of the familiar. For instance *Paromitar Ekdin* (Aparna Sen, 2000) consciously relates itself to women's magazine discourses⁵³, whereas a film like

⁵¹ Moinak Biswas. "Ray and the Shadow of Political Cinema", *Marg*, vol 61, no. 3, March, 2010, p. 46.

⁵² Author's interview with Indranil Ghosh, 30th October, 2010.

⁵³ *Paromitar Ekdin* in its narrative of sister-in-law mother-in-law conflict and emotional bonding appropriates a number of women's issues from women's magazine discourse (*Sananda* especially) within

Nagardola (Raj Mukherjee, 2005) in its story telling structure resembles the media genre of personal problem discussion forms (in newspapers and magazines columns and television programmes).⁵⁴ Many of Rituparno Ghosh's films (like *Asukh*, *Shubho Mahurat*, *Abohomaan*) and Aniket Chattopadhyay's *Chha E Chhuti* (2009) mobilize the pleasure of film industry gossip, multiple relationship 'stories' of film stars and popular scandal stories available in film magazines like *Anandalok* and others. The incorporation of these different sectors and forms of popular Bengali middleclass culture worked as a marketing strategy to serve the target audience that they were already familiar with.

With cable television's success and the popularity of Bengali megaserials like *Ek Akasher Niche* (on *Alpha Bangla* that later was renamed *Zee Bangla*) or *Tithir Atithi* (on *ETV Bangla*), the Bengali media entertainment sector experienced the phenomenal popularity of another television genre, the telefilm which was largely unparalleled in this period in the national scenario. Television channels like *ETV Bangla* invested in the formation of this genre with short or average length films made for TV audiences, directed by directors like Kaushik Ganguly, Partho Sen, Anjan Dutta and others. After *ETV Bangla's* success, other television channels like *Akash Bangla*, *Alpha Bangla* or *Tara Bangla* too started producing telefilms for the late evening slots of the weekend.⁵⁵

and beyond the story of this film. *Sananda* is a popular Bengali women's magazine that has been publishing since 1985 that shaped and popularized an idea of a 'new' Bengali *bhadralok* femininity which is both bound to home and hence efficient in household work and 'care', and on the other hand also 'smart' enough in dealing with professional life, job stresses and career building. It uses the idea of the *Sananda* woman in its advertisements describing her as someone who works both at home and outside with equal zeal ("ghare baire samaan tale"). The regular columns on cookery, beauty tips, home decoration, and child and in-laws care and time management form an idea of a middleclass *bhadralok* (married) woman who is now exposed to work pressures of the outside world and is also 'faithful' to the femininity of her 'inner world'. Aparna Sen's *Paromitar Ekdin* essentially evokes and references this 'new' Bengali feminine self in its shift from Sanaka (the mother in law played by Aparna Sen) to Paromita (the daughter in law played by Rituparna Sengupta). In Paromita's initial adjustment in her in-laws' house (she was married to a conservative joint family of north Calcutta), child care (had a physically handicapped child), her literary interest and knowledge of Bengali vocabulary, each step of the *Sananda*-discourse is incorporated cinematically.

⁵⁴ This is a popular media genre proliferating in Bengali middleclass cultural sphere with Sunday newspaper columns like *Byaktigato* (Personal) in *Anandabazar Patrika* or *Survival Strategy* in *The Telegraph* or Columns like *Kane Kane*, *Rupam ke balo* in magazines like *Sananda* or *Unish Kuri*. Similarly television programmes like *Mon Niye* or *Chhandadike Bolun* had viewers calling in to discuss their personal problems with the host offering solutions.

⁵⁵ An *Anandabazar Patrika* report claimed that in 2004 a professional business organization planned to invest in 206 films to be telecast on *Akash Bangla*. From the very number one could imagine the possibility

The West Bengal Film Centre, *Nandan* recognizing this popularity of telefilms started organizing telefilm festivals from 2003 “with tremendous response from the public who weathered long queues and inclement weather to maintain ‘House Full’ in most of the shows”⁵⁶. The next year, *Nandan* inaugurated this festival with Tapan Sinha’s *Admi Aur Aurat* (Man and Woman, 1984) followed by telefilms like *700 Square feet* (Atanu Ghosh), *Chilekothar Sepaira* (Comrades of the Attic, Jayashree Bhattacharya), *Chhaya Chhabi* (Moving Shadows, Kaushik Ganguly) etc that people had already seen and appreciated on TV. And interestingly the idea of a film like *Ek Mutho Chhabi* (A Fistful of Tales, 2003) produced by Bengali film actress Roopa Ganguly (Our Films Production) took shape observing the popularity of the first telefilm festivals at *Nandan*.⁵⁷ It was structured like six combined telefilms and each of the six parts was directed by six different directors like Arghyakamal Mitra, Anjan Dutta, Kaushik Ganguly and others. Thus television not only provided a market for the post 1990s Bengali cinema’s ‘parallel’ stream, but also the televisual imagination and some television genres that were so popular with its base middle class audiences contributed to the making and marketing of some ‘parallel’ Bengali films. Apart from TV, this parallel cinema imagines an audience of VCR/ DVD consumers as well as the Bengali diaspora, all of whom are addressed by the films of this ‘parallel’ circuit. Here I would like to mention very briefly the world premiere of *Utsab*, its pre history and the marketing logic that it followed.

Tapan Biswas, veteran producer of Bengali films who has been producing films since 1981 and has produced some of the Dinen Gupta and Tarun Majumdar films met Rituparno Ghosh in 1999 and planned to organize a retrospective of his films at the North American Bengali Conference⁵⁸ that is held each year in the USA.⁵⁹ They organized

of profit from investing in Bengali telefilms and its higher TRP rating. Source “Tele Hawa”/“Tele Wind” by Manojit Sarkar, *ABP*, 27th January, 2004.

⁵⁶ As quoted by Roopa Ganguly, film actress and Secretary of West Bengal Motion Picture’s Artiste’s forum in the brochure of Second Bangla Telefilm Festival, 2004 published by *Nandan*.

⁵⁷ Roopa Ganguly wrote in the brochure of second Bengali telefilm festival how six directors were selected whose telefilms were shown in international film festivals. These six directors, Ganguly as a producer and director of *Nandan*, Ansu Sur discussed the project together and the theme of *Ek Mutho Chhabi* was fixed.

⁵⁸ North American Bengali Conference or in short NABC is an annual conference held in North America to celebrate Bengali culture where people take part in discussions, literary readings, movie screenings and other types of performances dealing with Bengali culture. It started in 1980s in New York city and later spread all over the United States and Canada

screenings of Ghosh's first two films *Unishe April* and *Dahan* that experienced packed cinema halls in the conference. After these successful screenings of his films, when they were returning, Ghosh told him the story of *Utsab* and Biswas planned to produce this film and to premiere it in the USA.⁶⁰ Then *Utsab* was shot and was premiered on 24th June, 2000 at General Cinema in Los Angeles and then three other different halls across the USA, in San Francisco, Houston and New York. And it earned twenty thousand dollar from these shows in the USA⁶¹. After *Utsab*'s screenings they even organized an interactive session and dinner with the members of the film cast, Prasenjeet Chatterjee and Rituparna Sengupta for the people who bought 'dinner coupons'. Observing *Utsab*'s success among the non residential Bengali crowd in the USA, Biswas planned to produce two Bengali films per year to be premiered in the USA, and to give respective VHS of the films shown on the basis of membership. He calculated that if they could make six thousand people their members across USA and per head thirty or forty dollars could be fixed as membership fees it would be a good business plan to be developed. But then the USA *Prabasi* organization did not show any interest in this project, and Biswas realized that for the non residential Bengali people a new Bengali film screening may be 'fun' for one day, but nothing beyond that.⁶² After Tapan Biswas' 'pioneering attempt' it is an organization like *Databazar Media Ventures* based in Florida, USA that engages in global distribution and marketing of Bengali Films which includes e-marketing. *DMV* in its attempts to bring 'quality' Bengali films to the USA and Canada teams up with several other well known Bengali organizations like *Tagore Society* and *Durga Bari* in Houston Texas, *Prabasi* in the Bay Area, *The Greater Bengali Association* of Atlanta and the Bengali Association of South Florida. And *DMV* in its partnership with *Dingora.com*⁶³ started releasing Bengali films online for an international audience. And a site like *Vinnamat News Network* publishes reviews of these Bengali films distributed through *DMV* and provides the link of *Dingora.com* where one can watch the film online. Here I

⁵⁹ Author's interview with Tapan Biswas, 13th December, 2010.

⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that the plot of *Utsab* of four sons and daughters coming to their home during puja holiday thematically resonates with the sentiments of overseas *Prabasi* Bengali audience.

⁶¹ As reported by an *Anandabazar Patrika* article by Swapan Kumar Ghosh "Bangla Cinemay Ekhan Anek Vagavagi", 4th October, 2000, p. 5.

⁶² Biswas, Op. cit.

⁶³ *Dingora.com* is a site where one can watch films online and it was founded by Pankaj Sikka who is also the founder of the group blogging site *PassionForCinema.com*.

would like to mention a review of the Bengali film *Shukno Lanka* (/Dry red chilies, Gaurav Pandey, 2010) on *Vinnamat News Network* to show how interestingly these online sites connect with each other to publicize and market the Bengali film's diaspora release

Last time when I was in Kolkata I observed how people were excited about this film. For *Databazar* group one can watch a film online at *Dingora.com* in USA on the same day of its release in Kolkata. It can be watched with high definition quality from Canada and America. In the Sunday afternoon I thought to watch it online.... In this month there is another Bengali film releasing, a filmic adaptation of Tagore's story *Laboratory*. (Watch the trailer of this film in this link). The North American audience can watch *Shukno Lanka* from this *Dingora Link*.⁶⁴

It is interesting to observe how the advertisement of a Bengali film appropriates the amateur tone of a regular film viewer and provides the related links. The question is not always of how much profit the diaspora release did earn for Bengali films or whether *DMV* would experience the 'failure' of the global marketing of Bengali films like Tapan Biswas or not, but of how the circulation logic of these 'parallel' films imagines different alternatives to the box office. In the next section I will discuss the question of 'alternative' exhibition for these films. I will try to explore how the strategy of parallel marketing works in terms of exhibition logic, of differentiating the mainstream from the parallel, or what has been termed the 'crude' from the 'cultural' and will attempt to read the strategy of certain exhibition sites associated with this 'parallel' circuit.

Legitimized cinema at legitimized spaces of the city:

When filmmakers like Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha, Haranath Chakraborty talk about rural and small town working class and middle class people as their target audience, and similarly when directors like Anjan Das, Subrata Sen or producers like Tapan Biswas assert the need for reclaiming the 'lost' audience of Bengali cinema, both sides work within a logic of exclusion. This logic of exclusion that goes beyond the boundaries of aesthetic differentiation or any kind of ideological grounds is vividly visible in the distribution of Bengali films across theaters. Producers, directors,

⁶⁴ By Biplab Pal, *Vinnamat News Network*. Link: <http://www.vnnbangla.com/newsreader.aspx?id=4953>. Access date 25th August 2010. Translation mine.

journalists and most of my other informants confirmed that it was the 1990s that experienced a division in the film distribution policy in Bengal for the first time in terms of the location of exhibition sites. In the press and public sphere discussions it's popularly called the binary of 'gramer chhabi/ shaharer chhabi' (i.e. the binary of films made for rural mass/ films made for urban mass). To be more specific, if on the one hand the films belonging to the Bengali 'mainstream' releases at the majority of exhibition sites, the Rituparno Ghosh or Anjan Das films started being associated with some specific exhibition halls and its niche urban film crowd. The division actually not only works in the binary of the cinema halls of rural Bengal and those of Kolkata but works within city spaces as well therefore making some specific exhibition places important urban sites in the proliferation of this (parallel) film culture. In this section I would like to focus on these exhibition sites exploring their biographical detailing and locational importance, and the process through which they got associated with the post liberalization 'parallel' film circuit. Here methodologically I draw from Brian Larkin's work to explore how different orders of information around cinema are mobilized in the cultural life of exhibition sites.⁶⁵

To start with, *Nandan* is the most significant of all in the way it both assumes and constructs a distinct '*Nandan* film crowd'. *Nandan* was established in 1985 as a part of the state initiative taken "to promote film culture" in West Bengal and as its former CEO and the editor of *Bengali Film Directory* Ansu Sur asserts, it had a goal of creating mature young adult film goers who would learn to appreciate 'good' films not only through watching films at *Nandan*, but also by taking part in film appreciation courses, seminars, lectures and the interactive sessions organized by *Nandan*.⁶⁶ Since its inception

⁶⁵ Brian Larkin in his work on Nigerian cinema theater provides historical and ethnographic detailing of the emergence of Cinema in Nigeria examining the materiality of cinema theaters itself as public institutions and the specificity of the cinema going culture it generates through the local political upheavals. Larkin charts out how the material quality of cinematic technology and cultural complexity feed into the cinema going experience in the northern Nigerian city, Kano. See Brian Larkin "The Materiality of Cinema Theaters in Northern Nigeria", in Faye D Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin ed. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with Ansu Sur, July, 2010.

days, because of its association with the Calcutta Film Festival⁶⁷ and registered cine societies in Calcutta, and its very positioning in a 'cultural arena', the vibrant corner of Calcutta embracing *Rabindra Sadan*, *Calcutta Information Center*, *the Academy of Fine Arts*, *Nandan* gained an aura of 'cultured Bengali-ness'. The *Nandan* CEO Nilanjan Chattopadhyay asserts that *Nandan* has a specific film crowd who often decide to watch a film just because it is being screened at *Nandan*.⁶⁸ Thus a film show at *Nandan* gains a symbolic value both for the film itself and its audience. Both Chattopadhyay and Sur see *Nandan* as a significant intervention in the existing Bengali single screen theater chain like *Minar*, *Bijali*, *Chhabighar* or *Rupabani*, *Aruna*, *Bharati*, and also as different from the multiplexes because *Nandan* never had an aim to create a film market but to engage in the circulation of quality films. Though the state fixed a revenue target for film screenings at *Nandan*, there is a difference between the normal single screen theater chain and *Nandan*. Firstly, unlike other cinema halls, entertainment tax is not applicable at *Nandan*. And unlike a fixed amount deposited per show in a normal single screen cinema hall, *Nandan* only claims a certain percentage earned from ticket sales.



The Statesman report on the inauguration of *Nandan*. 2nd¹ September, 1985.

⁶⁷ *Nandan* hosted two international film festivals of India organized by the Government of India in 1990 and 1994. Calcutta film festival was started at *Nandan* in 1995.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Nilanjan Chattopadhyay, March, 2010

While tracing back the 'logic' for this 'art house', an article by Nirmal Dhar published in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* on 2nd September, 1985 provides the brief history behind the formation of *Nandan*. According to this report, in 1970 the West Bengal government formed a Film consultative committee under the leadership of the pioneering figure of Bengali cinema, B. N. Sircar. That committee after their investigation made a report with a list of what is to be done for the betterment of Bengali cinema and sent this to the state government. But that file was there with government officials 'untouched' for 8/9 years⁶⁹. When the Left front government came to power in 1977, the information and broadcasting minister of the West Bengal government, Mr. Budhhdhadeb Bhattacharjee took special interest in that B. N. Sircar report and particularly focused on the number three requirement as per the list, i.e. the idea of forming an art cinema house in the middle of the city. The first advisory board was constituted for this 'art film complex committee' in 1978. Satyajit Ray was the chairman and Mrinal Sen, Paritosh Sen and several other well known intellectuals from various fields of art and literature were the illustrious members of that committee. *Nandan* was named by Ray (which means aesthetics or the paradise); he designed the logo and pivoted the formulations of objectives and the planning of the courses of action.⁷⁰ After Ray, Utpal Dutta headed the board followed by Anil Chatterjee, Basant Chowdhury and Tarun Majumdar. The *Amritabazar* report claims that for the formation of *Nandan* the state spent 1.5 crore rupees; it was built on twenty thousand square feet,⁷¹ has three auditoriums (Nandan I with 950 seats, Nandan II with 300 seats, and Nandan III with 110 seats), a library and a documentation centre. *Nandan*, also known as 'the art film complex' in Calcutta at that time was planned for the exhibition of 'quality' films only, which distributors were not ready to release at ordinary cinema halls and not for "crass commercial (purpose) which thrives on exploitation of human weakness"⁷² of ordinary viewers. *Nandan*, since its inception carries with it this idea of 'quality' and an idea of elite niche film viewers is central to its existence. Here I would like to quote from an article by Nirmal Kumar Ghosh in the brochure of the 2nd Calcutta film festival; he writes:

⁶⁹ For detail see Nirmal Dhar. "Chalachchitrer Nandan Kanan", 2nd September, 1985, *Jugantar*.

⁷⁰ For this brief history of Nandan I am indebted to newspaper articles published of that period 1985 in *Amritabazar Patrika*, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *The Statesman*, *Jugantar* etc.

⁷¹ *Amritabazar Patrika*, 2nd September, 1985.

⁷² Catalogue of 2nd Calcutta Film Festival, 1996, ed. By Partha Raha and Surya Banerjee, p. 3.

In my warmed up vision, “NANDAN” too is a personified pipe- dreamer, one that has set itself the onerous task of bringing under its roof the pick of potential film talents drawn from all the far ranging corners of India free from the obnoxious clutches of caste and political creed. It firmly believes in the cherished dream of Lenin over the great rallying force of the powerful film medium..... “NANDAN” signifies and epitomizes the enlightened Celestial Garden, the Garden of infinite grace and beauty. It cares two hoots for affording big bugs of the movie industry here and elsewhere a grand scale scope to enter into a film- buying- and- selling spree for a rich film market. No drink parties here to egg them on in their drive for commerce! So “NANDAN” is “NANDAN”!⁷³



Nandan

Another important aspect here is that from the very beginning, *Nandan* in spite of its association with active film societies of Calcutta was a departure from the film society ‘biased ness’ of the festival circuit and world cinema. Retrospectives of Antononi, Godard, or Kurosawa were being shown at regular intervals at *Nandan II*. But the emphasis was reviving the practice of watching ‘good’ Bengali films. And *Nandan* increasingly focused on showing Bengali cinema from the past through retrospectives of actors like Uttam Kumar or Rabi Ghosh , directors like Tarun Majumdar or Tapan Sinha

⁷³ Ibid.

or simply showing films from the 50s or 60s.⁷⁴ And secondly, after its establishment the state government and the press undertook to make it not just merely a state run cinema hall. That's why the idea of the 'autonomy' of *Nandan* which as an 'autonomous body' would take decisions regarding *Nandan* appeared again and again in the press discourse. In a way, *Nandan* predated the concept of the multiplex in Calcutta two decades before the actual multiplex arrived. But surely its imagination of the film crowd and the economy of exhibition followed a different logic from that of the multiplex and its niche film market. *Nandan* in itself, the naming, its position and its association with the educated middleclass audience made it the intellectual hub of Calcutta that became central to the 'parallel' film circuit of contemporary Bengali cinema.

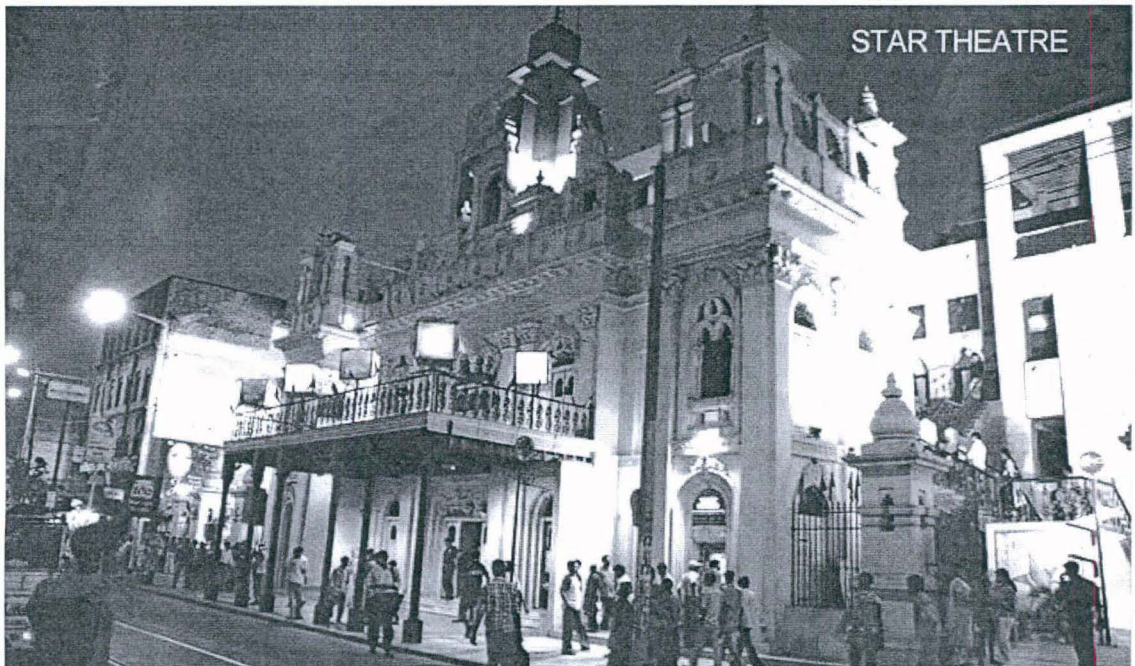
Priya, another important name that screens 'parallel' Bengali cinema holds its position as exclusively catering to the *bhadralok* film crowd in a different way from *Nandan*. Firstly, as both the sales manager Sagnik Michael Sinha, and the owner, Arijit Dutta think *Priya*'s posh south Calcutta location provides the basis of its middle class and upper middle class film crowd who live nearby at Rashbehari, Gariahaat, Golpark or Ballygunge.⁷⁵ The inhabitants of these localities of south Calcutta are largely included in the dissatisfied middle class audience of Bengali cinema. When I asked Mr. Sinha how did *Priya* maintain its difference from any other single screen theater of Calcutta, he shared two main strategies adopted by *Priya* to maintain the 'class' and 'quality' of its film crowd. Firstly, in the 1980s when one after another Bengali films with 'crude stories' and 'vulgar dialogues' started hitting the big screen and 'educated' urban audience allegedly stopped watching Bengali films at cinema halls, *Priya* released only Hollywood films for the city based urban, 'educated' film audience, and did not associate its name with those Bengali mainstream products. So for instance when films like *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* (Subrata Sen, 2001) or *Shubho Mahurat* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2002) were released at *Priya*, the *Priya* film crowd expected something 'different' from the

⁷⁴ To give few examples from its inception *Nandan* regularly presented festivals of (old) Bengali films that include Uttam Kumar retrospective, Homage to Salil Chowdhury, Satyajit Ray retrospectives, Bimal Roy film week, film shows based on Tagore's literary works, Bengali films selected for Indian panorama etc. In 1997 Calcutta Film Festival organized by *Nandan* there was a section called 'Nostalgia' where old Bengali films like Madhu Bose's *Alibaba*, Ajay Kar's *Harano Sur*, Rajen Tarafdar's *Nagpash* were screened. In 2000 festival a centenary tribute of Bengali film actor Chhabi Biswas were organized.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with Arijit Dutta and Sagnik Michael Sinha, November, 2010.

mainstream productions of Bengali cinema. Secondly, Mr. Sinha says that intentionally the average ticket price for *Priya* film shows were fixed higher than the other cinema halls of Calcutta. And this higher ticket price 'assured' the 'bhadralok' film crowd that *Priya* would be 'safe' from the unruly lower class film crowd of Bengali cinema. Another important factor is that *Priya* is associated with the *Piyali* films distribution company that earlier released many 'quality' Bengali films including some of the Satyajit Ray classics. The interior of *Priya* with its decorated lobby showcasing and highlighting the large size French poster of Satyajit Ray's film *Aranyer Dinratri* reconstructs this glorious history in regular film shows at *Priya*.

Star, on the other hand, has a different cultural history associated with great theater personalities (like Girish Ghosh) and performances in the Bengali cultural milieu.



This over a hundred years old heritage venue has turned into a popular entertainment site of north Kolkata where cultural events are held regularly, and Bengali 'parallel' films are shown. *Star* is a case of a tie up between the state government and the *Priya* chain authority. These specific exhibition sites in their association with the film society culture, quality film distribution companies, their marketing strategy of higher ticket prices or

simply because of possessing a rich cultural history that distributed many quality Bengali films quite evidently affirm their difference from normal single screen theater chains that run average mainstream films. Along with *Nandan*, *Priya* or *Star* some other exhibition sites outside Calcutta (exhibition sites like *Lok Sanskriti Mancha*, *Deenbandhu Mancha* etc) working in this network of 'parallel' cinema operate in the circulation of not only this film culture but their 'parallel-ness'. In a way a film show at *Nandan* or *Priya* gives a certain kind of legitimacy of 'bhadralok cinema' both to the film being screened and its audience that a regular *Aruna* or *Prachi* show can not possibly provide. To express it differently, one can say that these urban exhibition sites working within the discourse of 'taste' and 'quality' of Bengali cinema became an important part of imagining the 'parallel' and thus they complete the circle of production, distribution and public sphere imaginations regarding the idea of the 'parallel' in the post liberalization moment of Bengali cinema.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I've tried to map certain factors acting within and outside of the Bengali film industry, and relationally, their institutional role and cultural policies to demonstrate how they all participated in the emergence of this post liberalization 'parallel' film circuit. Especially while studying the Art Film Complex *Nandan* and *Priya* and their specific film crowds, I have tried to demonstrate how this film culture is embedded in a complex matrix of numerous micro social dynamics. To analyze the vital role of these social and cultural institutions, Rita Felski's explanation of how they mediate between the art work and its meanings in the public sphere has been relevant for my discussion⁷⁶. The role of the Bengali Press and *Nandan* is significant in shaping the notion of parallel-ness of this film practice. The regime of production and circulation of this film culture constructed by the Bengali middle class intelligentsia cannot be imagined without these brands like *Nandan* or *Anandabazar Patrika*.

⁷⁶ See Rita Felski. "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method". *MODERNISM / modernity*. Volume ten, number three, 2003, p. 501-517.

The 'unity' of this film culture is constituted of articulations of distinct unconnected elements and different institutions. These distinct articulations can be rearticulated in different ways, in different commitments and directions. Thus my attempt is not to structure a narrative in a causal chain relating all these institutions and their different articulations in a 'wholeness' of this film culture, because I did not find any preexisting 'belongingness' or coherence between these different institutional practices. As for instance, the press discourse especially the Bengali press did not appreciate the formation of *Nandan*; saw it as a 'wastage' of state investment and seriously expressed views that the state should not have any role in 'promoting' film culture by investing in an 'art film complex'. Similarly, *Priya's* strategic business policy and its role in the formation of the *bhadralok* film crowd is quite contrary to *Nandan's* intellectual concerns and *Priya* did not take the floating, amateur production practice of making 'good' Bengali cinema at all seriously. And yet all these institutions and institutional roles did come 'together' in addressing a 'class' that had allegedly distanced itself from the idea of 'mainstream' film practice. It was the moment that made their 'distinct' articulations cohere together and work within a discourse jointly. They operated distinctly in this formulation but their concerns merged while they took part in imagining the 'lost glory' of Bengali films. It was a moment of historicizing Bengali cinema through the contemporary 'crisis', sheer dissatisfaction with mainstream cinema, and constant lamentation for a past glory. In this context some distinct factors made those institutions work together in a process of 'reclamation'.

The mid 1980s- early 1990s was a period when the need for historicizing Bengali cinema was felt in different sectors associated with discussions and a serious engagement with Bengali films. Firstly, a serious change took place in the film society perspective with their 'rediscovery' of the 'mainstream filmmakers' of the past and the greatness of their works.⁷⁷ The popular press and other *bhadra* public sphere discussion forums invested in the greatness of earlier Bengali films while discussing the loss to the

⁷⁷ In an interview conducted by film journal *Silhouette* (Vol VII, 2009) Shamik Bandyopadhyay describes this change in film society organizers' approach and called it 'unfortunate' that film society could not provide the 'support' to film maker like Tapan Sinha or Hemen Gupta when they were making films and only 'historicized' these filmmakers works much later; when they had almost stopped making films or already left Bengali film industry.

contemporary.⁷⁸ Publication of books like Kiranmay Raha's *Bengali Cinema* or Rajat Roy's *Bangalir Chalachchitra o Sanskriti* are two significant attempts at historicizing Bengali films from a perspective of the contemporary. Mriganka Shekhar Roy made a documentary film (*Bangla Chalachchitra Shilper Chalchitra*) in 1985 on the history of Bengali cinema from its early phase through the 'glorious' 50s to the crisis ridden contemporary, and *Nandan* exhibited it on its inauguration function on 2nd September, 1985. In the 1980s after the setting up of *Nandan* through its regular screenings of old Bengali films, a nostalgic discourse of Bengali cinema emerged. Television, on the other hand, through screenings of old Bengali films contributed to this history writing differently. And later through television programmes like *Bishay Chalachchitra* (Zee Bangla) or *Cinemascope* (Tara Bangla) a history was formed and came to circulate. Significantly it's also the time when we experienced the birth of Film Studies as an academic discipline in West Bengal. What I want to argue is that this history writing and formation of the Bengali cinema discourse is closely associated with the emergence of the 'parallel' film circuit I'm dealing with. Unlike most other 'parallel' film practice(s) that essentially came and identified themselves as a 'break', in the case of the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema, the idea was of 'continuation' and 'consistency'. In my next chapter I will explore how this question of 'continuation' (with the past) gave rise to a certain kind of past-ness in the film texts of the post liberalization Bengali *bhadralok* cinema. I will elaborate on how the imagination of a shared memory of the Bengali cinematic past and the *bhadralok* past sometimes merged together, and sometimes produce tensions in narrative terms at the level of thematic and formal articulations.

⁷⁸ Here I should mention that the discussion regarding this 'crisis' in Bengali cinema was not only limited to some particular newspaper and magazine columns and editorial letters but there were a number of group discussion or public debates organized by *Nandan*, various art galleries, Calcutta book fair committee. *Doordarshan* talk shows or other regional cable television programmes.

The Politics and Poetics of Past-ness in the Post 1990s *Bhadralok* Cinema

“In 1980s-1990s a time came in Bengali film industry when films based on the pleasure of literary narratives and meaningful stories were rarely made and released, the main problem being production situation was not in favor of such meaningful films. When I came to film making my effort was to consciously regenerate that ‘lost’ film viewing pleasure of earlier Bengali cinema commonly found in Tarun Majumdar or Tapan Sinha films during 1950s and 1960s.”

-Anjan Das.¹

Recent memory studies have demonstrated how memory has taken part in contemporary times in shaping our social belonging or cultural imagination, individual desire or group activities. Andreas Huyssen relates memory’s contemporary resurgence in the post modern context to a ‘crisis’ in the ideologies of progress and the idea of modernization and the loss of faith in technological advancement in the present². Memory simply seen as the recording of ‘what happened’ has been further problematized and the general belief regarding memory that it is unchanging and only its value changes in different periods has been questioned in memory studies³. Nicola King’s account shows how memory can work as a ‘text to be deciphered’ and not always an (unchanged) ‘lost reality to be rediscovered’.⁴ Moving further, Richard Terdima explains memory’s role in capturing us rather than memory’s subjection to our recapture.⁵ Memory and the remembrance of the ‘lost past’ is central to the post liberalization Bengali ‘parallel’ cinema that I’m discussing, and it functions in diverse directions and multiple layers of determination. At the same time, the role of memory is not simply an imagination of a certain kind of film and film viewing practice from the past that has to be reclaimed, and hence memorialized, but also a question of to whom this past/ past-ness belongs. And it is this memory and nostalgia discourse in its organization, rather than simply working as mere constructions of a class and taste discourse, ‘actively’ produces the subject of the class and taste it belongs to.

¹ Author’s interview with Anjan Das, 6th October, 2010.

² See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (Routledge, 1995).

³ See Susannah Radstone, *Memory and Methodology*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ As referred by Susannah Radstone, *Ibid.*

⁵ As referred by Susannah Radstone, *Ibid.*

The way Rituparno Ghosh's *Hirer Angti* (The Diamond Ring, 1992) or *Utsab* (The Festival, 2000) inevitably remind a viewer habituated to Ray films of *Joy Baba Felunath* (Elephant God, 1979) or *Kanchanjungha* (1962), or Anjan Das' literary ventures like *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* (Strokes and Silhouettes, 2002) or *Faltu* (2005) in their very effort to evoke the pleasure of the literary narrative immediately connect with a cinematic practice of earlier decades can be seen as a kind of ritual remembrance of the lost glories of Bengali cinematic practice. In this memorializing gesture of the 'glorious past' what became an important factor in the construction of the narrative of common memory and its understanding was the identity of the *bhadralok* 'us'. In a complex manner the formation and determination of this 'memory' generated the subject to whom it belonged, and on the other hand, the 'us' to whom this 'memory' belonged took part in the modes of remembrance. The narrative that got constructed took the form that 'our' (Bengali) cinema that was defeated by the (Bengali) cinema of 'theirs' and hence 'lost' from film viewing practice for more than a decade started getting reclaimed from the mid 1990s through the 'parallel' circuit's conscious alignment to a past cinematic practice, through directorial position, film aesthetics and the pleasure generated through film texts. These Bengali film makers who started their film making career in a 'crisis' ridden industry in this period (post 1990s) experienced an industrial set up where those 'good old Bengali films' had ceased to exist. In their films they therefore revisited their cinematic upbringing and their experience of growing up in those 'glorious' days of Bengali cinema. So the 'memory' of a cinematic upbringing of not only some of the filmmakers, but also that of producers, part of the industry crew, and news paper journalists contributed to a discourse of this cinematic practice being in its very essence a continuation of the 'glorious' past of 'meaningful' Bengali films. This discourse exceeded the personal memories of some individuals related to film making, production, marketing and the press circuit, and worked within and beyond to an 'illusion' of a common public memory that belonged to the imagination of the cinema of a particular class and its taste discourse.

In this chapter I will try to elaborate on how the politics and poetics of 'past-ness' works in the ideology of this 'parallel' cinema both on textual and technical levels. It not

only memorializes the past but also ritualizes the remembrance. So the concern is not only what 'we' remember through these films and what we are made to remember again and again, but also of how we participate in this cinematic form of remembrance and ritualize our contemporary experience of the past-ness of 'our' cinematic pleasure and public memory. The question of participation while constructing the 'past-ness' of the contemporary comes with a nostalgia discourse generated around these film texts and associated with this cinematic practice. As I have discussed in my first chapter, in this period public sphere discussions, press articles, television programmes, *Nandan* retrospectives joined together in the historicization of Bengali cinema as well as the formation of a discourse about its authenticity. In this discourse, the 1950s and 60s were seen as the period in Bengali cinema closely associated with Bengali literature, marked by its modes of realism, and a 'middle class sentiment' (Raha, 1991)⁶ whereas the late 1970s and 1980s were seen as a 'deterioration' towards the incorporation of 'masala'⁷ elements like routine song and dance sequences, stereotypical villains etc. Documentary film maker and critic Mriganka Shekhar Roy in an essay published in a booklet, *Seven Decades of Bengali Cinema* blamed the young people who came to make films in the Bengali film industry.⁸ Roy considers them completely "bereft of ideas and idealism" for whom cinema was not a medium of creative expression but simply a 'money-making gamble'. He admits other problems like black-money racketeering, the distributor-exhibitor stranglehold on the producers, the lack of modern studio and laboratory facilities, but asks whether all these factors taken together can account for the 'artistic crisis' of 'perfunctory scripts', 'dumb acting', 'slack editing' or 'immature presentation of themes'. And thus he concludes that the main fault lies in 'our corroding brain cells'. The notion of an 'artistic crisis', in Roy's view, resulted in the formation of a Bengali popular film formula derived from the Bombay 'masala' film. According to him, this formula achieved an acceptable standard in the hands of 'competent' filmmakers as in the films of Prabhat Roy and Bires Chatterjee, but in lesser hands "this would spell a total

⁶ Kiranmoy Raha. *Bengali Cinema*, (Calcutta: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1991).

⁷ Sharmistha Gooptu in her essay "Changing contexts, new texts" in the book *Television in India: Satellites, Politics and Cultural Changes* ed. by Nalin Mehta (Routledge, 2008) talked about these films' emergence in the 1980s in the Bengali film industry and she uses the term 'masala' films.

⁸ Mriganka Shekhar Roy, "Cinema in Bengal: an Overview" in *Seven Decades of Bengali Cinema* (Calcutta: Nandan, 1990).

disaster so far as the art of cinema is concerned". This notion of 'artistic crisis' was a central focus for press discourse as well in this period. Senior journalist Ranjan Bandyopadhyay who worked with both the English and the Bengali press and was associated with *Anandabazar Patrika* for quite a long time, reminisces about the 'golden period' of Bengali cinema in the days of his youth, when on the one hand, one after another Bengali films of Uttam-Suchitra pleased audiences across the classes, and on the other, Satyajit Ray received both international recognition in festival circuits and box office success in Bengal.⁹ And then Bengali cinema lost its middle class ethos and sentiments and started copying Hindi and southern masala films. This constant lamentation of the 'bad quality' of contemporary Bengali films inevitably comes with a sense of loss in the popular discursive regimes concerned with Bengali films. The fact that the industry does not have a 'creative mind' in film or film makers do not have 'film sense' has always been measured against the 'glorious' past of Bengali films when the Bengali film industry had 'talented' filmmakers making 'meaningful' films.

While coming to the question of the 'sense of loss' and the nostalgia discourse generated around Bengali cinematic practice, it is interesting to note that *bhadralok* history in this period was also going through a similar 'crisis' and sense of loss in every sphere quite significantly. Partha Chatterjee points out how since post independence West Bengal has slowly been marginalized in terms of a political role in Indian reality.¹⁰ Firstly Bengal's claim to "natural leadership of the entire nationality" became virtually untenable. Secondly as Chatterjee observes there was no Bengali capitalist class which could utilize the "new opportunities opened up by the withdrawal of the British capitalist class or by state support for private capitalist expansion". For various other reasons within fifty years of India's independence in all areas of the Indian economy, as Partha Chatterjee points out, since the 1970s in the "onward march of Indian capitalism" West Bengal has been marginalized systematically. And he observes how West Bengal's dominant political mood reacted to this 'marginalization' with "pervasive anger,

⁹ Author's interview with Ranjan Bandyopadhyay, 23rd June, 2010.

¹⁰ See Partha Chatterjee, "The Fruits of Macaulay's Poison Tree" in his *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

sometimes sullen, sometimes violent” and always negatively.¹¹ Moreover, besides the large scale changes in technology and the proliferation of cultural production on new commercial premises, the cultural and moral basis of the leadership of the progressive intelligentsia was threatened. Chatterjee argues:

The moral legitimacy of virtually every aspect of the cultural edifice built by Bengali intelligentsia over the last hundred years is now under constant assault, on the one hand by the new cosmopolitanism of the ‘English medium’ to which the class itself has almost wholly succumbed, once again a helpless submission to the economic laws of the job market, and on the other by the vulgarity of mass produced commercial entertainment. The only answer to this has been state patronage of culture, on a scale so woefully inadequate as to be almost irrelevant to the overall situation.¹²

Thus in this period the overall *bhadralok* history became a larger ‘crisis narrative’ with the class seen as suffering from numerous problems and especially a growing sense of loss, and the various fields of social and cultural production manifested these changes in their own artistic domains. Bengali literature, for instance witnessed in this period the emergence of a new group of writers and literary canons which focused on moral degradation and relationship anxiety in contemporary *bhadra* middle class life and Bengali society. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s popular novels that were exemplary texts of this period like *Kancher dewal*, *Kachher Manush* or *Bhangankaal* carries the narrative of *bhadralok* anxiety. It’s interesting to note that a figure like Suchitra Bhattacharya from Bengali popular literary practice became an important name in the post 1990s Bengali ‘parallel’ film practice. Not only have many of her popular novels like *Dahan* or *Hemanter Pakhi* been adapted cinematically, but the kind of narrative her readers associated with her became a close reference for the post 1990s Bengali ‘parallel’ cinema’s middle class narratives based on the crisis of filial bonds and troubled couple spaces situated in urban localities. However, the broader sociological scenario of this time period is not my concern here in this chapter and neither is the changing phase of Bengali literature within the scope of this paper. So in my approach I will just try to read these other changes symptomatically within Bengali cinematic practice that is my focus area. I do not propose here a parallel sociological analysis of the sense of loss in *bhadralok* culture in the broader sense of that period, or the emergence of a new kind of

¹¹ Ibid, p. 25.

¹² Ibid, p. 26.

middle class popular literary practice, but will use them as reference points for the body of films under my consideration and will try to theorize how these changes in West Bengal's social life have been manifested in film texts in terms of their narrative and apparatus logic. The broader narrative of *bhadralok* nostalgia and memory discourses definitely influenced the poetics of these films which also developed their own memorializing patterns. My approach here of critically analyzing the politics of past-ness and the ritual of memorializing in the parallel films under consideration will attempt to go deep into the different registers of past-ness that are evoked, and will try to understand them in their multiple strands, complex patterns and diverse alignments.

The Narrative of Past-ness:

In this section I would like to explore how the films engaged in their narratives with different patterns of past-ness. The post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' film text focuses interestingly again and again on narratives concerned with the past and memory. A film like *Dekha* (Vision/ 2001) by Goutam Ghose has as its central protagonist an aged Bengali poet Shashibhusan (played by Soumitra Chattopadhyay) and his troubled 'vision' in the contemporary. In the section that deals with the 'present' of the aged poet, Shashibhusan is seen in his surroundings: his old house, the people he knows, the places he belongs to, but his 'vision' is absent since he has become an almost a blind person who can not see anything. Whereas in the sections dealing with the 'past', the film is shot from the perspective of Shashibhusan in his childhood, youth and middle age, and each of the shots is taken from his point of view underlining his perspective and the way he 'sees' so that Shashibhusan is rendered 'invisible' since what is realized on the screen is his point of view both literally and metaphorically. In this way the film from the 'present time' goes back to the 'past' from time to time, and Shashibhusan's vision of the past and the way he is 'viewed' in the present are merged in the film. Some other films of the 'parallel' circuit like Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Laal Darja* (The Red Door, 1997) or Aparna Sen's *Yugant* (What the Sea Said, 1996) or *Paromitar Ekdin* (House of Memories, 2000) similarly deal with the intermingling of the past and the present.



Narrative of past-ness and moments of memorializing: Vidya Balan as Anandi in *Bhalo Theko*

In the narrative of past-ness of these films, childhood, memory and lost innocence are themes that are repeated again and again. In films like *Bhalo Theko* (Forever Yours/ Gautam Halder, 2003) or *Asukh* (Malaise/ Rituparno Ghosh, 1999) childhood memories haunt the present of the film. *Bhalo Theko* is based on a day in the protagonist Anandi's life (played by Vidya Balan), and from time to time the film goes back to past incidents of her life. Her childhood memory of going to a village *mela* where she was lost and later found by her elder brother is referred to more than once in this film. A close parallel is drawn to Anandi's 'present' life where in the present, her politically active brother has been missing for some years and Anandi has not been able to find him. In *Asukh*, the logic of past-ness appears in a different pattern of memorializing. *Asukh* narrates the troubled relationship between Rohini (Debashree Roy) who is a film star and her father Sudhamoy (Soumitra Chatterjee). The narrative is centered on the sudden illness of Rohini's mother (Gouri Ghosh) who has to be hospitalized and the manner in which the relationship between the father and the daughter changes during this period. Physical illness allegorically indicates the 'illness' that Rohini and Sudhamoy are suffering from because of the emotional distance they have developed. In this narrative of past-ness the childhood of Rohini is visually not shown but thematically referred to through a recitation of Tagore's poem "Chhotto Amar Meye" (My Little Daughter) from his *Hariye*

Jawa anthology. The poem refers to a mother's anxiety and reminiscence of her daughter who is distant and lost from her surroundings.



Scenes from *Asukh*: Recitations from Tagore, past-ness, and the interiority of mother daughter bonding

The reference to *Sanchayita* (Tagore's collection of poems) and its diegetic and non diegetic recitations locate past-ness in a different register from the present time of the narrative. Recitations of Tagore's poems and the past-ness associated with them constructs the interiority of the mother-daughter bonding in *Asukh*. The use of this device immediately connects the 'lost intimacy' between the parents and their child; what it used to be in Rohini's childhood when her mother used to read from *Sanchayita* to make Rohini sleep. In a particular sequence Ghosh merges the memory of the mother's childhood, Rohini's childhood and past-ness of the two quite significantly. The sequence starts with the mother reminiscing about her childhood when her father took them all to Matheran for a month's holiday and she laments that the three of them (Rohini, her father and she herself) perhaps would never be able to go together anywhere anymore. Just after that Rohini soothes her mother quoting a poem and referring to both her and her mother's lost past; the literal translation reads:

Sometimes I see you with your father's letter in your hand.
You lean on the window and you seem to be thinking quietly.
Looking at your face I feel as if you are from a distant land.
As if you are my long lost, distant mother¹³.

In a way, the mother and daughter share their memory of lost childhood and innocence that has a reference to their 'distant' fathers. Their personal memories continue in the recitation of the same poem in the following scenes but with a background voice that

¹³ *Asukh* DVD, Translation mine.

belongs neither to the mother nor to the daughter anymore. This third non diegetic voice (Aparna Sen's recitation) elaborates both their memory stories and acts as a third register of past-ness here.¹⁴

In these narratives of past-ness and of childhood memories the 'present'/ 'absent' father/ mother figure plays a significant role. As both in *Laal Darja*¹⁵ or *Dekha* the absent mother of Nabin or Shashibhushan remains central to the development of the protagonist's remembrance, and the way memory maps out their traumatic present throughout the film. In *Laal Darja* the mother figure's presence is felt in references to a letter written by her to her son Nabin and a magical sequence. In *Dekha* she is more prominent, shown as singing in the protagonist's memory. And in one sequence, she lyrically merges with three other women in the protagonist's life, Reba, Sarama and Rima while he journeys through dream, memory and fantasy. *Unishe April* (Nineteenth April, Rituparno Ghosh, 1996) also evokes the past through its protagonists' Sarojini and Mithu's memories and goes back again and again to Mithu's childhood and her traumatic experience of her father's death. The film narrates a day in Mithu's (Debashree Roy) life. It's 19th April, the day of her father's death anniversary and co incidentally her famous danseuse mother Sarojini (Aparna Sen) receives a prestigious award on that same day for her contribution to Indian classical dance. The film highlights the contradictory moods of the mother and the daughter on that day as one becomes busy with media attention, hype, celebration and a short trip to her guruji to offer a *pranam* on this auspicious occasion; while the other gets increasingly disturbed at these celebrations, sorry about her father's absence, first worried and then broken by her boyfriend's decision to not marry her, finally deciding to commit suicide. Accidentally Sarojini's flight gets cancelled, she returns home and Mithu's plan is revealed to her. The rest of the film is about the development of a mother-daughter bonding once they start sharing each other's trauma and memory. Subhadra Chowdhury's *Prahar* (2004) too is a return to the absent father in its narrative of past-ness. Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Kaalpurush* (Memories in the Mist/ 2008) also makes its protagonist return to his lost father in its ending. Throughout the

¹⁴ The title track of *Asukh* referred this voice as "Rohini's inner voice".

¹⁵ Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Laal Darja* (The Red Door, 1997) is about Nabin's troubled life who is a dentist by profession and disturbed for many reasons.

film, the father follows the son and he appears in his son's dreams and memories, and at the climax we see them together chatting with each other beside the sea.

Past-ness and the use of the father and mother figures work in *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* (Strokes and Silhouettes, 2002) in a different way that needs a discussion. Anjan Das' *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* and the novel it is based on by Joy Goswami can be seen as a reversible journey both from and towards memory. The novel significantly starts and ends with the same lines where the protagonist Shanjhbatir introduces herself and her surroundings. In this way, it establishes the cyclic return of memory to the contemporary and its overwhelming presence in the contemporary. Anjan Das' film also to some extent follows the same path, but film being a different medium the themes are established differently. In *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* the father of Shanjhbatir remains the center of Shanjhbatir's journey from and towards selfhood and memory. In *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* memory becomes something from which dream originates and the dream finally moves towards the memory. The film starts with a visual of a swinging cradle and Shanjhbatir's (Indrani Haldar) voiceover in a memorializing tone. I would like to quote part of it:

My name is Saanjhbatir endearingly Tukun. Ma gave me that name as I was born at twilight time... Pa used to see a light around me. It was not like a candle or a bulb. But was a different kind of glow... rarely seen elsewhere.

Ma never saw that glow. Ma was like a water vessel. Light passed through Ma like water. But if you ever look through water, deep down under... you will see a greenish tinge below the surface... dissolving into darkness.

Light never goes through Pa. he is like a massive tree. Light falls on the leaves but it can never go through the trunk.¹⁶

Memorializing almost leads to dreaming. And the voiceover and the form of soliloquy throughout the film blurs the line between dreaming and memorializing. Towards the end of this film, Shanjhbatir after a long gap comes back to her father. Her father says "So you have come out from under water.... under fathomless water... Wipe your face! Let me see your face. Is it full of algae or sand?"¹⁷ The reference to water reminds her of her dead mother. After this sequence when her father starts drawing Shanjhbatir, it becomes a

¹⁶ *Shanjhbatir Rupkathara*, DVD.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

portrait of Shanjhbatī's mother. In a way Shanjhbatī becomes the memory of her mother. And it was Shanjhbatī's dream to make her father draw a portrait of her mother. Finally in the end when Shanjhbatī achieves her dream she is able to write something; she starts with "My name is Shanjhbatī endearingly Tukun. Ma gave me that name as I was born at twilight time... Pa used to see a light around me...." Before this sequence the image of the swinging cradle comes back. And memory returns to her with the dream fairy.¹⁸ Thus in *Shanjhbatir Roopkathara* memorializing is a reversible journey both from and towards the dream, and the figure of Shanjhbatī's father is central to it.

However, the central figure of reminiscence is not necessarily father/ mother in these films and it's not always the memory of childhood that is lost and cried for. For example, in Urmi Chakraborty's *Hemanter Pakhi* (The Autumn Bird, 2005) the figure who is being remembered is not that of the protagonist, Aditi's father or mother, but a friend of Aditi's (played by Fanushree Shankar) uncle, Hemen mama (Soumitra Chatterjee). After a long time he has come to visit her and has got her involved in writing and encouraged her to publish. Through his inspiration, Aditi goes back to her college life when she was enthusiastic about the college magazine and finally starts writing again after a long time. Though she was not able to sustain her newly discovered passion for writing for long and lost contact with Hemen mama, through her memory of her first published story of a little girl who used to stand before a dense fog that Hemen mama reminds her of, she starts 'living' her life. In Aparna Sen's *Paromitar Ekdin*, Paromita (Rituparna Sengupta) reminisces about her ex mother-in-law Sanaka (Aparna Sen) during the latter's shraddha ritual. In the title track, the recitation of *Gita* shlokas and the mapping of the empty spaces of an old north Calcutta household ends with Sanaka's photograph decorated with flowers and sandal wood paste for the shraddha ritual, and as the film starts with a close up of Paromita, it goes back to Paromita's experience of her first day in this house when she was just married. The film then tells the tale of the growing intimacy between Paromita and Sanaka and symbolizes Sanaka's dual presence/ absence in Paromita's imagination through the spaces of this house. This entire old house as the English title (House of Memories) suggests turns to a household of memories for Paromita as she

¹⁸ In the film Bengali word 'Roopkatha' (literally fairytale) was translated in the subtitle as 'dreamfairy'.

steps into the house after her closest friend Sanaka's death. The memory of Sanaka and those intimate moments they shared imbues this narrative of past-ness with a nostalgic tone for a lost relationship. Aparna Sen's earlier film *Yugant* (What the Sea Said, 1994) is also about a 'lost' relationship between an aged couple Anasua and Deepak (played by Roopa Ganguly and Anjan Dutta) and their longing for that beautiful past life they once had. In the past when things were simpler between them, both were committed to what they were passionate about: Anasua's dance and Deepak's advertising job. Their meeting, after a long separation of eighteen months, at a small fishing village where they had once spent time together ends in a local myth of the village community when Deepak sees the mythical 'buri kachhua' (old tortoise) and vanishes into the sea. The film ends with Anasua's search for Deepak in vein and her cry merged with the sound of the sea.

This thematic of lost relationships between couples that create the affect of past-ness is a common theme that is repeated in film after film. Rituparno Ghosh's *Dosar* (The Companion, 2006) for instance laments a lost intimacy in a double register. Firstly, it is the lost intimacy between Kausik and Kaberi (Prasenjit Chattopadhyay and Konkona Sen Sharma) after Kaushik's colleague Mita Roy's (Chandreyi Ghosh) accidental death with whom Kausik was having an affair. And at the same time, Mita's physical absence and her reference in conversations and her sms to Kausik writes the lost romance in Kausik's suffering. The film finally tries to resolve this dual 'loss' in a mystic afternoon when Kaberi recites the same poem that was used to signify Kausik and Mita's romantic involvement and intimate moments. Abhijit Dasgupta's *Dwitiyo Basanto* (*Beyond Tomorrow*, 2005) similarly laments the past-ness of intimacy in Jhumur's (Rituparna Sengupta) isolation in a secluded place after her husband's death. The whole film is about her reminiscence of her husband (Sabyasachi Chakraborty) and one of her closest friends and colleague Sudipto (Shilajit). Even when Sudipto comes to visit Jhumur nothing 'happens' actually in present, but it is their friendship, shared love for Bengali poetry, and artistic inclination that they remember. Jhumur's gloomy household spaces, almost darkly lit living room design, banal conversation in the present is sharply contrasted to her colorful and bright past life. The past is what Jhumur cries for and also Sudipta feels, but both of them knows it's impossible to reestablish that lively bond they

used to share; they can only memorialize those moments in their present lives and nothing more than that. A film like *Rangeen Godhuli/ Colorful Twilight* (Debanik Kundu, 2007) is similarly about the reminiscence of a love affair between Labanya (Bratati Bandyopadhyay) and Kumaresh (Bodhisatta Majumdar) when they were young. This couple accidentally meets after a long gap of about more than three decades during a holiday outing in north Bengal. After going back to Kolkata they continue their meeting, but finally realize it's impossible to regain that past passion with their present family lives and responsibilities. Kumaresh leaves the city taking his Labu (the name he used to call Labanya by) with him and Labanya Prabha continues living her life in other roles as a wife, mother, mother in law, and grandmother with memories of Kumaresh and their lost intimacy.

Before I end this section I will elaborate on an example from *Bariwali* (The Lady of the House/ 1999) to demonstrate how in the narrative of past-ness, the lost glory of Bengali cinema and the present crisis of the Bengali film industry are interwoven. Rituparno Ghosh's *Bariwali* narrates the story of Banalata (played by Kiran Kher) and her interaction with a shooting unit when they rent her ancestral house for a film shooting. Banalata, though not convinced initially by the idea of "letting hoards of men" into her house and 'ruining' it, later agrees due to the rental offered to her that she realized she could use to settle certain pending official issues. In a sequence within this film Banalata while watching a fight sequence in a Hindi film on television expresses her anxiety to her maid Malati (Sudipta Chakraborty) about how much the shooting unit would 'ruin' her house. When Malati tries to assure her that Bengali films generally have fewer fight sequences than Hindi films, Banalata's quick reply is, "are Bengali films what they used to be?"¹⁹. Interestingly after a few more sequences when it is revealed to them that the film the shooting unit is going to shoot is based on Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* they are relieved, and Banalata's servant Prasanna says that it's good because then there would be no fights. The film in its different parts through its characters' conversations comments on the Bengali film industry's contemporary crisis- it talks about films being made with meaningless scripts and a particular class's affinity

¹⁹ *Bariwali* . DVD.

for contemporary Bengali cinema, and the 'better' cinema going class's reluctance about going to cinema halls. *Bariwali*, though centrally focused on Banalata and her desire for the film director Dipankar (Chiranjeet Chakraborty), and their changing phases of intimacy also has a parallel discourse running through the film about the crisis narrative of contemporary Bengali cinema. The film within the film (filming of Tagore's *Chokher Bali*) clearly a 'different' film from the run of the mill commercial hits allegorically highlights its own position as beyond and superior to the mainstream. Film actors Abhijit and Sudeshna in a sequence speak about the terrible condition of the contemporary film industry and the poor quality of Bengali popular films. Throughout the film, the division between "make belief commercial film" and "realistic art film" is articulated. And through Malati's (who represents the lower class of the cinema going public) interest in going for contemporary films, and Banalata's disinterest (*bhadralok* reluctance) in going to the cinema hall to watch a film, this film within its scope 'talks about' the crisis ridden Bengali cinema and marks its own position as higher than that. The politics of past-ness functions here through the naming of the character (Banalata has an obvious connection with Jibananda Das' famous poem "Banalata Sen"), dialogues (full of literary references), singing of Rabindrasangeet, and most importantly, the quality of the literary narrative film that was 'lost' from Bengali cinematic practice.

In this section I've tried to describe how the narrative of past-ness appears and functions in a set of films produced and released as 'parallel' films in this period. In the narrative content, the referring back to the past mostly brings up the idea of a lost past and a nostalgic tone accompanies it. The evocation of the past and thereby the gesture of memorializing rarely brings trauma, sorrow, pain or any negative memory of the past lives these protagonists once had. Past-ness is mostly designed and memorialized as something pure, pristine and beautiful. Furthermore, in most of the cases the sense of past-ness that is evoked is of personal pasts and not necessarily contextualized within a 'proper' historical framework. Thus the immediate past of the 1970s and the 1980s Bengal that also had a considerable amount of political turbulence with violent incidents

of the Naxalite period rarely appear in the post liberalization past-ness of these films.²⁰ Whenever past-ness appears with a tragic incident or in terms of a reference to historical tragedy, the larger tragedy is marginalized, and the tragic tone is located in the personal stories of relationships. For example, the reference to the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war in a film like *Rangeen Godhuli* remains nothing more than just a context necessary to establish the love affair and the separation between Labanya and Kumaresh. In *Bhalo Theko*, to establish Anandi's brother's involvement in radical politics and his revolutionary ideals, a Naxalite feel was clear enough in the script but the film never engages with the political dimension and takes more interest in his missing as a personal loss in Anandi's life. My intention here is not to criticize these films for the 'ahistorical', 'apolitical' framework they work within, or to show how and why they 'lack' this quality, but rather to reflect on why this framework works in these narratives. My observation is that this narrative of past-ness is a primary refuge for a particular class - the 'better' cinema-going class, the *bhadralok* that felt distanced from and marginalized within mainstream cinema because of the dominance of a particular emergent new labor and bourgeois class. And it is this older *bhadralok* class that attempted to articulate their sense of rootedness and belonging to an imagined 'glorious' past they believe they once had. And these personal memories and *bhadralok* perspectives rather than Bengal's immediate or earlier history is what they make their stories about. The loss in *bhadralok* cinema is primarily a question of cultural loss. Thus, the logic of past-ness functions here 'culturally'. In the next sections I'll try to demonstrate how cinematic form participates in this memorializing, and finally how the *bhadralok* self central to this imagination reveals itself in its self portrayal.

Memorializing a Cinematic Past

This puja in my grandma's house is more than 150 years old, my mom's grandpa used to celebrate with brilliant fireworks, grand feasts, ornaments imported from Germany... (heard that) these utensils were used in Satyajit Ray's film 'Devi', Ray visited this house one day. My mother was just-a kid then...

²⁰ *Anu* (by Shatarupa Sanyal, 1996) being an exception to that practice dealt with the traumatic memory of that period of the protagonist Anu (played by Indrani Halder) who is a survivor of the radical politics of the 1970s and a victim of gang rape.

Now just my grandma stays here, her four children come with their families every year at this time... the five days festival starts tomorrow, Banshida is late as usual, still chatting with Bumba just like the opening scene in Ray's film 'Elephant God'...

- DVD subtitle of title track voice over in Rituparno Ghosh's film *Utsab* (The Festival/ 2001).

These lines from *Utsab* engage with past-ness in different patterns of memorializing. Here the video voice that belongs to Joy (Ratul Shankar), a character of this film, introduces his ancestral house during the Durga Puja celebrations. The narrative here and also in the entire film is full of different histories and references to past events of this house. The narrative is not always a memory of 'his' (Joy's) childhood and his 'past' but also that of the pasts and the memories that he has acquired from the older generation. The larger frame of past-ness here goes beyond the character²¹ and speaks of a general past. Past-ness is not only evoked through the memory narrative of *Utsab* but also through its film form that memorializes the cinematic past of Bengal with some references and stylizations. And I do not consider *Utsab* as an exceptional case evokes a certain cinematic past in this particular manner. On the contrary, I would like to argue that this memorialization through film form is a general feature of the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema that needs a discussion. Hence in this section, I will try to explore how the form of the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema memorializes earlier Bengali cinematic practice. . Firstly I will try to focus on the re-emergence of 'Bengali narrative cinema' in the work of these 'parallel' film makers and how it connects them with the earlier cinematic past. Then I will demonstrate how Ray realism and the thematic and visual references of Ray films are evoked by 'parallel' filmmakers and especially in Rituparno Ghosh's work. And finally I will try to engage with some other features and forms of these films that memorialize and ritualize this remembrance in different patterns.

One of the important features of the post-liberalization 'parallel' cinema that generated the 'feel' and 'pleasure' of earlier Bengali cinema was their use of literary narratives. Rituparno Ghosh's *Hirer Angti* (original novel by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay)

²¹ *Utsab* is a film that is centered not on a protagonist but a family. But the narrative voice many cases merged with this character, Joy. The starting and the ending of this film are voiced by his video voice that he recorded during puja holidays in his ancestral house.

or *Chokher Bali* (Rabindranath Tagore), Anjan Das' *Iti Shrikanto* (Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay) or Pinaki Chowdhury's *Ballygunge Court* (Bani Basu) and a large number of other films were inspired by or adaptations of Bengali literary creations. One point that came up again and again in public sphere discussions of the 'crisis narrative' of the 1980s- 90s was the distance of contemporary Bengali cinematic practice from Bengali literature. This point was considered one of the possible reasons behind Bengali cinema's alleged decline in quality. Kiranmoy Raha while discussing this cinema's history stresses on earlier Bengali cinema's closeness to Bengali literature which according to him resulted in Bengali cinema's 'difference' from other regional cinemas of India.²² Firstly, he observes Bengali cinema's inheritance of a "rich literary tradition" and "literary attachment" that caused in Bengali filmic texts, less reliance on mythological stories compared to films made in Hindi, Tamil or Telegu.²³ Secondly, according to him this literary trait made Bengali cinema less dependent on songs and its cinema music evolved differently from elsewhere.²⁴ Other writings on Bengali cinema also emphasized the association of Bengali cinematic practice with the literary tradition of Bengal in the silent era, during the emergence of the talkies and in the decades of the 1950s and 60s. Raha states that in the very first year of the talkies only one of six films made was on mythology. Nirmalya Acharya in a different essay observes that in those initial years of the talkies, Bengali cinema showed more interest in "social subjects" rather than mythological narratives, and "in this quest, literature expectedly enough, proved to be cinema's most accessible cornucopia".²⁵ Interestingly, in this time period many renowned writers from the Bengali literary tradition emerged as writers of film plots and many of them became directors themselves. Premankur Atarshi who was a writer, made the first new theater talkie, *Dena Paona* in 1931 that was based on Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story. On the one hand a large number of films were based on Bengali stories and novels, and on the other hand many Bengali novelists wrote scripts for Bengali films. In those early years many of Sharatchandra and Rabindranath Tagore's novels and stories were made into films. Tagore himself was associated with the direction

²² Kiranmoy Raha. Op. cit.

²³ Raha, *ibid*, p. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ Nirmalya Acharya in "Seven Decades of Bengali Cinema" (Calcutta: Nandan 1990).

of New Theater's production of *Natir Puja*. And later well known figures from Bengali literature like Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay or Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Premendra Mitra or Sailajananda Mukherjee became quite prominent in the scenario of Bengali cinema that included films like *Saptapadi*, *Jhinder Bandi*, *Palatak* or *Nimantran*

This association of Bengali literature and cinema made a section of the cinema going public from the (middle) class refer to and understand film as 'boi' which is a Bengali word for book. Acharya says that such people inferred that cinema was "a mere variant of literature" and Raha sees the Bengali cinema viewers' preference for 'good' filmic narrative content resulting in producers hiring writers for their stories. This practice slowly however became rare in the 1980s and 90s coming to be replaced by 'copy paste jobs' of southern films or West Bengal's version of Bangladeshi superhits. I have introduced this brief history of earlier Bengali cinema's literary connection here just to explain how the connection with literature in the post 1990s Bengali cinema can be seen as being aligned to the Bengali cinematic practice of the 50s and 60s. Ranjan Bandyopadhyay²⁶ observes that in the 1990s with Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh, literary cinema (that the Bengali middle class viewer used to refer to as 'boi') returned to Bengali cinematic practice that had been absent for decades both in the mainstream and the parallel film circuit. What I mean to say here is that it is not only the case of "period" films like *Iti Shrikanta/ Chokher Bali* that bring up the idea of the glorious past of Bengal or Bengali literature via the 'greatness' of a Tagore or a Sharatchandra narrative. But the very idea of Bengali cinema based on Bengali literature even if it is contemporary popular novels by Bani Basu or Suchitra Bhattacharya essentially brings up the idea of the continuation of earlier 'good' Bengali films. Anjan Das in his interview memorialized this earlier tradition of literary films in Bengal and expressed his disappointment at the way in which it vanished from Bengali cinematic practice.²⁷ So he consciously tried to bring back that pleasure of literary narrative through his films. And it's interesting to observe that all of his films (from *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* / 2002 to *Bedeni* / 2011) are literary adaptations.

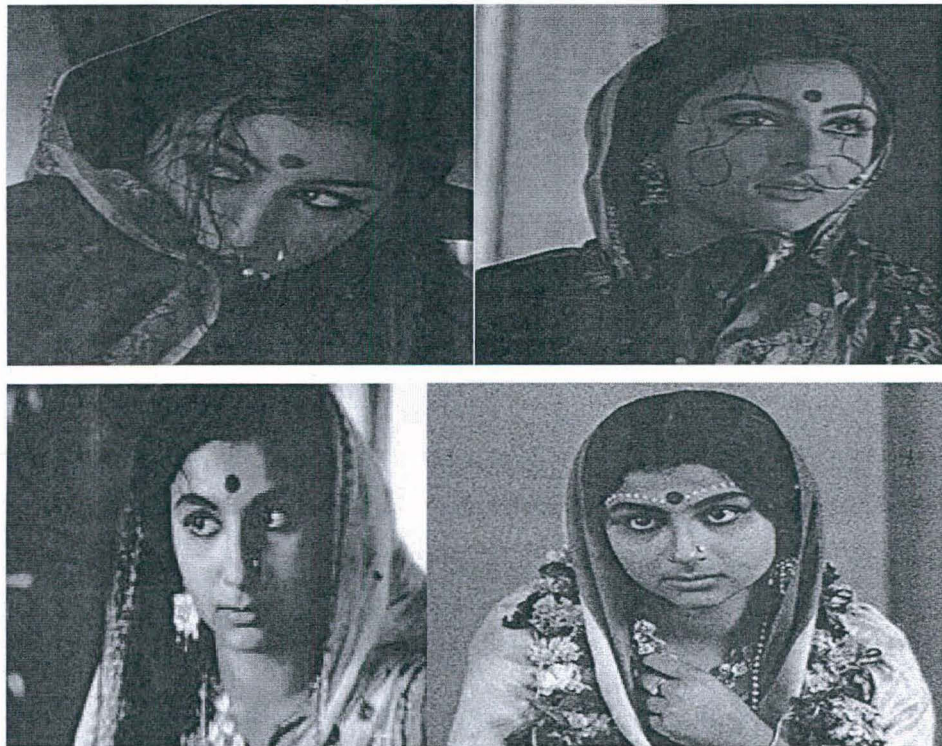
²⁶ Ranjan Bandyopadhyay, Op. cit.

²⁷ Anjan Das, Op. cit.

Along with the 'reemergence' of the practice of basing films on literary creations, certain directorial works and directors became central to the cinematic memorialization of the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema. Especially Satyajit Ray and the references to his films can be seen as a dominant pattern of memorializing in many of these films and this is particularly relevant to Rituparno Ghosh's works. Ghosh from the beginning of his film making career followed Ray aesthetics in different aspects of his film making. Ghosh's first film *Hirer Angti* (The Diamond Ring, 1994) was a literary adaptation of a Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's novel. Though he made some changes in his film, it conveys the pleasure of literary narrative. *Hirer Angti* narrates the story of what happens to a family when suddenly a person comes during Durga puja preparation and claims to be the original owner of their house. The narrative deals with past secrets, the history of that house and a resolution. What is important here is how Ghosh makes some changes to regenerate the nostalgia of *bhadralok* cinema. Firstly, the time of the narrative that was referred to in the original novel as 'Baishakhi Purnima' was transformed into 'Durga puja'. Shifting the event to *durga puja* serves to convey an essence of Bengali culture and also the feel of some earlier Bengali films that dealt with similar joint family structures and *puja* celebrations. Moreover, it specifically reminded its audience of a particular film by Satyajit Ray, *Joy Baba Felunath*²⁸ (The Elephant God, 1979). The mood of the puja holiday, the scenes of making the Durga idol and the sequences of preparations for Durga puja celebrations and the way they were designed inevitably reminded its viewer familiar with Ray's film of *Joy Baba Felunath*. It has other aspects of evoking the Ray film in terms of the spaces constructed between two young boys of different age groups visually evoking the memory of Feluda and his younger cousin and assistance Topshe. And Rituparno also added a perspective of NRI nostalgia about the puja holiday through a portrayal of the family of the second son who is settled in the USA. This is absent in the original novel.

²⁸ *Joy Baba Felunath* is a film by Satyajit Ray set in Benaras where private detective Prodosh Mitter (who is famously called Feluda, a literary creation by Ray) goes for the puja holiday with his assistance Topshe and Lalmohan Ganguly and solves the mystery of a missing Ganesha idol.

Following *Hirer Angti*, Rituparno Ghosh in many of his films evoked the nostalgia of Ray films in the way he developed the dialogue, designed the mise-en-scene, and used the lighting scheme and overall atmosphere. I consider this style of Ghosh's film making a form of memorializing that provided its viewers the pleasure of remembering Ray and his films. And Ghosh also occasionally commented on them by literally referring to the memory of Ray films as he did at the beginning of *Utsab*. Within the film Joy's memory of Satyajit Ray's films (*Joy Baba Felunath* and *Devi*) evokes the memory of the viewers also who are familiar with Ray films. And sometimes Ghosh's films visually refer to the figures and sequences from Ray films. In a film like *Antarmahal* (Views of the Inner Chamber, 2005) the image of Soha Ali Khan immediately reminds the viewer of Sharmila Tagore images from *Devi* (Satyajit Ray, 1960). Besides the thematic resemblance (the narrative of feudal decay and the practice of idolizing woman) with *Devi*, *Antarmahal* visually evokes the memory of *Devi* in the way Soha Ali Khan's look is designed and the manner in which camera angles and lighting schemes are used.



Images of Soha Ali Khan in *Antarmahal* (above) visually referring back to the image of Sharmila Tagore in *Devi* (below)

Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (A Passion Play, 2003) too visually brings up the cinematic memory of Ray films, especially in its visual registers, the memory of *Charulata* (1964). In an early sequence, the manner in which Ghosh uses Aisharya Rai with a binocular can be seen as a citation to *Charulata* which it evokes in a strong memory of the film. Even in Rituparno Ghosh's latest film *Noukadubi* (Boat Wreck, 2011) a whole memory of the Bengali cinematic past is evoked in its use of place, its spatial designing of Benaras ghats, its interiority, the literariness of the film narrative, and the way the images of Raima Sen remind the viewer of her grandmother, Suchitra Sen, the leading lady of the glorious phase of Bengali cinema. In *Abohomaan* (The Eternal/ Rituparno Ghosh, 2010) the mise-en-scene of the study of Aniket, the film maker played by Dipankar Dey within the film clearly evokes the space of Satyajit Ray's study. In this way, Ghosh's films work to generate the 'feel' of Ray films in their cinematic remembrance of his films.

Goutam Ghose however worked on the memorialization of Ray on a different scale while making the sequel to Ray's *Aranyer Dinratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1969) : *Abar Aranye* (In the Forest... Again, 2003). *Abar Aranye* begins with the visuals of *Aranyer Dinratri* and a voice over of Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) describing a Palamou trip of four young men in April, 1969. And then she introduces the present situation of three of them Asim, Sanjoy and Hari and the absence of Shekhar. It seems that the characters in this film belong more to a previous film than this one, and are developed from the memory of a different film. In this way, the film essentially establishes itself as a memory of an earlier film. The entire film can be seen as a memorialization of *Aranyer Dinratri*. It not only generates its memory in its characterization, the conversations of the characters that are full of references to their trip to Palamou, its sequences, but it also visually quotes from time to time from *Aranyer Dinratri*. The film uses the cross cutting device to evoke the memory of some sequences from *Aranyer Dinratri*, and they are presented in comparison to the present moments of the film. For instance, when the characters are chatting at a tea shop in this film, suddenly scenes from *Aranyer Dinratri* appear in which four of them are seen wandering through the forest. And in the next shot, three of them are seen walking at present through the forest. This way the film cross-cuts and alternates between present-ness and past-ness and memorializes the earlier film. It is

interesting when the sequence of the memory game within the film memorializes the memory game sequence of *Aranyer Dinratri* by using a black and white colour scheme to evoke the past and also quotes scenes from the memory game sequence of *Aranyer Dinratri*. In this game of name dropping, suddenly the name of Satyajit Ray appears and thus the characters are made to memorialize their creator.

Along with *Aranyer Dinratri*, Goutam Ghose's *Abar Aranye* evokes the memory of another Ray film, *Agantuk (The Stranger, 1991)*. The way the film talks about the binary of nature and civilization, urbanity and innocence and creates a figure like Mastermoshai is reminiscent of Manmohan of *Agantuk*²⁹ and its discourse of civilization and nature. The reference to tribal people and the tribal colony also associates the film with *Agantuk* and its thematic of idealized nature and the people who live in the lap of nature. In this way these film texts memorialize the earlier cinematic practice of Bengal. It is also important to note that Rituparno Ghosh made a film like *Dosar* shot in black and white. And *Dosar* also essentially evokes the past-ness of black and white film aesthetics in its form.

Another important aspect of the form that aids this act of memorializing is the use of aesthetic devices like the flashback and the epistolary form. Flashback as a cinematic device is used extensively in the films of the contemporary 'parallel' cinema to evoke the idea of the character's past or convey a general sense of past-ness. And these films engage with this device in various patterns. Sometimes the past is evoked only through voices and without any visuals. For instance in *Asookh*, past-ness is evoked but the past is never seen and is realized only through the recitation of Tagore's poetry. In *Antaheen/ The Endless Wait* (Aniruddha Roychowdhury, 2009) in a particular sequence, a character remembers a wrong number phone call in which the caller used to talk to her for hours once in her life. When she remembers this, only the voice of the stranger is used with the visuals of the present. In *Dosar* the past affair and its memory is evoked neither by visuals nor through a voice, but by a poem. The epistolary form is another significant

²⁹ *Agantuk* is the last film by Satyajit Ray that dealt with the events followed by a long lost Uncle Manomohan Mitra's sudden visit in his niece's house and the film questioned what civilization is.

feature of post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' films. Firstly the tone of soliloquy often expresses a certain kind of past-ness of events in one's life in films like *Dahan/The Burning* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1998) *Bariwali*, *Chokher Bali* or *Shanjhatir Roopkathara*. Secondly, letter writing as a mode of communication evokes past-ness in a different dimension. It brings back an 'obsolete' part of reality. Aparna Sen's *The Japanese Wife* (2011) which narrates the story of Snehamoy and Miyagi and the relationship they develop as pen-friends through letters is a good example of this. The film starts with a letter and throughout, the film uses this mode of letter writing to convey the past-ness of a certain communication practice.

Before I end this section I would like to make an observation. While the 'parallel' films and the discourse around them referred back to the cinematic past of Bengal, it is important to observe that they almost never did 'remakes',³⁰ of earlier Bengali film hits, but only remembered the aesthetics of those films or worked through sequels. I wonder if the 'parallel' cinema circuit valued the 'purity' of the past of Bengali cinema so much that they could never do a 'remake' of any particular film from the past, but could only evoke the memories of them. Or perhaps since the 'past' is taken as the 'present' no pressing reason was felt to go in for a remake because when remakes are done, in most cases the distance from the 'original' is acknowledged or the time gap is recognized.

Past-ness and the Self Image of a Class:

"... Till before *Ekdin Pratidin* I was fighting the enemy outside through my films. I was pointing a finger at the enemy around us. But from *Ekdin Pratidin* I began a journey of soul searching. The process of *fighting within* began from there."

-Mrinal Sen.³¹

The post liberalization period in India is marked by new economic policies, newer job sectors, and the growth of consumer culture all of which merged and resulted in the idea of a 'new' middle class. At a structural level Leela Fernandes defines this class as a "social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization".³² In her words:

³⁰ Apart from instances like very recent Saron Dutta film *Thana Theke Aschhi*, which is a remake of a Bengali film in 1950s.

³¹ As quoted in *Mrinal Sen/ The Survivor* by Shoma A. Chatterjee (Kolkata: Rupa & Co. , 2003) p. 45. Italics mine.

³² See Leela Fernandes, *India Today*, 17.08. 2007.

This middle class is not new in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words its 'newness' does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class. Rather its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctively social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. At a structural level this group largely encompasses English speaking urban, white collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunity (particularly in private sector employment). However the heart of construction of this social group rests on the assumption that other segments of the middle class and the upwardly mobile working class can potentially join in.³³

If measured in terms of access to consumer goods, incomes and infrastructure the Indian middle class has grown in a large numbers in the period between 1995 and 2005. Henrike Donner believes that the definition of the new middle class is based on the ideal of middle class professionals as 'white collar workers' in private companies, possessing education, skills, and expertise.³⁴

Along with the 'emergence' of this 'new' middle class and its socio-political construction in the Indian economy, the creation of the media image of this new class is equally important. According to Donner, Rangaswamy, Wei and Steevson, the media image of the 'newness' of this class rests on its embrace of the social practices of taste and commodity consumption which market a new cultural standard and is associated with liberalization and the opening of the Indian market to the global economy.³⁵ This new middle class of IT professionals and others working in multinationals is a symbolic, dynamic construct in which consumption markers play an important role. In Bengal this idea of being and becoming a 'new' middle class affected the *bhadralok* belief system regarding this 'new' class' taste, their cultural need and social position. In Bengal the rise of this "cosmopolitanism of the 'English medium'" that was required for the "economic laws of the job market" came as an attack on *bhadralok* culture and its belief systems on a large scale. As I've discussed earlier in the previous chapter, *bhadralok* culture (especially film culture) had already been marginalized with the emergence of a newly

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See for detailed account Henrike Donner, *Domestic Goddesses, Maternity, Globalization and Middle Class Identity in Contemporary India*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd/ Routledge, 2008/2001. p.54.

³⁵ See Jonathon Donner, Nimmi Rangaswamy, Molly Wright Steevson, Carolyn Wei. "Express Yourself and 'Stay Together': The Middle Class Indian Family". Link: <http://www.activesocialplastic.com/india/express-yourself-staytogether.pdf>. Access date 10th November. 2010.

privileged class and their culture in Kolkata and other suburban localities of West Bengal. But still in the former case the 'cultural attack' on the class came from outside the *bhadra* public sphere and its well defined domain of 'bhadrata' (/gentility). And the economy of the post 1990s 'parallel' circuit tried to form a 'separate' cinema of its own for the targeted niche in the processes of production-distribution policies and the exhibition-circulation logic. But the later 'attack' of the emergent new consuming class came from *within* the Bengali middleclass sphere and the crisis and the anxiety lay in the *bhadralok* domain. In this section I would like to focus on Bengali 'parallel' cinema in this period and the self image of the *bhadralok* in these films to relate it to all these changes symptomatically. And primarily in this section I'll read how certain kinds of past-ness was constitutive of the construction of the self in these film texts, and the politics of this construction.

Very briefly I would like to discuss some points related to the cinematic formation of this 'self image' in its different registers. At the outset, I would like to point out how the politics of past-ness works on self-image formation and the extent to which it constructs the *bhadra* protagonists. The politics of past-ness works here in different registers. Firstly, I'll briefly discuss how the film texts form an idealized vulnerable feminine and create 'artistic' protagonists who reside in personal pasts and lament the present. And secondly, I'll try to investigate how as part of the self-image construction this film culture tries to present a 'criticism from within' of the new consuming middle class public and lifestyle and how far it goes. Coming to the question of the vulnerable self, Rituparno Ghosh's earlier films are important to focus on. Ghosh himself agrees that "to the Indian audience, a woman would be more acceptable as vulnerable than man" but he believes that this vulnerability does not necessarily mean weakness; it could mean sensitivity.³⁶ This is a question that perhaps goes beyond the vulnerable faces of his heroines - Mithu, Sarojini (*Unishe April*), or Romita, Jhinuk (*Dahan*) or Rohini (*Asukh*) or Banalata (*Bariwali*); Ghosh's films perhaps can be seen as addressing the larger issue of Bengali *bhadralok* vulnerability and its daily remembrance, personally and culturally,

³⁶ Rituparno Ghosh quoted in Somdutta Mandal. "Rituparno Ghosh: The 'Woman's Director' of Bangla Cinema in Films and Feminism: Essays on Indian Cinema (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002) p. 24.

of past life. The personal loss and nostalgia narratives go beyond an individual 'crisis' and attempt to convey the larger narrative of *bhadralok* crisis and its nostalgic mood in this period. In other films of the parallel cinema I am discussing, feminine vulnerability is not necessarily always centered on female protagonists. There are films in which the male centered narrative presents the inner crisis of male protagonists. But in those films like *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* or *Jara Bristite Vijeckhilo* the protagonists are feminized for their age or their masculinities are threatened in those films.

Through these threatened, vulnerable feminized figures these films present the marginalized self image of the *bhadralok* cultural entity and bring up the question of 'culture', to be more specific a kind of 'homogeneous Bengali culture' these protagonists fight for. And it's not an accident that we see 'artistic' protagonists in film after film that are either artists by profession, or truly devoted to art practice. The politics of using 'artistic' protagonists and their struggle allows for a narrative drive to 'reclaim' a certain *bhadralok* identity and taste discourse lost to the vulgar mainstream and its 'aposanskriti'.³⁷

Going back to the binary of 'sanskriti' ('culture') and 'apo sanskriti' (bad culture) that appeared in the middle class *bhadra* public sphere in the mid to late 1980s and in the 1990s brings up the class question. This is a period in Bengal when a certain kind of 'crisis', 'decay' and degradation of (Bengali) culture became a point of high concern in different sectors of public sphere discussion. The division of what used to be 'healthy' (*sustha*) Bengali culture in earlier days and what it had become was discussed widely.³⁸ Especially, on the one hand, the phenomenal popularity of films like Motiur Rahman Panu's *Beder Meye Josna* (*Josna, the Daughter of the Snake Charmer*, 1991) or Swapan Saha's *Baba Keno Chakor* (*Why is the Father a Servant?* 1998) amongst a particular 'class', and on the other hand, the new generation's alleged distance from Bengali

³⁷ These two terms 'sanskriti' and 'apo sanskriti' meaning 'culture' and 'bad culture' widely came in public sphere discourse during this period indicates the *bhadralok* anxiety of losing its self to 'vulgar' and 'foreign' cultural dominance.

³⁸ Narayan Chowdhury for instance edited a book called *Sanskriti O Apasanskriti/Culture and Bad Culture* (1985) and wrote a book called *Sanskriti, Shilpa O Sahitya / Culture, Arts and Literature* (1985). And newspapers like *Anandabazar Patrika* or *Dainik Basumati* largely engaged with this topic and mobilized the discourse of "Aposanskriti" in features, articles, reader's letters and editorials.

literature and culture and the emergence of a new group of film makers who deliberately denied any kind of *bhadralok* address in their filmic texts made a part of the *bhadralok* public sphere deeply anxious. At the same time, the role of national television programmes and their increasing focus on ‘vulgar’ song and dance were criticized in both press and film society journals.³⁹

It’s not coincidental that many of these films focus on an ‘artist’ protagonist with the artist conceived in a romantic manner. In a film like *Hemanter Pakhi* (/ Autumn Bird, Urmi Chakraborty, 2003) the protagonist Aditi’s sensitive self is located in her deep rooted interest in Bengali literature and her own writing ‘talent’. The challenge and opposition to her sensitive self that she faces within her family from her husband and two sons is also a challenge to her emerging literary career and her writing practice in little magazines. In passage after passage in Suchitra Bhattacharya’s novel on which the film is based, this binary of the sensitive, artistic ‘self’ of Aditi, and the insensitive, rude ‘other’ in Aditi’s husband is described. Later on this conflict goes on between Aditi and her sons both in the novel and the film. Here I would like to quote a dialogue sequence from this film where these conflicting positions lead to a crisis in the relationships.

Aditi: Papai, does your father know that you are sitting for the GRE?

Papai: Yeah

Aditi: You have told father but hide it from me.

Papai: Will have to tell father, after all he will pay the fees. And now you are busy with Hemen grandpa, reciting stories, and the little magazine *Abarta*

Aditi: Papai, you should not talk like that.

....

Aditi: Would you return to (your) birthplace Papai?

Papai: Why all this talk now, let me get the chance first.

Aditi: Suppose you get it. What would you do?

³⁹ To have an idea, one can look at *Chitravash* issue on July, 1993 that criticized the vulgarity of Doordarshan programmes and the role of the Indian government. One can also look at the editorial of the January/ 1989 issue of *Chitravash* by the editor, Nandan Mitra . And in the October, 1985 Nandan organized a discussion that criticized the approach of Doordarshan and the dominance of vulgar song and dance programmes in it (source: Dainik Basumati/ 11th October, 1985).

Papai: Mom this is a hypothetical question. What do you think? Should one return here? You tell me what is the use of coming back. Suppose I get a chance for research in a good place.

Tatai: What Rubbish! Tell the truth; frankly say that you will earn much more money over there. You would earn a lot and would live lavishly. For me my country is better; anyhow I will earn more money here.

Aditi: Your only aim in life is earning money... fantastic! I think I'll write something about this subject. Our children are becoming selfish and leave everything aside. What sort of learning!⁴⁰

Then Aditi's husband interrupts supporting their sons 'bright career ambitions' and says that his sons will fulfill the dreams that he could not achieve. Aditi reacts saying that then 'our nationality', 'our tradition', and 'culture' will no longer have any bearing on 'our children. One can observe how in this particular film *bhadralok* anxiety and the sense of crisis is narrated in terms of generational and gender conflict and the clashes of ideology. The *bhadralok* anxiety here does not come from the so called 'lower class' outside the sphere of *bhadrata* but from the next generation, within the family.



Scenes from *Hemanter Pakhi*: Aditi discussing literature with Hemen mama (in the left) and Aditi is anxious for present generation (right)

Another film *Ballygunge Court* (Pinaki Chowdhury, 2007) stresses and expands on this theme; it is located in a residential locality in Kolkata where in a particular apartment only aged parents live since the next generation has moved to the USA for a better life. The father had attempted to stop his ambitious son when he had wanted to move. After the son moved, his mother passes away and the father to 'take revenge' does

⁴⁰ *Hemanter Pakhi*. DVD.

not inform his son about his mother's death. When the son comes back he realizes his 'mistake' and finally starts living with his father in their Kolkata residence. These kinds of narratives of generational conflict and the isolation of the older generation, be it in physical terms in a film like *Ballygunge Court* or mentally as in *Hemanter Pakhi* reveals the anxiety within the *bhadralok* and its 'inner crisis'. This crisis is caused by a threat that comes from within *bhadralok* home, family and the 'inner' world of middle class dreams. The threat of growing consumer culture in a post liberalized country and the anxiety of 'losing' one's self and one's *bhadralok* identity result in anxiety stories of relationships. Whereas in films like *Hemanter Pakhi* or *Ballygunge*, the crisis narrative is clear enough in its origin and nature, in Rituparno Ghosh's *Asukh*, *Unishe April* or *Utsab* or Anjan Das's *Shanjhatir Roopkathara*, it is more subtle and high on memory stories and desire for a nostalgic return.

These films in the narratives of generational conflict try to establish the *bhadralok* self rooted to her/ his 'ideal' past and 'artistic' interest and present the 'inner' threat facing the *bhadralok* cultural sphere and society. In emphasizing the vulnerable, artistic, sensitive self and the traumatized previous generation they try to present a critique of the growing consumer culture, liberalized economy and the threat it poses to *bhadralok* middle class life. However, I find the 'critique' incomplete and transcendental in denying a further exploration of the crisis of middle class life, falling short in their constructions of the ideal 'self' that takes refuge in past-ness and dreams and remains unharmed by ambitious, careerist, and aggressive new middle class lives. In Buddhadeb Dasgupt's *Kaalpurush* the central protagonist (played by Rahul Bose) is posited against his ambitious and insensitive wife. The wife goes to America to write travelogue series on America whereas the protagonist from time to time goes back to his childhood memory and his father. Instead of problematizing the newer threats posed against middleclass life the film just ends up idealizing the *bhadralok* sensibility marginalized within middleclass lives. And in this imagination and construction of the self-image of this class, a certain kind of past-ness became inherent. Past-ness again does not here refer to larger socio political or broader narratives, but references memory, reminiscences and nostalgia. The ideal middle class self appears in these narratives as essentially disengaged from the

present, if not detached from it. That's why it is the personal memory of good times that are needed to establish this (self image) rather than a pressing issue of the contemporary.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I have attempted to discuss how past-ness and the politics and poetics of past-ness work in the film texts. My focus has been on different dimensions of this past-ness; firstly, at the narrative level, this past-ness has worked as a *bhadralok* frame and perspective from where the anxiety ridden 'present' has been lamented. Secondly, film form memorialized the cinematic practice of earlier Bengali cinema in their literariness, references of Ray and in its use of some other cinematic devices. Thirdly, past-ness functions in the formation of a self image in its marginalized, vulnerable presence. Thus the politics of past-ness in the bodies of these films works to generate a sense of loss, a sense of lamentation and results in an imagination of a common 'glorious' past that a particular class (*bhadralok*) had. The politics of past-ness operates here in ritualizing that lost common past in imagining the commonality that a class 'shares'. But film being a concrete medium that has its own logic of form and apparatus, problematizes that very idea of homogeneity and coherence. There are interesting examples within this circuit that 'oppose' this politics and in a way offer a 'possible critique' of the *bhadralok* nostalgia, if not of the 'parallel' film culture itself and its constructs of 'parallelness'. Before I end this chapter I would like to mention two different film examples that 'oppose' this *bhadralok* nostalgia and operate in an interesting way with the politics of past-ness and its mapping. *Herbert*, both the film (2006) by Suman Mukhopadhyay and the original Nabarun Bhattacharya novel on which it is based, in its very approach subverts the *bhadralok* belief system regarding the questions of cultural superiority, taste, education, *bhadralok* sensibility and other charismatic self-perceptions of this class. While the protagonist Herbert Sarkar lives in the world of the past, this portrayal is a significant interruption in the *bhadralok* imagination of past-ness and its politics elsewhere. Herbert's engagement with 'calling up ghosts', mumbo jumbo, the 'fraud business' of the 'conversation with the dead' have a different register of past-ness from the nostalgia narrative and the stories of the *bhadralok* sensitive self. This film touches upon the memory, past, child hood of Herbert and relies on the flashback mode a lot, but

in its use it never romanticizes the idea of the past where the protagonist can take refuge. Instead of that pleasure of refuge in the past, past-ness here bursts out in explosion when Herbert's dead body explodes as a dead human bomb. As the novel says and the film uses that as a dialogue from the police inspector "The government, the state or police will never exactly know from where and whom the explosion is coming"⁴¹. *Herbert* in its different registers of past-ness subverts the romantic idea of the past and it never assumes the past as something kept unchanged for memorizing and remembrance. Rather it suggests that the past from different directions can surface within the everyday as something unpredictable and with the capacity to explode whatever we possess in our safe and secure present life.

Another recent film *Ekti Tarar Khnoje* (In Search of a Star/ Stars Never Sleep, Avik Mukhopadhyay, 2010) in a different way problematizes the nostalgia narrative of *bhadralok* lamentation when it traces back the history of a *bhadralok* family in heinous crime circles and thugs. The film narrates the story of Abhishek who (Sayan Munshi) has come to Kolkata for a career in film. He has got accommodation at a middle class home where a girl, Rani (Arpita Paul) stays with her aunt (Tanushree Shankar) and uncle (Dhritiman Chatterjee). Abhishek has bagged the second lead in a Bengali film, and at the same time unwillingly has become involved with the underworld. At last we come to know that the landlord uncle is the underworld don under whom he unknowingly works. And Rani traces back their family history in thuggee crime circles. In stead of stories of *bhadralok* glory and its 'cultural capital' that is remembered and cried over, *Ekti Tarar Khnoje* touches upon a different aspect of this past-ness that acts within a *bhadralok* Bengali middle class family that is supposedly cultured, educated, and with an aged patriarch (played by Dhritiman Chattopadhyay). It's interesting to observe that whereas a set of films with an intention to 'regenerate' past-ness cinematically takes up this issue and functions in the nostalgic mode, there are instances like *Herbert* or *Ekti Tarar Khnoje* that build up an imagination of the past on an opposing plane and try to reach a possible critique of the construct of 'past ness' practiced and developed in this circuit. Possibly

⁴¹ Nabarun Bhattacharya, *Herbert* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2004) p. 78. And subtitle track from *Herbert* DVD.

they indicate a recent shift in *bhadralok* film culture in terms of its belief system and pleasure principles. They assert newer cultural needs for contemporary Bengali cinema announcing a change that has come – the nostalgic return and ritual of past-ness may come to an end in the coming years. The next generation of filmmakers may have emerged out of this shell of past-ness and nostalgia. As new Bengali filmmaker Q (Quashiq Mukherjee) says he has made his film as a form of protest against a certain form of art that's recognized in Kolkata. Q says "This city (Kolkata) has always produced cutting edge commentary on society and the world. But somewhere along the way, we seem to have stopped in our tracks. We have stagnated, bound by our past, and a distinctly class value system".⁴² Surely it would be a difficult task to demonstrate a simple correlation between the emergence of new media and a new media public in the last four/ five years in the Bengali cultural sphere and this emerging need for a cinema that criticizes or simply ignores the reality of past-ness for the *bhadralok* intelligentsia. Perhaps it can yet be said that their complex intermingling might result in a new film culture that would revisit and rewrite the nostalgia map of the post 1990s *bhadralok* cinema.

⁴² Interview of Q on *Calcutta Times* supplement of *Times of India*, 19th November, 2010.

Beyond *Bhadralok* Film Aesthetics: Extra Filmic Texts and the Construction of the Taste Discourse of post 1990s Bengali 'Parallel' Cinema

1995: Satellite channels and global networks were beginning to make a home in (Bengali) middle-class households, though the revolution in the entertainment world that was to come in the new millennium was still beyond the imagination of the common man. The filmy *khobar* had not yet made its way to the headlines of news channels, and was still supplementary stuff. Yet news of *Unishe April* (April 19th) winning a few important national awards, amongst Best Film and Best Actor (Female), was quite a buzz in the town. Nobody knew who this Rituparno Ghosh was. However, the unusual title signaled a different film.

Blog: Kaustav's Arden¹

I take this excerpt from a blogger Kaustav Bakshi who enthusiastically writes about film, literature and his surroundings to give voice to thoughts that in his words "swim against the mainstream".² I find these lines useful as an entry point for my third chapter primarily because they touch upon the issues that I would like to illustrate here – how the name itself of a movie could generate interest and act as publicity of its self-acclaimed 'difference' from the mass; how a blogger in his personal memory and its recapitulation could read and critically construct the 'difference', and how a 'different' film maker emerged at the center of the post 1990s Bengali 'alternative cinema'. To be precise, this chapter will look at some 'texts and efforts' which reside outside the immediate production system of the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema, and are yet inherently related to the film culture I've been describing. After discussing the economy of emergence and the 'strategies' of parallel-ness of the post 1990s Bengali film culture in my first chapter, and how the politics of past-ness functions as a parallel *bhadralok* ideology in these film narratives in the second chapter, here my attempt will be to address some issues like the construction of parallel-ness or 'difference' in defining a cinema defined by the *bhadralok* as 'ours' in some other registers: taste politics and the nostalgia

¹Link:<http://kaustavsarden.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&updated-max=2009-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&max-results=18>
access date-26.04.2011.

² Kaustav Bakshi introduces his blog saying he believes when one has no one to listen to , writing is the best way to unburden yourself...one may call it ecriture-therapy..."it's like counseling yourself, when the entire world seems to be at odds with you."

of this particular class through published materials proliferating around *bhadralok* film culture. Issues like an imagined past and attempts at 'reclaiming' it, and an escape into the romanticism of the past will be addressed here through the nature of publicity, the formation of public sphere discourses and the question of stardom. After studying the film texts and the production–distribution–exhibition set up of this film circuit, this third chapter will try to explore the over-all discourse of this parallel film culture examining the nexus of the Bengali Press, prestigious magazines, contemporary Bengali literature, television etc in the creation of the discourse of 'good taste'. Furthermore, this chapter will explain how this film culture in its discursive domain constructs a strong support system for itself maintaining its 'distance' from the 'crude' and 'commercial' mainstream model of contemporary 'popular' Bengali cinema. And my effort will be not only to engage with the texts, but also to concentrate on the relational aspect of these different kinds of texts across the boundaries, and the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of that relationality.³ The idea of class in this method of reading the logic of 'difference' in these subsidiary texts⁴ and their intertextuality is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu's systems of self-definition and self-differentiation and how class is important in this system of imagination.⁵

What I find interesting in this support system constructed by media and some cultural institutions is that, it often includes 'personal' engagement beyond institutional frameworks and market mechanisms.⁶ Here I would also like to mention how the film directors of this 'parallel' cinema in their active association with the Bengali press and media houses 'influence' the regime of reception constructed around this film culture. Along with the popular press, television from the beginning acted as a strong support

³ My method of analysing this relational aspect is deeply inspired by John Fiske's approach to intertextuality in his reading of television texts and discourses generated around them in his book *Television Culture*.

⁴ Here by subsidiary texts I mean the publicity and media texts that were generated along with film texts, like posters, or other publicity materials, review columns of these films in newspapers etc.

⁵ See Pierre Bourdieu . *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁶ For instance the CEO of *Nandan* , Nilanjan Chattopadhyay wrote a story called *Dui Number Asami* on which Shekhar Dash's film *Kaaler Rakhal* is based. The former president of Eastern India Motion Pictures association and the owner of the *Priya, Star Cinema* hall chain, Arijit Dutta appears in many of these films as a character actor.

system for ‘parallel’ cinema and a primary site to publicize, proliferate, and construct this film culture. Firstly, Bengali television channels like *ETV Bangla* or *Tara Bangla* in their afternoon or late evening slots showed these films regularly and some of the films were shown on these channels in their ‘world television premiere’ even before their theatrical releases.⁷ Besides this, a number of television shows constantly engaged in debates and discussions regarding the crisis narrative of contemporary Bengali cinema, the greatness of old Bengali films and the scenario of the ‘parallel’ film circuit. And the ‘parallel’ cinema directors or actors as talk show hosts or anchors regenerated this discourse.⁸ This physical presence of the director as talk show host is a crucial point that I’ll discuss in detail while analyzing the ‘phenomenal’ emergence of Rituparno Ghosh as the star director of the post 1990s *bhadralok* cinema. Those popular talk shows, internet discussion forums, blogs (like *Kaustav’s Arden*, *Sen’s Spot*, *Cinemascope*, *Alternative Movies* etc), Orkut communities and Facebook pages in their serious engagement with and discussion of ‘quality’ Bengali films shaped this discourse. An entertainment news based website like *Calcuttatube.com*, a site like *Vinnamat News Network* or a live community Bengali radio station like *Washington Bangla Radio* serving a global Bengali audience are all important names in this concern with their participation important for forming the recent taste discourse of this film culture. And this *bhadralok* ‘taste discourse’ conforms to what Bourdieu has called the “cognitive acquirement” of the “cultural code”, “presupposing an act of cognition” through the logic of differentiation and legitimizing and decoding that ‘difference’⁹. In the following sections I’ll try to map out this act of ‘differentiation’ or performing ‘difference’ in publicity materials, promotional attempts, critical perspectives and the discourse of stardom.

⁷ For instance *Tara Bangla* showed Rituparno Ghosh’s *Utsab* on its inauguration day (28th April, 2000) and later showed Buddhadeb Dasgupta’s *Uttara* much before these films’ theatrical release. Gautam Ghose’s *Kaalbela* (2009) on the other hand was initially made for *Doordarshan* as a miniseries to be shown serially; later it was redesigned from video format in Qube digital prints to release in Cinema halls. A new Bengali channel *Mohua Bangla* recently announced that it would telecast a number of films made by Anjan Dutta which they are planning to release later in theaters.

⁸ A popular talk show called *Ebong Rituparno* (hosted by Rituparno Ghosh) was telecast on *ETV Bangla* followed by *Sange Indrani* (Indrani Halder/ *Tara Bangla*) or *Aparna Online* (*Aparna Sen/Kolkata TV*), *Ghosh & Co. (Star Jalsa)*. Recently a show has started called *Antaheen Adda* (on *Rupasi Bangla*) that has even been named after Bengali film *Antaheen* and hosted by Kalyan Roy, one of the actors of this film.

⁹ See Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Routledge, 1984. P-3.

Publicizing 'Difference'

Discussing the entire publicity network of Bengali cinema, its narrative of 'transformation' and its material significance is too ambitious an attempt for this section. Primarily because of the difficulties in accessing all the material, and secondly since this chapter is not a survey of Bengali cinema's publicity discourse, I'll limit myself to some observations that I would like to make and the materiality of its procedures and will try to comment on them relationally to my argument presented in the previous chapters.¹⁰ In my first chapter, I've spoken of the 1980s 'interruption' in Bengali cinema that in the hands of a new kind of film maker-producer chain, witnessed the emergence of a new film aesthetics in Bengali film industry. These alleged copies of southern or Hindi film hits or remakes of Bangladeshi films had a strong negative impact on the *bhadra* public sphere and one of the primary reasons that this sphere could not 'bear' with 'their' narrative scheme was their use of dialogue, and a perception among the *bhadralok* of the way they spoke Bengali language in those 'jatra marka chhobi' (/jatra typed film)¹¹. They spoke a language that the *bhadra* sphere clearly understood, but one that they could not, or to be precise, were not ready to 'identify' with. Noted film journalists like Seabratra Gupta or Sunetra Ghatak, Gautam Chakraborty or Swapan Mullik did not hide their feelings of discomfort while listening to this unidentifiable, 'rowdy' Bengali in their review columns in *Aajkaal*, *The Statesman* or *Anandabazar Patrika*.¹² This is possibly the reason why the well known film journalist Ranjan Bandyopadhyay does not consider these films as Bengali films at all and describes the Bengali film star Prasenjeet who has acted in many of these films as a Hindi film star.¹³ This specific use of the Bengali language whether scripted intentionally or unknowingly is a different issue to discuss here. If on the one

¹⁰ This method of observing the narrative of Bengali film publicity is deeply inspired by Ranjani Mazumdar's study of the Bombay film poster. See "The Bombay Film Poster" *Seminar 525: Unsettling Cinema*, May 2003, 33-41.

¹¹ This term was used to refer to these films' closeness to popular jatra form instead of a 'true' cinematic form. One can read the review of *Prem Joyare* by Shubhra Mukhopadhyay on ABP, 1st February, 1997 for usage of this term in contemporary 'masala' Bengali film models.

¹² For instances, of this particular emphasis on the 'changing' use of language and the discomfort it caused see *Anandabazar Patrika* reviews- *Aapan holo Par* review by Gautam Chakraborty, 18th November, 2000; review of *Madhur Milan* by Shankar Ghosh 23rd September, 2000. *Mahan* review on 7th December, 2000 by Shubhra Mukhopadhyay; review of *Deba* by Gautam Chattopadhyay on 21st December, 2002 ; or review of *Shashurbari Zindabaad* by Anindya Mukhopadhyay on 22nd April, 2000 etc to name a few.

¹³ Author's interview with Ranjan Bandyopadhyay. 23rd June, 2010.

hand filmmaker Haranath Chakraborty sees it as a part of their project to speak in a simple, colloquial Bangla dialogue addressing the common Bengali mass and that there was nothing ‘unconventional’ or ‘unusual’ in using that language, on the other hand journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta feels that this language was a conscious ‘rejection’ of the *bhadra* cultural code.¹⁴

As discussed earlier this ‘rejection’ needs to be understood in terms of a newly privileged class which is obvious when we consider the appeal and also the politics of these films that often goes beyond the language used within the film texts to the publicity logic in the language of circulation of these films. If we look at the 1950s and the 1960s scenario of Bengali film publicity and especially the Bengali film posters we can see the use of still photographs from film stills on show cards or hand drawn banner size two sheet posters of those film stills as in films like *Basu Paribar* (1952), *Sare Chuattor* (1953), *Abhayer Biye* (1957), *Chaoa Paoa* (1959) etc.¹⁵ Most of the publicity for these films used a scene from an important film sequence that matched with the mood of the film, for instance if it was a comedy like *Sare Chuattor* the film still used conveyed the light, comic mood of the film, or if it was a social drama like *Kankabatir Ghaat* (1957) the poster captured intense moments featuring Anubha Gupta and Uttam Kumar in sentimental postures and with their anxiety ridden faces. Some film show cards like those of *Ekti Raat* (1956) or *Khelaghar* (1959) added colors on black and white stills to make them attractive, the curtains in the background, the heroine’s sari or sometimes the faces of the hero-heroines were hand painted. Sometimes along with still photographs of a particular film scene, additional hand drawn motifs or pictures were used, like in the *Haat Baralei Bandhu* poster a hand drawn picture of a hand holding the Bengali word “Bandhu” (/friend) was used. Satyajit Ray’s hand designed film posters are famous for their innovative use of fonts and the punning. And it was Ray’s own ideas and styles that were materialized in his film posters and publicities. Apart from Ray, there are films like

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Haranath Chakraborty, 9th December, 2010 and with Ratnottoma Sengupta, 23rd December, 2010.

¹⁵ Courtesy: Uttam Kumar Film Archive, the Film Centenary Building, Kolkata, West Bengal.

Chouranghee (1978)¹⁶ or *Sanyasi Raja* (1975)¹⁷ that used stylized fonts in accordance with the film plot and its theme. The information conveyed in most posters are names of the director, producer and actor-actress, and if its a literary adaptation, also the name of the original literary source; writers were also highlighted in the posters, as in the cases of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Saptapadi* (1961), or Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's *Jhinder Bandi* (1961).

After the arrival of color, for some years black and white still photographs continued to be used for film publicity. For example, in film posters of *Pratishodh* or *Ogo Badhu Sundari* black and white star images were used in colored backgrounds and the term 'colored film' was highlighted. This tradition changed after colored film posters came into circulation primarily from the late 1970s. Another major change that happened later in Bengali film publicity was the change in printing technology: a shift from silk screen printing to off set printing.¹⁸ In silk screen posters, colors were applied to line drawing and half tones did not develop properly, whereas in off set printing this problem is not there. There were other changes as well, as for example, a shift from hand drawn method to PTS (photo type setting) and from PTS to digital setting. Along with technological changes a professional approach to film publicity also came about. In earlier years individual designers like Dhiren Mallik, Shree Panchanan, Nirmal Roy, Shishir Karmakar worked on poster design and producers directly gave them contracts. Then the film publicity firm "A Square" was formed by Shailen Sur and Samaresh Basu for Bengali film publicity for different sectors. Then in the mid 1970s "Cine Media" entered the Bengali film publicity scenario.¹⁹ Uttam Kumar Basu, the present PRO of the firm claims "Cine Media" to be the first complete entertainment firm in Bengali cinema. Swapan Kumar Ghosh and Chanchal Brahma created this firm and it has continued its significant presence working for diverse genres of Bengali cinema until now in Bengali film publicity. On the one hand, they have the experience of working with Mrinal Sen in

¹⁶ The *Chouranghee* poster fonts stylistically foregrounded the mood of Chouranghee's locational and thematic significances- the letters organized as if four roads were intersecting each other evoking chaos and hurry.

¹⁷ *Sanyasi Raja* poster fonts were shaped and organized like a crown situated just above Uttam Kumar's large figure dressed according to his attire in this film.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Uttam Kumar Basu. 16th May, 2011.

¹⁹ Basu, Ibid.

his award winning publicity designs for *Chalchitra*, and on the other hand they have worked regularly with mainstream production houses like Venkatesh Films, Surinder Films and directors like Swapan Saha and Haranath Chakraborty. From his experience as a PRO of the leading Bengali film publicity house, Mr. Basu shared publicity details and the changing scenario of Bengali film publicity in the last three decades.

The late 1970s is a period when with technological advancement, poster designing went through an overall transformation with a stylization of fonts and changes in the patterns in which the star images were used. And along with it the language of film publicity and posters in terms of its nature and usage experienced a new phase in the 1980s to address a class that the Bengali film industry had just recognized as its target audience. Film posters went through a transformation that was manifested in the use of loud colors, the emphasis of hyper (melo) dramatic moments, in the very naming of the films and the fonts used. According to Sengupta, the use of names like “Baba Keno Chakor”²⁰ (Why is the father a servant?) or “Swami Keno Asami” (Why is the husband a criminal?) indicates a rejection of the *bhadra* cultural code and the dominance of a rhetoric oppositional to *bhadralok* culture. It’s interesting to observe the kind of titles and the way they were written in posters and publicity materials with clear resemblances to the *jatra pala* posters popular in suburban and rural Bengal. In many cases the names of the films were in curved bright yellow fonts representing the *jatra* poster aesthetics quite directly. More importantly they were published in the Bengali newspaper pages used for theater and *jatra* advertisement. Printed in adjacent columns, these film posters resonated directly with the *jatra* posters in the stylization of the titles and the general aesthetics of the representation. Usually the image of the star figure was used to cover the entire surface of the poster; for example the use of the images of the hero Ranjit Mallik,²¹ Chiranjeev or in later years in most of the cases, the star Prasenjeet in his moments of action emphasizing high drama in his facial expression and action in his aggressive

²⁰ Ratnottoma Sengupta sites interesting example of this particular film *Baba keno chakor*. According to her instead of this direct and crude approach, the film could go for some title like “pitar asamman” (Disrespect to the father) that would not hamper the sense of the theme that the film wanted to convey and the film would also have a ‘presentable’ name that was suitable for the *bhadra* tongue.

²¹ Mr. Basu sites the example of the *Shatru* (Anjan Chowdhury, 1985) poster in which the star figure of Ranjit Mallik in police uniform is presented quite aggressively which was quite unusual in those years of Bengali film publicity.

postures. Sometimes the poster also used faces of the antagonists and female leads, and sometimes a scene from the film promising a song and dance sequence. Often if the represented figures and the frozen images were not enough to convey the sense of moral drama of the film, the posters would literally use words like Anugatya (Obedience), Tyag (Sacrifice), Samman (Respect), Kartabya (Responsibility) etc as in case of *Dadathakur* (Haranath Chakraborty, December, 2001). Additionally references to Hindu religious figures and their blessings were used in posters that had largely been absent in earlier decades. The posters and newspaper publicity in many cases started with lines like “Ma Tarar kripay” or “Ma Kaalir Kripay” (with the blessings from Goddess Tara or Goddess Kali).

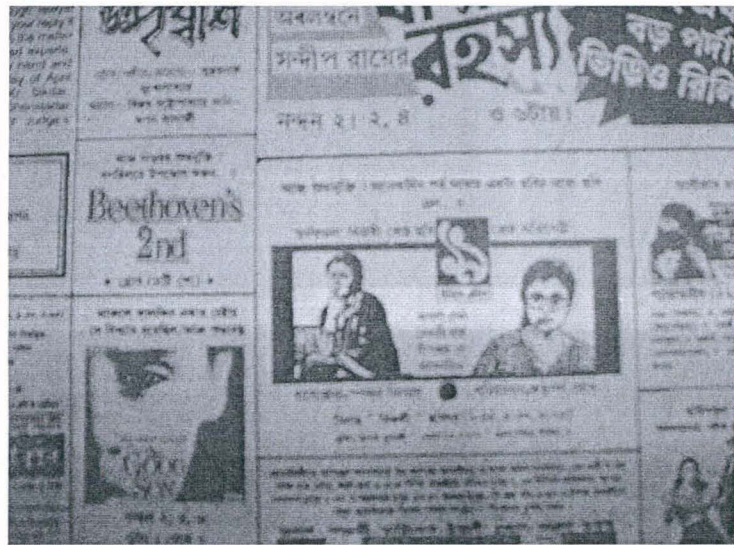


Examples from the ‘mainstream’: posters of *Barud* and *Rakhe Hari Mare Ke*. Courtesy: *Jalan Distributors*.

In contrast to the examples mentioned above are the titles of the parallel cinema of the period that I am discussing in this dissertation. Film director Subrata Sen speaks of how the urban audiences of Bengali cinema became tired of the titles of contemporary Bengali films, that according to him for years had continued using moral binaries like Nyay Anyay/ Virtue and vice, Sadhu Shaytan /the pure and the evil etc.²² So when he worked on films that have titles like *Ek Je Achhe Kanya/ Swapner Feriwala/ Nil*

²² Author’s interview with Subrata Sen, 2nd October, 2010.

*Nirjane*²³ he must had this equation in his mind. As Kaustav Bakshi has mentioned in his blog, the very name *Unishe April* was an “unusual title” that “signaled a different film” for him and generated an interest even before he watched it. Along with the naming, the representation style of this film poster (of *Unishe April*) attracted a crowd that was reluctant to watch a mainstream Bengali film; it used the Bengali numerical one and nine and put images of Debashree Roy and Aparna Sen in two corners indicating the distance between them via the use of the space in between. In the newspaper advertisements, using phrase like “ma o meyer jatil samparko niye ek asadharon paribarik chhabi” (“an extraordinary family film exploring relationship complexity between a mother and a daughter”), the poster promised something other than what the usual family melodrama of a Swapan Saha or a Haranath Chakraborty film could provide. Firstly the ‘realist’ nature of the characters’ photographs differentiated it from the usual family melodramas of that time.



One of the *Anandabazar Patrika* advertisements of *Unishe April*.

Darkly lit spaces, characters’ faces with restrained emotion tried to convey that ‘difference’ and it went well with the sense of the reality of relationships in the middle class belief system. And the poster highlighted the film’s national award recognition, especially Debashree Roy as a national award winning actress for this film. Another interesting publicity strategy that was deployed for this film was that prior to its release on 17th May, 1996, an advertisement on 5th May attempted to arouse the curiosity of the

²³ Translated respectively as There is a girl/ The hawker of dreams/ Vacation blues.

audience by adding “why is nineteenth April a memorable day for Aparna and Debashree?” These interesting strategies clearly promised a ‘different’ film, and its newspaper advertisements seemed to cater to an audience who probably would not go to watch other Bengali films like “Vai amar Vai” or “Nach Nagini Nachre”²⁴ but would be curious about this film. Additional information that the newspaper advertisements of *Unishe April* provided, was that the night show would be over by 10.30 pm. Though this simple information might sound like just a necessary detail, it had its significance beyond just information. An interview with Uttam Kr. Basu who was in charge of publicity for *Unishe April* on behalf of the publicity organization Cine Media, reveals that this detail about the show timing had been provided out of safety concerns so that the middle class *bhadralok* could go to the film theater without worrying about transport.²⁵ It’s important to note the manner in which this film imagined a class who might be bothered about their security and available transport facilities in order to watch this film.

In the following week the *Unishe April* posters and newspaper advertisements added critic’s statements from their reviews that appeared in *Desh* or *Aajkaal*, *Bartamaan* or *Sonar Bangla*. Along with direct publicity there were other features published in newspaper columns that generated interest regarding this film. Firstly, there were interviews of the actress Debashree Roy who described her response after winning the national award. These interview features regarding her recognition were not of a celebratory mood, but were full of her struggle stories in the industry, highlighting her obstacles and the jealousy of co-actors.²⁶ Moreover, the film magazine *Anandalok*’s gossip columns and the *Anandabazar* feature news covered the Debashree-Prasenjeet’s marriage break up stories in detail with full page interviews.²⁷ The fact that actor Prasenjeet Chatterjee and Debashree Roy both acted in this film when their 14 years of

²⁴ These two films were widely-advertised Bengali films around that time and they were adjacently placed on cinema advertisement pages. *Unishe April* therefore had the challenge how to look ‘different’ in its first appearance.

²⁵ Author’s Interview with Uttam Kr Basu.

²⁶ For instance see *Anandabazar Patrika* interview of Debashree Roy, “Jhar Samlate Samlatei Bachhar ta Chole Gelo” 19th May, 1996

²⁷ Especially 29th June, 1996 *Anandalok* issue covered this ‘story’ as its cover page story with ‘exclusive’ photographs of them and interviews.

relationship was going through a break up, acted as an added interest in generating curiosity about their ‘onscreen chemistry’.

Rituparno Ghosh’s *Titli* in a similar vein in its publicity brought up a comparison between Aparna Sen, Konkona Sensharma in different registers. The film magazine columns (*Anandalok* especially) and press entertainment news section during that period focused on the comparison between the two actresses dealing with the question of who is a better actress, who is more beautiful etc. Both *Titli* and Konkona’s first feature film *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* used a star discourse about Konkona Sensharma in their respective publicity programmes. When Subrata Sen and Sandip Sen the director and the producer of this film respectively planned *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* as the first Bengali “urban youth film”²⁸ they felt it was necessary to establish Konkona Sensharma as the face of urban Bengali youth. And the subsidiary discourse on Konkona Sensharma highlighted this factor during this period when the actor debuted as the central character of the film. So *Anandabazar Patrika* and *Anandalok* columns highlighted her college life spent in Delhi as a St. Stephen’s College English honors graduate, her preference for English Television serials on Star World etc.



The publicity logic of ‘parallel’ cinema: Strategies of looking ‘different’ - Minimal design of *Hothat Nirar Janya* poster and centering Konkona Sensharma’s look as the urban face of Bengali youth in *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* poster.

²⁸ In my interviews with the producer and the director of this film, both of them claimed *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* to be the “first Bengali urban youth film”.

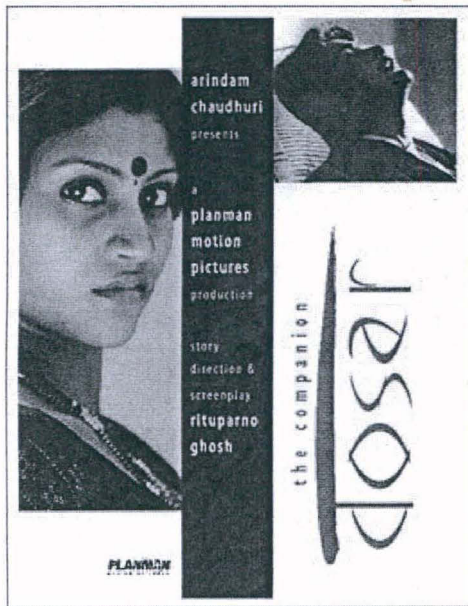
Similar publicity was done for Subrata Sen's next film *Swapner Feriwala* (the hawker of dreams) in which Nilanjana Bhoomik, the daughter of another early Bengali film heroine Anjana Bhoomik, debuted. When Anjan Das' *Iti Shrikant* was released, the Bengali newspaper *Pratidin* publicized Soha Ali Khan's presence in this, her debut Bengali film in their *Mahanagar* supplement on 4th June and 11th June 10, 2004. The first one highlighted Soha's similarity with her mother Sharmila Tagore, and the second one tried to establish her presence and the possibilities for the future based on the columnist's conversations with Soha Ali Khan at a night club of Calcutta, *Tantra*.²⁹

Contrary to the flat, bright title fonts of the 'mainstream' model, these film posters used fonts of a 'different' style. In many cases going against uniform typed words they consciously used fonts of the asymmetrical hand writing style. The fonts of *Ek Je Ache Kanya*, *Titli*, *Utsab*, *Iti Shrikanta*, *Shubho Mahurat* or *Hothat Nirar Janye* were in this mode. Apart from that, the names of the films themselves were closer to the literary use of Bengali names as opposed to the names resembling popular *jatra* titles of the 'mainstream' model. There are instances when professional painters worked for the publicity or font design of 'parallel' films, for example, the artist Anup Roy designed the letter type and overall style of the title for *Titli*, the hand written red colored word and an idle butterfly sitting on it visually signifying the meaning of *Titli*.³⁰ On the other hand, the films that were based on direct literary adaptations created a literary flavor in the use of their fonts as that of films like *Chokher Bali* or *Antarmahal*. Along with font style there are strategic use of captions that also helped to differentiate these films from the mainstream model. In Subrata Sen's *Hothat Nirar Janye* (Suddenly for Nira, 2004) lines from Sunil Gangopadhyay's poetry were used for publicity. This film had a one week delayed release on censorship grounds with reference to one scene, and this 'news' had already been leaked to the public to generate curiosity. And when the publicity lines used a sentence like "Sharir jakhan maner kotha bole" (/when the body speaks of mind's words) it increased an interest in the film quite effectively. Moreover, the *Hothat Nirar*

²⁹ "Sei Chokh, Sei Hasi, Shudhu Tol Chara Sharmila" and "Soha- g" both by Ranjan Bandyopadhyay on 4th June and 11th June *Pratidin* respectively.

³⁰ Basu interview.

Janye publicity poster used a minimalist style, unique to the Bengali film poster tradition: it just had a close up of Jaya Seal who played the title role of Nira against a white background with Sunil Gangopadhyay’s lines used above. With her face and that line, the capital ‘A’ in a circle connotative of its adult certification was highlighted. The film is an adaptation of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s short story *Rani o Abinash* (Rani and Abinash), but it intentionally uses the name Nira in its title. Nira is an imagined muse that Sunil Gangopadhyay had written about in a number of poems and thus the figure had already been in *bhadralok* popular parlance and the cultural imagination from much earlier. Sen in this way generated an interest regarding his film using a name from a *bhadralok* literary imagination that had a wide appeal.



Poster of *Dosar* and print advertisements of *Titli* (*Anandabazar Patrika*)

Rituparno Ghosh’s *Titli* used two interesting captions: the first one “pahare premer galpo” (/ love story in hillside)³¹ sounded like the title of a travelogue, and the second one “jibane kauke valobese hariyechhen? Titli dekhun” (/have you lost someone in your life whom you loved? *Titli* is a must watch)³² seemed to evoke a personal resonance with the pleasure of memory and nostalgia . Aparna Sen’s *Yugant* used “premer galpo, ei prithibir galpo” (/ love story, story of this world) in the *ABP* advertisement and later “A film about Love and Change” in *The Telegraph*

³¹ December, 2001, *ABP* advertisements. Translation mine.

³² Ibid.

advertisement.³³ Goutam Ghose's *Abar Aranye* poster generated the nostalgia in a different register; its caption read "fire dekha aranya" (/ the forest looked back) clearly referring back to Satyajit Ray's film *Aranyer Din Ratri* of which this film is a sequel. In Abhijit Dasgupta's *Dwitiyo Basanto* poster a line that is used is "There are lots of secrets. In this life nothing would be spoken of"³⁴. Kausik Ganguly's line in *Warish* is "Valobasa kakhano abaidha noi" (/ love is never illegitimate),³⁵ and Bratya Basu's *Teesta's* caption uses "Amar kona Shabda nei, shudhui naishabda...."³⁶ (/ I don't have any words, only silence). These sentences on the one hand capture the theme of the film and in a line give an idea of what the film is all about; on the other hand they establish their closeness to certain kind of Bengali *bhadralok* rhetoric and culture, a kind of literariness of the *bhadra* cultural code. It is because a body of films rejecting the *bhadra* code and belief system used a different language pattern unauthorized and criticized by the 'better' cinema going class that Subrata Sen, Rituparno Ghosh or Anjan Das as also some other directors' films claimed that 'lost' taste discourse in their publicity strategy and in this reclaiming developed a taste discourse attached to their films and their closeness to Bengali literary practice. It's important to note that the language they use that resonates with a certain idea of Bengali cultured-ness goes beyond the title and caption patterns and when these films were shown on Television the brief description of their plot lines in press columns almost introduced them as novels published in *Desh* or *Anandabazar Durgapuja* issues.³⁷ Apart from the popular press even little magazines like *Kobita Pratimase* published special issues on films like *Jara Bristite Bhijechhilo* (Anjan Das, 2007) or *Sab Charitra Kalponik* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2009). The issue on *Jara Bristite Bhijechhilo* included the interview with the film maker Anjan Das and some other intellectuals of the literary fields and brought about a discussion of the play based on the same book by Joy Goswami on which the film is based. In the *Sab charitro Kalponik* issue there were interviews of Joy Goswami, Rituparno Ghosh and others. Along with the

³³ December, 1996. *Anandabazar Patrika* and *The Telegraph*. Translation mine.

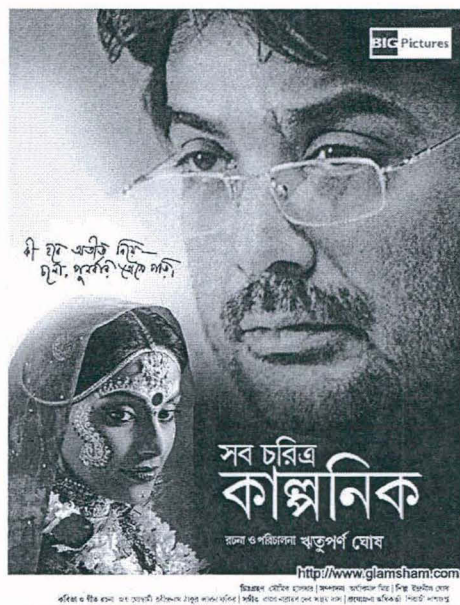
³⁴ *Anandabazar Patrika*. August, 2005. Translation mine.

³⁵ Ibid, March, 2004.

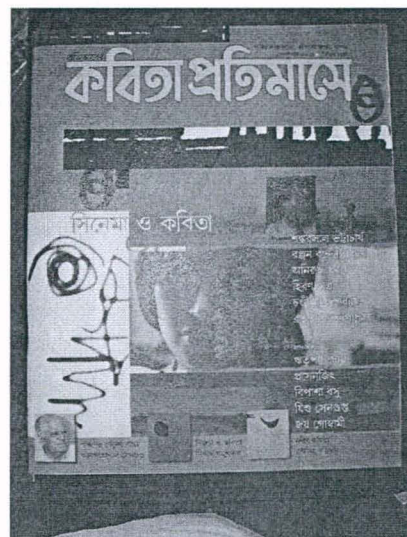
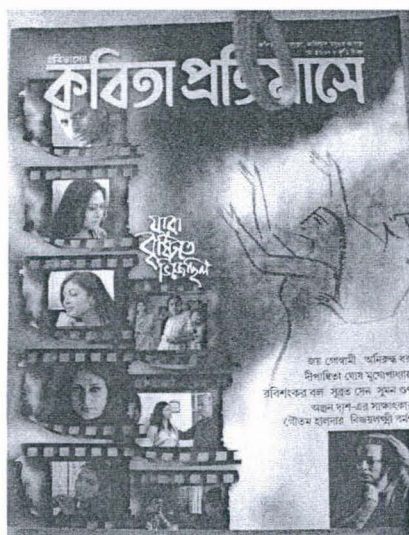
³⁶ Ibid. September 2005.

³⁷ For instance see the way *Anandabazar* advertised Rituparno Ghosh's *Hirer Angti* on 1st November, 2002 p-2. for its Alpha Bangla screening, or the way *Utsab* was advertised for its 'world television premiere on Tara TV on 23rd April, 2000, p. 2.

special issue publication, *Kobita Pratimase* organizes a yearly poetry workshop and once while participating, Rituparno Ghosh spoke about cinema, poetry and his films.



Posters with a 'difference.' Posters of *Abohomaan* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2010) and *Sab Charitro Kalponik* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2009); the literariness of address on the top, the design of font and the festival logo.



Kobita Pratimase special issues of Anjan Das' *Jara Bristite Bhijechhilo* and Rituparno Ghosh's *Sab Charitra Kalponik*.

Along with literary closeness and the mobilization of materials relating to the star, the marketing logic of this *bhadralok* 'parallel' cinema resulted in giving shape to its wider appeal by subsidiary media and brand endorsements. Large scale advertisements of

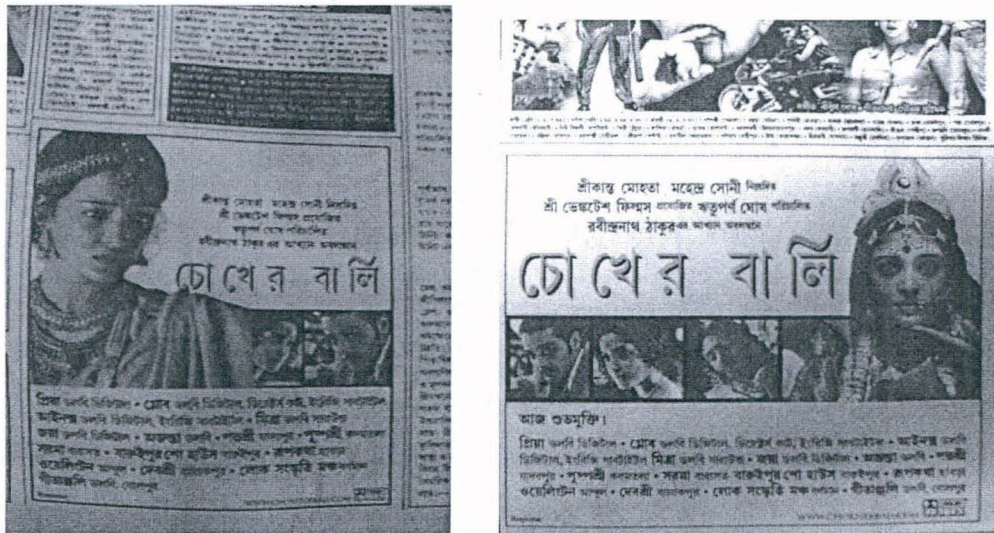
Chokher Bali brought brand association to a new dimension hitherto unexplored in Bengali cinema. My personal interview with Tapan Biswas³⁸ revealed the narrative of producing *Chokher Bali*. The idea of this film and the casting of Aisharya Rai as the lead were planned by Rituparno Ghosh and Tapan Biswas when they had done the pre-production. When Ghosh went to talk to Aisharya Rai and she agreed, the owner of Venkatesh Films met Ghosh, and on hearing that Aisharya Rai was ready to do a Bengali film, offered a bigger budget for *Chokher Bali*. Rituparno Ghosh then ‘breaking’ his ties with Biswas became ready to make *Chokher Bali* under the banner of Venkatesh Films.³⁹ Venkatesh Films until *Chokher Bali* happened was known as a big budget producer of Bengali commercial films. With Rituparno Ghosh’s *Chokher Bali* they started associating themselves with ‘quality’ Bengali films, and this film on the other hand started a new pattern of film publicity in poster aesthetics and the logic of circulation. The sponsorship logic made the primary banners of this film advertisement look like brand endorsements of Anjali Jewelers. The main posters, print advertisements and kiosks presented Aisharya Rai dressed up in jewelry. The poster focused on Rai’s stardom, her jewelry and used a caption that went as “biyer saje Binodini” (/Binodini in Bridal wear) or “Anjalir Alankare Aparupa Binodini” (/Beautiful Binodini in Anjali’s Ornaments).⁴⁰ Most of the advertisements appeared on the 2nd page of *Anandabaar Patrika* instead of the sixth or seventh pages where film publicity is generally done, and in each of them along with Venkatesh Films the name of *Anjali Jewelers* was printed in bold letters. Post *Chokher Bali* this jewelry brand and some other brands as well saw a new phase in their association with a number of Bengali films. Starting from Raja Sen’s *Krishnakanter Will*, to Suman Mukhopadhyay’s *Mahanagar @ Kolkata* or Sandip Ray’s *Kailashe Kelenkari*, this trend of placing jewelry houses’ advertisement within the films was established and jewelry houses used these films as a platform for brand endorsement. Aniruddha Roychowdhury with his *Antaheen* and his latest production *Ekti Tarar Khnoje* extends this product placement strategy to a new scale relating the film to numerous brands starting from hair oil, a skin clinic to investment plan banking, laptop brands and even

³⁸ Tapan Biswas is a veteran film producer who is associated with Bengali film industry since 1981. He was the producer of Rituparno Ghosh films like *Titli* or *Utsab* and the recent Kaushik Ganguly film *Arekti Premer Galpo/ Just Another Love story* (2010)..

³⁹ Author’s interview with Tapan Biswas . 13th December, 2010.

⁴⁰ *ABP* advertisements of *Chokher Bali* , October, 2003.

news television channels. The use of Peerless brand in *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* can also be mentioned in this regard. Moving one step further, a fruit juice company gave money to the producer of *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* to serve only its fruit juice free of cost during the intervals of the Priya shows of *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* just to make its brand known.⁴¹



Publicizing *Chokher Bali*: Rai's stardom and endorsing Anjali Jewelers. *Anandabazar Patrika*.

The use of subsidiary media is another significant intervention in the press based publicity of Bengali films. When *Titli* was planned as a big budget film with star casts like Aparna Sen, Mithun Chakraborty and Konkona Sensharma, Tapan Biswas thought of its publicity on a large scale and discussed it with the publicity PRO Mr. Uttam Kr Basu and they planned to shoot a 'making of *Titli*'. They proposed to *ETV Bangla* to telecast this video before the film's release and they agreed.⁴² Of course, nowadays this is a part of regular publicity for almost all big banner Bengali films and channels like *Sangeet Bangla* owned by Venkatesh Films, and this is an important promotional strategy for their films and even news television channels like *Star Ananda* take part in this publicity. However, at that point, the telecasting of the 'Making of *Titli*' was the first attempt of this kind in the Bengali film publicity scenario. If the 'Making of *Titli*' started a new phase in the involvement of new media in film publicity, Anjan Das' *Shanjhatir*

⁴¹ Interview with Sandip Sen, producer of *Ek Je Achhe Kanya*, 1st December, 2010.

⁴² Interview with Basu .

Roopkathara extended it to a new scale altogether. With the publicity of *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* Planman Motion Pictures beat earlier publicity strategies when its advertisements in news papers described *Shanjhatir*'s release as 'heralding a new era in Bangla cinema'⁴³ since it had "Hollywood giant Columbia Trister's first regional film distribution" and it had been "shortlisted in the final seven movies this year for Oscar nomination from India". Added to that in bold letters, the advertisement mentioned that it had been selected for film festivals in London, Rome, USA and Canada (though the name of the festivals and section in which it had been selected was not mentioned). The *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* team organized a TV show on *Akash Bangla* prior to its release, the *Shanjhatir Roopkathara quiz* from 4th November to 8th November between 6.45 p.m. and 7 p.m. and offered "exciting prizes". Radio station Red FM also organized a *Shanjhatir* debate competition and offered prizes for the winner. Apart from that, the film organized another competition "pujar *Shanjhatir*" with a local organization Rajdanga Navyuday Sangh and announced a prize money of Rs. 11,000 /- . Along with this, the world of Titan produced "*Shanjhatir* letter writing contest". In this contest anyone could write and submit a letter at any Titan show room and the winner would win a watch worth rupees seventy thousand. The film publicity here described this film as a letter of *Shanjhatir* written to her father and one willing to compete had to write a letter on this theme. The film producer also organized a book reading evening as "an exclusive evening of poetry, painting and music for the people of Kolkata"⁴⁴ sponsored by The Park, Calcutta. There was another announcement that if one bought a block ticket of ten the 'lucky number' could win a family tour of Darjeeling.

In this manner, the *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* publicity worked to promote interest in the film to new levels through lucky draws, the fm debate and the letter writing competition involving mediums like radio, television etc. And during this period, television became a major site to publicize and promote Bengali films. Later this 'parallel' cinema even acknowledged the importance of television not just as a publicity medium but also as a strong connection to the 'majority' of the audience. Rituparno

⁴³ *Shanjhatir Roopkathara* publicity advertisement. November, 2002. *Anandabazar Patrika*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Ghosh's *Khela* (2008) is an interesting case in point. The publicity caption for this film prior to release on kiosks and two sheet and six sheet banners read "baro parda r "Khela" ("Khela" of the big screen). *Khela* was a popular television serial of *Zee Bangla* around that time period directed by Ravi Ojha. And this film by Ghosh, though it did not have any kind of similarity in terms of narrative or star cast logic with this mega soap, mentioned its title to use its popularity to generate an interest regarding the film. At the same time the so called mainstream Bengali film publicity in the last four/five years has also become largely dependent on television and TV news. Especially after the launching of *Sangeet Bangla* and film based infotainment programmes on TV with shows like "Film Star" on *Star Ananda* and others, television has become a crucial medium to circulate what Kaustav Bakshi calls 'filmi khabar'. Music video aesthetics that was quite evident in Subrata Sen's *Nil Nirjane* (2003) both in its filming and its publicity that Subrata Sen had considered 'experimental' and to some extent 'avant garde'⁴⁵ in that period, can now be found in any average *Sangeet Bangla* promo of a so called mainstream film. Newer publicity mediums like film websites, Orkut communities or Face book pages are not exclusive to 'market' the parallel-ness of a parallel film any more. For instance an Orkut community like "We Love Bengali films" is equally enthusiastic about giving information and personal reviews about a Haranath Chakraborty film and a Rituparno Ghosh film. The question of the new media public is important here. For instance, when I asked Haranath Chakraborty what he thought about the media's changed approach towards Bengali popular cinema, that they did not even recognize him as a film director fifteen years ago, and now the media is so concerned about his films, he pointed to the 'truthful' quality of electronic media of the contemporary that was missing earlier for the attitude of the press was faulty with a partial vision⁴⁶. He said now the press can not fool an audience if they have the awareness. However, here the question I think is not so much about 'truth' or of the audience being fooled, but what we believe to be appropriate for the audience and how we think of the nature of the audience. The electronic media can not function according to the exclusive imagination of an ideal educated middleclass public as its consumer. It has to target or imagine a wider base. And

⁴⁵ Author's interview with Subrata Sen. 2nd October, 2010.

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Chakraborty. 9th December, 2010.

Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali's* Jewelry house endorsement or the TV ness of *Khela* publicity is no exception in following that logic.



Highlighting band euphoria and using social networking site's logo in recent Bengali film posters: Anjan Dutta's *Madly Bangali* (2009) and Atanu Ghosh's *Takhani Teish* (2011).

On the one hand, the electronic media blurs the differentiating line between the Bengali mainstream and the parallel cinema. On the other hand, this raises the question of how we would formulate and relate this 'change' to the target consumer imagination of parallel spectatorship.

Recognizing 'Our' Reality, Reviewing 'Our' Cinema: A Note on the Critical Discourse Generated around 'Parallel' Cinema

Sanjay Mukhopadhyay, film scholar and Professor of Film Studies, Jadavpur University and former Director and CEO of the West Bengal government run Roopkala Kendra, on the first page of the supplementary copy of *The Times of India* on 17th November, 2006,⁴⁷ accused Rituparno Ghosh's film *Dosar* (The Companion, 2006) of unethically "omitting the cultural inverted commas" to go for a complete plagiarism of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours Blue*. Mukhopadhyay considered Ghosh's film "a misunderstood carbon copy of the Kieslowski masterpiece" which has been redesigned

⁴⁷ As quoted by Sanjay Mukhopadhyay, "Rituparno Accused of Plagiarism" on *Calcutta Times* (p-1), *The Times of India*. 17th November, 2006.

and repackaged to suit box office demands for the middle class Bengali audience. *Dosar*, based on a couple's troubled relationship after the husband's mistress died in an accident, and the wife became aware of the secret relationship that her husband was involved in is according to Mukhopadhyay a complete thematic plagiarism of Kieslowski's work. What I find very interesting about this piece is the way it appeared in the newspaper. Along with Mukhopadhyay's piece as told to Priyanka Dasgupta, there were three other pieces that appeared alongside. There was a piece by a director on condition of anonymity on how he found *Dosar* a copy of *Three Colors Blue* and especially how he found "the accident scene in *Dosar* a complete copy".⁴⁸ Another small article introduced the brief narrative structure of *Three Colours Blue* and a third was a notice to say that Rituparno Ghosh was unavailable for comments, and to let readers know that when "someone close to the film's cast" was asked if he thinks whether any of Rituparno Ghosh's films were internationally inspired, his answer was *Dosar* because he thought this film "has an international flavour".⁴⁹ The discussion on the plagiarism of *Dosar* however did not stop here. The next day *Calcutta Times* published filmmaker producer Mahesh Bhatt, and musician Anu Mallik's take on the plagiarism issue. And the day after, *Calcutta Times* published a set of remarks in favor of and against the plagiarism charge and named it "Punch/ Counter Punch". The contemporary Bengali filmmaker Ashoke Viswanathan located Rituparno Ghosh's alleged act of plagiarism in a set of master directors' (of world cinema) inspired acts, a sign in their own way of having "paid 'tribute' to greats by using similar motifs and techniques".⁵⁰ Viswanathan included the films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray to trace influences of Tarkovsky, Bergman, Godard or Fellini in their work.⁵¹ He wrote:

I don't think being influenced is a dishonest thing. That's why we don't look down upon *Maqbool* or *Omkara*. If within the text of your film which is wholly original, you use a technique or an element already used, it could be a tribute to that film-maker or the only way that scene could have been done... As a bottom line, I'd say that I've my doubts about whether you can call any work of art as a piece of plagiarism even if the artist seems to have borrowed

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ As quoted by Ashoke Viswanathan. "Ray's Nayak was inspired by Bergman & Felini". *Calcutta Times* (p-1), *The Times of India*. 19th November, 2006.

⁵¹ For instance Viswanathan writes "At the risk of being criticized, I would say that there are elements of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* and *Eight and a Half* by Fellini in certain stretches of Satyajit Ray's *Nayak*..." *Calcutta Times*.

from a different source because in today's world every creator is nothing more than a cultural site. In effect, to quote the famous philosopher Roland Barthes, the traditional concept of the original author is dead.⁵²

On a side note, Shubho Shekhar Bhattacharjee, the CEO of Planman Motion Picture, which produced *Dosar* replied back to the allegations of plagiarism. He said the accusation was disturbing and said that if the accident scene is a copy then Billy Wilder's *Avanti* should also be questioned, and in that case it could also be said that every action film is plagiarized from *Die Hard*. Mukhopadhyay, in a brief note quoting Brecht tried to explain how he could not be responsible for each one's ignorance.⁵³ The anonymous director added to *Dosar's* alleged plagiarism, and listed one more film of Rituparno Ghosh, *Unishe April* and mentioned that even Wikipedia acknowledged that it was 'loosely based' on Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*.

I have chosen this open ended discussion on whether to call *Dosar* an act of plagiarism or see it as paying tribute to masters to point out how discussions regarding these *bhadralok* 'parallel' films often end up in a discourse about 'taste' that becomes the central determining factor. The question for me is not so much whether Ghosh is praised for whatever tribute he has paid or criticized for his unethical plagiarism. Rather, my interest is in how this allegation, with the two sides talking positions in favor of and against Ghosh and the overall press concern located him on a certain plane. Praising a director's work or writing a good review of her/ his works is definitely a way of taking sides about certain films. But it is more interesting when even in a denouncement, a certain 'class' is associated with Ghosh or his films. A parallel can be drawn when the Bengali film *Poran Jay Jwaliare* was being attacked for allegedly plagiarizing Vipul Shah's *Namaste London* and a case was filed or the numerous times when the press has criticized the remakes in the Bengali film industry of Hindi or southern film hits. Whereas Rituparno Ghosh's *Dosar* and this allegation of plagiarism in the news was more than just an allegation against a director. Starting with film scholar Sanjay Mukhopadhyay's comparison to other adaptations from Ray to the name of Kieslowski;

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ He starts with Brecht said "Let others speak of their shame. I speak of my own" and even refers Kaavya Vishwanathan's alleged plagiarism act that was in the news at that time.

from the question of an 'international flavor' to Ashoke Viswanathan's comparison of the influence of Felini, Godard and Tarkovski on Mrinal Sen and other Bengali art house directors; the discussion of the inspiration of Bergman in Rituparno Ghosh's earlier works positioned *Dosar* and its director in some 'higher' order, worth a serious discussion. An average Bengali film could not possibly have that privilege to be something of such serious concern. Not only *Dosar*, but almost all the films that I'm concerned with were privileged with the sense of 'importance' given to them by the 'attention' and the involvement of artists and intellectuals of various fields in reviewing or reacting to these films. Here one is reminded of the review of Aparna Sen's *Yugant* in *The Telegraph* by Sunil Gangopadhyay⁵⁴:

Yugant reminded me of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* where a divorced couple meets also on the seashore. No, Aparna has not imitated; if one is reminded of a good film while watching another, it is to the credit of the second. It is not often we find a director writing her own story and screenplay- one marvels at Aparna Sen's efficiency in this regard... Cinematic language dominates the entire direction; in this the director has excelled her earlier works. The workings of the heart have been worked out by the camera.⁵⁵



Sunil Gangopadhyay reviewing Aparna Sen's *Yugant* for *The Telegraph*

⁵⁴ "An act of courage". Sunil Gangopadhyay. *The Teleraph*, 20th December, 1996.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Again in this film review what I find important along with how the film is praised (reference to Bergman, etc) is the figure of the reviewer, someone like Sunil Gangopadhyay. A good review definitely acts as an important publicity tool, but if it's from a well known intellectual in other fields of the arts, the film requires an extra importance. We have to place this discussion in the context of a period when press and public sphere discussions were agreed that mainstream Bengali films were not worth watching for the educated Bengali *bhadralok* class, and the films were sometimes even referred to as appropriate for the "downmarket Bangladeshi audience"⁵⁶. At this point, that someone like Sunil Gangopadhyay considers a film worth reviewing meant a lot for a film and its publicity. And once the reviews were published, from the next day onwards, one or two lines from that review would be circulated with posters and newspaper publicity naming the source, the newspaper, the name of the reviewer especially if s/he was a well known figure as an artist or an intellectual.⁵⁷ Senior film journalist Aniruddha Dhar also agreed in an interview that this practice of reviewing films by noted poets, artists, theater personalities worked to generate and increase curiosity that was more effective than a film reviewed by a film journalist, and he called it a press strategy for some films.⁵⁸ This strategy adopted by the ABP newspaper group, both by *Anandabazar Patrika* and *The Telegraph* and sometimes even by the fortnightly Bengali magazine *Desh* generated an interest, or in press language what they call a buzz quite successfully amongst a class. Thus a *Shubha Mahurat* review by noted novelist Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay,⁵⁹ the *Abar Aranye* review by well known artist Shuvaprasanno,⁶⁰ or someone like Taslima Nasrin involved in writing reviews of films like *Dosar*⁶¹ or *Bibar*⁶²

⁵⁶ See for instance Bengali film *Bangshadhar* review by Anirban Bose. "Makes you cry". *The Telegraph*. 1st June, 2001.

⁵⁷ For instance Anjan Das' *Faltu* in its publicity quoting extensively *Anandabazar*, *Aajkaal*, *The Telegraph*, *Bartaman* review and also what Said Mustafa Siraj said about this film- the second masterpiece in Bengali cinema after *Pather Panchali*!

⁵⁸ Author's interview with Aniruddha Dhar, June, 2010.

⁵⁹ See "Rahasyer Mahurat". Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, 28th December, 2002. *Anandabazar Patrika*. *Patrika Supplement*. p-4.

⁶⁰ See "Samay Aranyer Dinraat ke aro parinato korechhe". Shuvaprasanno 14th May, 2003, *Anandabazar Patrika*. Saturday supplement *Patrika* p. 1.

⁶¹ See "Dosarer Nastoneere" by Taslima Nasrin 22nd April, 2006. *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Patrika*, p. 4.

⁶² See "Jadi sex tao bhalobhabe dekhate parto" by Taslima Nasrin, 14th June, 2006, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Patrika*, p. 4.

worked to position these films above the average plane of Bengali film discussion and associated them with an intellectual practice.



Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's review of *Shubha Mahurat* (Rituparno Ghosh) and Taslima Nasrin's review of *Bibar* (Subrata Sen). *Anandabazar Patrika*.

Press reviews recognized this 'new' stream of Bengali middle class cinema from the beginning. Swapan Mullick wrote about *Unishe April* :

The primary inspiration is drawn from everyday experience. It is placed in a recognizable, intelligent urban setting... Rituparno Ghosh's direction allows everything to take place within the limits of credibility. Never does it look as if the screenplay has set out to impose a concept or an objective...certainly the best feature film to have emerged in the last few years.⁶³

And the press reviews welcomed the credibility of the middle class world that 'we' are used to in 'our' day to day life and that 'we' experience in our daily-ness. The charge of (*bhadralok*/ middle class) realism came from that recognition. Opposed to the crude, 'unrealistic' representation of the so called popular Bengali films, films like *Unishe April* or *Asukh* were seen to engage with what 'we' believe to be 'real' and 'close to our middle class world'. To illustrate my point I would like to quote how *The Statesman* review of *Paromitar Ekdin* starts with this recognition that it is 'our film':

There is nothing quite as satisfying as getting totally absorbed in the normal flow of events and finding people placed in their most appropriate milieu and

⁶³ See Swapan Mullick, "Wholly Credible Insight", *The Statesman*, 24th May, 1996.

speaking for themselves. Aparna Sen is something of a protectionist in her handling of people, especially women, and the most outstanding feature of *Paromitar Ekdin* is that they spontaneously become part of the total design. Each has a contribution to make to the director's sensitive observation of the joint family structure. The details are drawn with great conviction and understanding of inner compulsions. Departing from powerful statements she has made in the past, the director this time thrives on delicate nuances and marvelous characteristics.⁶⁴

The *Anandabazar Patrika* review of *Paromitar Ekdin* similarly praised the realistic nature of this film; it said "the acting of *Paromitar Ekdin* is normal like our day to day life".⁶⁵ Almost each and every line of the review recognizes the 'reality' of Bengali middle class life that has been explored so beautifully in this film.

While reviewing Subrata Sen's film *Ek Je Achhe Kanya*, Gautam Chakraborty stressed the 'urban reality of contemporary life' that the film portrayed. Chakraborty asserts that "finally Tollywood has become mature... Thank you Subrata Sen. Though this is your first direction, after really a long time I had the opportunity of watching a smart Bengali film, thanks to you"⁶⁶. Along with the focus on the film's urban setting and plotline, the language and casting was also Chakraborty's concern. *The Telegraph* review similarly praised the "fresh and exciting approach" and "crispiness" of this film and wrote of it as a rare Bengali film "that is something to make you sit up".⁶⁷ The review goes on:

Subrata Sen and his team talk the language of filmmakers who are completely dedicated to the medium. A very *clear presentation of reality* and a tight rein as the drama marks out the film which boasts of a solid team of professionals like its cinematographer Shirshya Roy whose camera from the very first frame speaks clean and produces beautiful visuals, especially of the city's night life.⁶⁸

The reviewer wrote that though the film is a "frame by frame reminder of the 1993 film Alan Shapiro's *The Crush*, *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* is a well laid out film, eminently watchable." The question of the 'representation of reality' essentially brings up the

⁶⁴ See Swapan Mullick, "High Point of human concern", *The Statesman*, 14th January, 2000.

⁶⁵ See Ranjan Bandyopadhyay "Paromitar Ekdin, Bhalobasar Chiradin", *Anandabazar Patrika*, Saturday supplement *Patrika*, 15th January, 2000, p. 4. Translation mine.

⁶⁶ See Gautam Chakraborty "Ek Je Achhe Konkona", *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Patrika*, 9th June, 2001, p. 4. Translation mine.

⁶⁷ See Jaydip Kundu, "Quite a teeny Crush!", *The Telegraph*, 8th June, 2001.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Italics mine.

question of 'detail'. To quote some lines from the review of *Bariwali*: "Rituparno Ghosh's eye for detail is remarkable, from the authentic dress designing to the art direction to the manner of even eating in the 'right way'".⁶⁹ In this way the critical discourses generated around these films recognized the credibility of these films and praised their representation of 'reality'.

Films like *Shubha Mahurat*, *Titli*, *Sanjhatir Roopkathara* that were praised highly in the popular press, and a film like *Hemanter Pakhi* that was not seen as of the same quality were both associated with a 'realistic' charge in representing the world 'we live in'. This is the way critical discourse recognized 'the difference' of the 'parallel'. And along with this recognition, in their reviews there was another significant practice- to publicize the social concern of these films that was highlighted post release while film details were shared prior to their release as well. For example, Anirban Chattopadhyay wrote a feature after *Paromitar Ekdin's* release relating it to Aparna Sen's earlier film *Parama* to show how a "new feminist" approach has been developed by Sen that breaks the boundaries of patriarchy and signifies the new woman going beyond the model of the feminist rebel.⁷⁰ On the other hand, when Abhijit Dasgupta's *Dwitiya Basanta* (2005) went on the floor, the *Pratidin* report by Nirmal Dhar focused on how a 'different' film was going to start in Aurora studio.⁷¹ The feature highlighted how the actress Rituparna Sengupta's facial expression and emotive techniques signified an 'off beat' and 'clean' film.⁷² After *Dosar* was released and its review had been published, the Saturday supplement of *Anandabazar Patrika* published an 'adda session' with Prasenjit Chatterjee by Bengali film and television actress Sudipta Chakraborty. While Sudipta Chakraborty expressed her feelings after watching *Dosar* and was to ask Prasenjeet Chatterjee how he felt about his own acting in this film, the actor Prasenjeet Chatterjee, on the other hand said that characters like Kaushik (the protagonist of *Dosar* that he played) were very believable and made of flesh and blood and that this is where lay

⁶⁹ See Jaydeep Kundu, "Dub it a Wonder Film", *The Telegraph*, 15th June, 2001.

⁷⁰ See Anirban Chattopadhyay, "Parama Theke Paromita- Nijer Khonje Ekti Meye"/"from Parama to Paromita- A girl in search of herself", *Anandabazar Patrika*, 25th January, 2000. p. 4.

⁷¹ See Nirmal Dhar report in Friday supplement of *Pratidin*, 11th June 14, 2004. p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Rituparno Ghosh's excellence and signature.⁷³ Sometimes the director's/actor's interviews were published prior to the film's release.⁷⁴ After Atanu Ghosh's *Angshumaner Chhobi* (A Film by Angshuman, 2009) released, the Saturday supplement of *Anandabazar Patrika* published a news feature on the gigolo as an emerging urban type in Kolkata, and said that Ghosh's debut film was probably "the first Bengali film" to portray a character who is by profession a gigolo; the article attached stills from the film.⁷⁵ This is the manner in which critical discourse worked to establish these films as films concerned with our social reality.

Furthermore, while the press and critical discourses played an extremely supportive and promotional role, they also underlined repeatedly how the 'parallel' practice was different from mainstream cinema. Firstly the assumption at an associative level of being in the same league as world cinema directors worked to place this parallel practice in a different and higher order from mainstream cinema. And secondly, the recognition that 'our cinema' represented and constructed 'our world' placed this cinema alternative in the *bhadralok* 'belief system'. And what I find is that besides this press support, the directors themselves were part of the support system that 'influenced' the regime of reception. For instance Aparna Sen was the editor of the Bengali women's magazine *Sananda* since its inception for almost two decades (from 1986 to 2005) and then she was the creative director of the Bengali news television channel *Kolkata TV* for a long period of time. Rituparno Ghosh was the editor of the film magazine *Anandalok* for quite a long time and wrote regularly in *Anandabazar Patrika* as well. Now he is the editor of the Sunday supplement *Robbar* published by the Bengali daily *Sanbad Pratidin*. Other filmmakers like Subrata Sen, Sudeshna Roy or Aniket Chattopadhyay started their careers as newspaper journalists before becoming film makers. So apart from the media support system that worked in differentiating the 'parallel' from the 'crude commercial' the director(s) as press personae or media personnel helped to generate a discourse of

⁷³ See Sudipta Chakraborty and Prasenjeet Chatterjee, "Bhalo Abhineta ke Homework Korte Hoyna"/"a good actor does not need homework". *ABP*, 29th April, 2006, *Patrika* supplement, p. 3,4.

⁷⁴ Like in case of Rituparno Ghosh's *Abohomaan*, Ghosh's interview was published in *ABP* on 16th January, 2010, *Patrika* p-4. And on 30th January *ABP* along with this film's review by novelist and poet Sangita Bandyopadhyay Actress Ananya Chattopadhyay's (who acted in *Abohomaan*) interview was also published

⁷⁵ See "Gopan Premi" by Sudip Ghosh *ABP*, 22nd August, 2009. *Patrika* p. 3.

quality and good taste. What is very interesting is when the filmmaker himself or as part of the cast of the film reviewed intervenes in these debates and discussions regarding her/his film and a discourse is generated after these reviews are published through readers' comments on them. Before I end this section I will use examples of such influences on the discursive domain post the *Ballygunge Court* (Pinaki Chowdhury, 2007) release and post the *Abohomaan* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2010) release.

Ballygunge Court was reviewed by Papiya Adhikary on 1st September, 2007 in *Anandabazar Patrika*. Recognizing it as a film that identifies with contemporary Bengali middle class society and praising the acting and the technicalities she pointed out the lack of 'message' in this film.⁷⁶ The next week *Anandabazar Patrika* published two letters to the editor, one by Soumitra Chattopadhyay and the other by Sabyasachi Chakraborty (both were part of the cast of this film) protesting the review. Chattopadhyay emphasized the 'relevant message' the film had and blamed the reviewer for expressing her biases and her personal preference that got precedence over a neutral and objective view of an ideal reviewer.⁷⁷ Chakraborty questioned the necessity of having a 'message' in a film; he asked what message does Satyajit Ray's *Goopy Gain*, *Bagha Bain* have, and is it every filmmaker's responsibility to solve the social problems they portray in their films.⁷⁸ Both these letters expressed the anxiety and fear that the review might affect the responses of the audience. Then a week later, Papiya Adhikary wrote back her reactions to the accusations; she wrote in five brief points how her perspective was justified.⁷⁹ Along with Papiya Adhikary, Mamata Shankar (who was also part of the cast) wrote how she feels personally the 'message' of the film and always supports it.⁸⁰ She wrote,

Careers can be built in our country... I have belief in the film's message. Even I did not allow my son to go abroad... One should not forget the wisdom that we inherit from the joint family... the aim of education is to gain knowledge, now that has changed into income ... ambition became more important than mission... is there any logic behind spending one's whole life as a second class citizen?⁸¹

⁷⁶ "Hriday Achhe, Upay Nei" *Patrika*, p. 3 *Anandabazr Patrika*, 1st September, 2007.

⁷⁷ *Patrika*, p. 4 *Anandabazr Patrika*, 8th September, 2007.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Patrika*, p-4 *Anandabazar Patrika*. 15th September, 2007.

⁸⁰ "Jete Paro, kintu Keno Jabe?" Mamata Shankar. *Patrika*, p-4 *Anandabazr Patrika*. 15th September.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Translation mine.

These responses indicate clearly that the film was projected as one that recognized 'our' reality, identifying the world 'we' live in and that this made them 'our' cinema. This was clearly emphasized in the discourse around the film.

The Bengali film actor Barun Chanda reviewed *Abohomaan* in *The Telegraph* within a week of the film's release. Though Chanda found the film technically brilliant, and as a director Rituparno is good, he thought that the 'parallel storylines' and subplots should have added up to something more than a whole that did not happen in *Abohomaan*.⁸² Chanda wrote

A series of beautiful, evocative scenes, arbitrarily placed together does not necessarily a great movie make. You need a fabric of meaning to run through the film, from beginning to end, for the audience to take back with them. That does not happen in *Abohomaan*. Which is sad.

He further added

I have a suggestion for Ritu... this is not sermonizing. Rather a passionate plea, a request from the heart. Before Ritu makes his next film he should ask himself just one simple question. What's the film about? The rest would take care of itself. More than many of the current crop, Ritu has the gift of creating cinematic magic. Let it not be restricted to individual scenes.⁸³

Within five days of this review having been published, Rituparno Ghosh responded to this, criticizing Chanda's approach in that review. Calling Chanda's approach as "fragmented understanding" Ghosh wrote

My 14 films released so far (with three still pending) have clearly established me as a competent storyteller on celluloid, if not a filmmaker of any worthwhile standing. Experimenting with the narrative style is something I think I have earned and I am entitled to, with or without anyone's advice, blessings or suggestions.⁸⁴

Here Ghosh himself wrote about influences and comparisons with 'master filmmakers' from Harisadhan Dasgupta to Satyajit Ray, from Ritwik Ghatak to Ingmar Bergman. On Chandra's accusation about why the thematic of death appears repetitively in his films Ghosh's defense was, "Other directors have had their pet preoccupations too; for instance, Ritwik Ghatak with the Partition." And then a bit cautiously he added, "I am not

⁸² See Barun Chanda, "Fragmented Eternity", *T2*, p. 4 *The Telegraph*, 26th January, 2010.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ See Rituparno Ghosh, "Fragmented Understanding", *T2*, p. 4. *The Telegraph*, 30th January, 2010.

for one moment claiming comparison with the greats, merely saying that I don't see recurrent theme as a problem per se."⁸⁵ Chanda comparing Ray's work with that of Ghosh had said Ghosh could observe Ray in how he kept his beautiful scenes brief. Ghosh reacted to that saying yes he adored Ray for his brief beautiful scenes, but Bergman another director whom he hugely adores, "was much given to long dialogue-driven scenes which are the inspiration and stuff of *Abohomaan*."⁸⁶



Abohomaan face off: Barun Chanda's review and Rituparno Ghosh's response on *The Telegraph* .

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Then *The Telegraph* opened the issue for the readers to reflect on this debate and published a number of letters engaged in this discussion.⁸⁷ Film Scholar Pradip Biswas who is a member of the NFDC Script Committee reacted that it would be 'stupid' to compare Ghosh with someone like Satyajit Ray and wrote that he wanted "Rituparno to review his own films so that he can wallow in ecstasy" whereas Subhankar Bhattacharya asserted that he completely agreed with Rituparno Ghosh's 'defence', and said that he considered "constant comparisons to Satyajit Ray, when Rituparno has already established his credentials as a director may in itself be self defeating".⁸⁸ Here my point is to observe how this question of quality is presupposed in a 'parallel' filmmaker's work. Its not just the simple fact of whether one may consider Rituparno Ghosh as a competent successor to the Bengali 'art' cinema tradition of directors like Ray or Ghatak or not. The question is this very comparability of Ghosh with Bengali quality cinema. The press and other media discourses in Bengal have worked with this comparison to a great extent, to constitute and influence the regime of reception of this cinema. And I am using this *Abohomaan* face off to demonstrate how the directors themselves 'influence' this regime generated around their work. I think one of the reasons this discourse has reached this point is because the post 1990s 'parallel' film director(s) successfully established themselves as press or media persons. And the phenomenal emergence of Rituparno Ghosh in Bengali cinema in the post liberalization period had its root(s) in how he has used the media as a tool for his stardom, and to generate a star discourse that is in turn related to the construction of *bhadralok* parallel-ness in reception and circulation for his film texts and the media discourse generated around them. My next section is an attempt to study the stardom of this Bengali filmmaker whom one can consider central to the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema.

⁸⁷ Here I should mention that this is a regular feature in *The Telegraph* in their Thursday supplement called "We've got mail". Before *Abohomaan* *The Telegraph* feature on 4th August 2007 about *Anuranan*'s 'success' by Kushali Nag invited readers' thought on what they thought of the two characters' 'undefined relationship' in this film and in the 9th August supplement some letters were published from readers like Amit Banerjee or Chitra Bagchi commenting on that particular topic.

⁸⁸ *The Telegraph*. 4th February, 2010. T2, p-6.

The Star-Director Discourse and the Idea of Continuation and 'Difference' in a *Bhadralok* Filmmaker: The Curious Case of Rituparno Ghosh

"If my films help the Bengali film industry in any way, I'll be extremely happy. I'm extremely flattered that I'm being compared with Satyajit Ray. But I feel I'm majorly overrated. I came into Bengali cinema at a time when intelligent urban films were going out of fashion. That's why I found a place quickly." – Rituparno Ghosh⁸⁹

It's going to be a Rituparno Ghosh season once again. Bengal's moviemaking maestro has one film in the theatres, another slated for release next month — it'll be his first movie in English — and several others almost complete and ready to hit the screen. If that isn't enough for his fans, he'll also be at his social best sitting back on a couch and interviewing famous celebrities in a TV chat show *Ghosh and Company*. The filmmaker loves to test his creative strength and venture into unfamiliar and unknown territory — that's also evident from the shaven-headed look that he's been presenting to the world lately. "I just felt like it," he grins... He's a maverick at heart and even in this era of celebrity blogging, prefers to put down his thoughts using pen and paper. "It allows me to practice my handwriting," he jokes... Not surprisingly for a director whose scripts remain his strong point, Ghosh is a bookworm. That he's an avid reader is obvious the moment you enter his small and neatly decorated study which has pictures of Satyajit Ray and Akira Kurosawa besides a laminated still from his film, *Chokher Bali*. Books are stacked all over the place and are neatly arranged in ceiling-high bookcases. Though he is fond of non-fiction, everything from the classics to the latest bestsellers finds a place in his collection. "When I'm abroad, my friends deposit me in a bookshop and go shopping," he laughs. He has just finished reading a book on Israel and this has made him toy with the idea of writing travelogues.

-*The Telegraph*. 17th August, 2008. By Promita Mukherjee.

This is not a section aimed at any kind of auteur study: studying film texts in accordance with the 'creative mind' behind them that has a certain kind of authority over a body of films that bears the 'signature' of his creativity. Rather I'm interested in how a star figure is constructed beyond film language and aesthetics and determined and regulated by subsidiary media texts, and how interest is generated in popular discourse and via an active oral culture. Some Auteur studies have been done of Bengali film makers contemporary to Ghosh who belong to the contemporary 'art house' cinema of Bengal. One of the important texts in this genre of writing is John W. Hood's study of

⁸⁹ As quoted in Somdutta Mandal "Rituparno Ghosh: The Women's Director of Bangla Cinema" in Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai ed. *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema* (Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2002) p. 36.

Buddhadeb Dasgupta, where Hood describes Dasgupta's 'artistic vision' and 'technical excellence'.⁹⁰ Here he discusses in detail the (unique) features of Dasgupta's films like 'creative emotion', 'profound sense of realism', his 'concern for the individual in isolation or alienation' and the 'extraordinary originality' of both style and substance.⁹¹ Hood sees Dasgupta as a director "seeing beyond the material exterior to the yearnings of the simplest human heart"⁹² and parallelly also acknowledges Dasgupta's presence at international festival circuits. Another book on Buddhadeb Dasgupta, *A Poet with a Camera: Buddhadeb Dasgupta: A Monograph* edited by Ajay Kumar Das and published by Nandan: West Bengal Film Center is composed of critical reviews published in *The Statesman*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India*, *Deep Focus*, *Cinema Wave* and *Amritabazar Patrika* and with comments by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Derek Malcom, David Robinson.⁹³ These reviews and their compilations have tried to project him as a poet and filmmaker of fine sensibility and of his 'own style' with an international reputation.

Shoma A. Chatterjee's study of another contemporary Bengali film maker, Aparna Sen, while recognizing the art cinema tradition in Bengal situates Sen's work as a cinema of "authentic woman- experience"⁹⁴. At the same time, Chatterjee feels that Aparna Sen belongs to a shared tradition:

Along with Buddhadeb Dasgupta and Goutam Ghose, she belongs to the young Calcutta school. Together yet not quite together, they confidently tread the path of meaningful cinema as an aesthetic expression. A cinema already formed and created by predecessors Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. Each of these three, Buddhadeb, Goutam and Aparna are distinctively different from each other.⁹⁵

Chatterjee traces how Aparna Sen in all of her films "pays serious attention to a whole range of feminist concerns"⁹⁶ and she tries to establish Sen as a filmmaker who is in

⁹⁰ See John W. Hood. *The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta*. (Orient Langman, 2005).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, p. 218.

⁹³ See *A Poet with a Camera: Buddhadeb Dasgupta: A Monograph* edited by Ajay Dey, Nandan. 1994.

⁹⁴ See Shoma A Chatterjee, *Paroma and Other Outsiders: The Cinema of Aparna Sen*. (Parumita Publication, 2002) p. 26.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 17.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 15.

constant opposition to Indian popular cinema in portraying urban woman hood going against conventional Indian femininity.⁹⁷ Similar studies have been done of Rituparno Ghosh and his films by Somdutta Mandal depicting Ghosh as a 'women's filmmaker' in Bengal.⁹⁸ Considering Ghosh as "a bridge between good Bangla cinema and the crowds"⁹⁹, Mandal emphasized Ghosh's directorial talent as a specialist in 'human relationships' and especially in the female mind.¹⁰⁰

However Ghosh and his films were not always appreciated for their humanist concern or their author praised for being a women's filmmaker; sometimes they were also seen as limited and conformist. Pachu Roy, quite contrary to Mandal's approach writes about Rituparno Ghosh in a brief essay called "Paribarik Chhobir Master: Rituparno Ghosh"/ "The Master of Family Films: Rituparno Ghosh" in special film issue of *Madhyam O Sangjog*, February, 2002. In his essay, Roy traces Ghosh's conformist attitude in his first five films (from *Unishe April* to *Bariwali*) and argues how in each of his films Ghosh expresses his 'fear' of going against the establishment of middle class social life.¹⁰¹

My concern, however, is different from either Roy's or Mandal's or these earlier 'auteur studies' of other Bengali film makers contemporary to Ghosh. My intention in this section is to study the 'emergence' of Rituparno Ghosh's stardom in post liberalization Bengali cinema, and how this celebrity persona was constructed in subsidiary media discourses other than the film media that he was directly involved in. Before I start I would like to mention two points around which Ghosh's star persona as an 'alternative' filmmaker was built. Firstly Ghosh is seen and imagined in *bhadralok* discourse as a continuation of the 'good' Bengali film tradition, to be more appropriate,

⁹⁷ For instance Chatterjee discusses in detail how in Sen's film woman-as-mother and woman-as-sexual entity are not mutually antagonistic images- but simultaneously present within the same woman" (p. 23).

⁹⁸ See Somdutta Mandal "Rituparno Ghosh: The Women's Director of Bangla Cinema" in Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai ed. *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*. (Rawat Publications, Jaipur and New Delhi, 2002).

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.17.

¹⁰⁰ Mandal says "the raison d'être for Rituparno Ghosh's films remains "I understand women" (p. 38).

¹⁰¹ See Pachu Roy, "Paribarik Chhobir Master: Rituparno Ghosh"/ "The Master of Family Films: Rituparno Ghosh" in special film issue of *Madhyam O Sangjog*, February, 2002. p. 31- 33.

as carrying on the legacy of Ray aesthetics and Ray's film making talent. And secondly Ghosh is seen and mapped in the popular imagination as 'someone with a difference' as an exception. These points are what I consider crucial to the star discourse around Rituparno Ghosh in Bengali public sphere and its dominant imagination. To begin with the realist charge of the Rituparno Ghosh films comes from their resemblance to the film space design of Satyajit Ray films and especially to the interiority of the late Ray films, and no less important is the public sphere recognition of that 'resemblance' and 'Ray's inspiration' of these films. Here I would like to quote from a website's introduction to Rituparno Ghosh:

Rituparno Ghosh, often hailed as the rightful heir of Satyajit Ray, is one of the most talented Indian directors... (a) feature of Ghosh's films (is) his cultural influence. The influences of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray are apparent in his films. After Ray he is one of the few filmmakers who can use the songs from Tagore delightfully in his films. The sensitivity, passion and intellect with which he makes his films are well rewarded by awards. Apart from the National Film Awards, the films of Rituparno Ghosh are quite popular in the international film festivals too.¹⁰²

This is what I wanted to point out: the imagined legacy of Ray and the 'glorious' film making past of Bengal that acted to establish Ghosh and his 'parallel-ness' in Bengal's public sphere discourse. Firstly the films themselves were 'actively' responsible for bringing back that pleasure of past-ness, and in many cases, as I have discussed in the last chapter, the memory of Ray. The 'influence' of different stylization and narrativization techniques of Ray is quite evident in Ghosh's works. In terms of their style of dialogues, subtlety of action and atmosphere, and the specific use of the lighting resonating 'our' everyday reality, Ghosh's films consciously regenerate the 'effect' of Satyajit Ray's oeuvre. And it is the 'recognition' of that resemblance and regeneration that are equally important in establishing Ghosh as central to the 'alternative cinema', and as an able successor of Ray.

Filmmakers like Goutam Ghose, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Utpalendu Chakraborty who were the next generation after Ray (that Shoma A. Chatterjee refers to as the 'young

¹⁰² Introducing Rituparno Ghosh , at India Net Zone.
Link:http://www.indianetzone.com/34/rituparno_ghosh_indian_movie_director.htm. Access date 30th March, 2011.

Calcutta school' and Aruna Vasudev sees as 'Bengal's Second Breath'¹⁰³) were not seen as that close to Ray in terms of narrative patterning or plot development as Rituparno Ghosh has been recognized to be. This is primarily because their early filmmaking careers were contemporary to the late Ray films that Ghosh was not a part of. When Ghosh started making films, Ray had passed away. And the allegation that post Ray, 'Bengal's second breath' unlike Ray were not bothered about whether the film would find its audience or not, largely ruled out Ghosh from belonging to this group after *Unishe April's* commercial success. Here I would like to quote the way an Orkut community of Rituparno Ghosh with more than two thousand members praised Ghosh's focus on commercial success along with his film making talent. Speaking of Ghosh they say:

One of India's most acclaimed contemporary filmmakers. He has redefined so called arthouse cinema by successfully marrying art and commerce. His films have won record number of national awards as best film, best director, best actress. A prolific filmmaker with at least one film releasing every year since his second film *Unishe April* (The first to release) in the early nineties. Has always kept in mind a film's commercial success and never stayed away from using mainstream stars to his advantage.¹⁰⁴

A filmmaker like Buddhadeb Dasgupta has agreed that neither the mass nor the niche audience of Bengal form the primary audience base for his films, but it's the international festival circuit and foreign organizations who buy the rights for his films.¹⁰⁵ The case is quite similar for other filmmakers of the 'young Calcutta school' contemporary to Dasgupta. Distribution obstacles or lack of popular appeal, whatever the reason, they failed to form a film crowd for their films. Here Ghosh emerged with a 'difference' in successfully forming an audience base for his films.¹⁰⁶ His films are popular amongst a crowd, yet they managed to be 'different' from the so called Bengali popular films. Regularity is another important factor. Film makers like Utpalendu Chakraborty and some others became quite irregular even after the hype and interest generated around the release of *Chokh* (The Eye, 1982). In this situation in the post liberalization Bengali film

¹⁰³ See Aruna Vasudev *The New Indian Cinema*, Macmillan India Limited, 1986. p-65-74.

¹⁰⁴ Link: <http://www.orkut.co.in/Main#Community?cmm=25825635>. Access date 6th April, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Buddhadeb Dasgupta in a face to face conversation organized by Eisenstein Cine club of Kolkata at Gorky Sadan, 22nd March, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ The point I referred here is clarified by the EIMPA secretary Ashis Kr Banerjee, *Priya* hall owner Arijit Dutta and also producers like Renu Roy or Tapan Biswas who produced some of Ghosh's films.

scenario I find Rituparno Ghosh an exceptional figure in following a method both in film aesthetics and for publicity in the manner in which he regularly geared the promotional strategy in his films to target the *bhadralok* audience that would form the base of his films. In order to successfully form an audience base unlike Dasgupta, Chakraborty or (Goutam) Ghose he had a strong parallel focus (and developed a hold) on subsidiary media that would influence his films' reception in many ways, planned and unplanned. Firstly, as I have already pointed out, Ghosh was associated with the leading newspaper organizations like *Anandabazar Patrika*, wrote film reviews or other feature stories regularly, became the editor of the film magazine *Anandalok*, and after he left ABP, joined *Sangbaad Pratidin* and became the editor of their Sunday Supplement *Robbar*.

The point I would like to illustrate here is that the columnist Rituparno Ghosh or the editor Rituparno Ghosh contributed to establish a niche for his films, and develop a star persona called Rituparno Ghosh beyond his Bengali film maker identity. Thus Ghosh's press persona is I think responsible to a great extent in establishing his stardom in public sphere discourse. Ghosh's reviews of films like *Debdas* or *Chalte Chalte* express his process of observation, critical skill, preferences and other details. Or, for instance, if I refer to an article like "Atiter Khnoje" ("In search of the Past") by him in *Anandabazar Patrika* on the Bengali cinema tradition it is clearly evident that his belonging to the Bengali cinematic tradition is deeply connected to his memory, practice and experience of being an integral part of this tradition.¹⁰⁷ Similarly an article like "Soumitra 70" by Ghosh in the *Anandabazar Patrika* supplement about Soumitra Chattopadhyay expressed his admiration for the "Apu" of Bengali cinema.¹⁰⁸ When he became the editor of the Bengali film magazine *Anandalok* he came closer to the regime of reception and circulation of cinema that worked to his advantage in the manner in which he became a 'regulator' of public sphere discourse of *filmi khabar* through editing the leading Bengali film magazine.¹⁰⁹ The second thing is that when he became the editor of *Anandalok*, the 'look' of the magazine changed. The advertisement claimed

¹⁰⁷ *Anandabazar Patrika* supplement, 15th April, 2000.

¹⁰⁸ *ABP* supplement, 24th January, 2004. p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Here one can also observe how his films like *Titli* or *Shubha Mahurat* use the name *Anandalok* in showing the cover or referring the name of it to generate the pleasure of stardom, and gossip columns.

“Ulte Dekhun Palte Gachhe” / “Have a look, it has changed”. Apart from “filmi” news and interviews of the persons related to the film industry during this period *Anandalok’s* regular sections also changed and included news from other public sphere concerns and discussions. And now when he is associated with *Sanbaad Pratidin*, he uses press discourse even more innovatively and to his advantage. Prior to his film *Sab Charitro Kalponik’s* (2009) release, in an editorial of a *Robbar* supplement¹¹⁰ Rituparno Ghosh revealed how the poet Joy Goswami had agreed to give his poems exclusively for Rituparno Ghosh’s films and promised not to publish them anywhere else. Then those poems exclusively written for and used by Ghosh in *Sab Charitro Kalponik* were published in *Robbar*. After that the film released, and within some days of it a book was published called *Nando r Maa* (the mother of Nando) that carried those *Pratidin* editorials and those ‘exclusive’ poems by Goswami. For me what is important is how Ghosh tactfully uses his media engagement for the promotion of his films. Moreover, as a media persona Rituparno Ghosh is always present in public sphere discourses. This is clear, that as a filmmaker, Ghosh can reach his film’s audience by many other means apart from his films.

Along with this press persona, Rituparno Ghosh developed a strong television presence at a time when “satellite channels and global network were beginning to make a home in (Bengali) middle-class households”¹¹¹. In this post liberalization period of the cable television boom, Rituparno Ghosh got associated with more than one Bengali regional television channel. He was actively associated with *Tara Bangla* since its inception, a channel that premiered Rituparno Ghosh’s *Utsab*. And on *ETV Bangla* Rituparno Ghosh started anchoring a talk show called *Ebong Rituparno* (And Rituparno). These associations helped him to establish his TV persona as an ‘alternative’ filmmaker. I see these media associations as a strategic step by Ghosh to promote his films that resulted in almost a genre called ‘Rituparno Ghosh films’ and also parallely led him to stardom. No Bengali film maker either from the mainstream or from the art house tradition except Aparna Sen, to some extent, has functioned as a successful media person

¹¹⁰ *Pratidin* supplement, 13th January, 2008.

¹¹¹ Kaustav’s Arden. Op. cit.

as Ghosh has. Apart from these, he appeared for television interviews, joined in Bengali film discussion forums, directed a television serial (*Bahanno Episode/ Fifty two episodes telecast on DD Bangla*), and made telefilms like *Avinoy/ Acting or 10 no. Maltibala Lane for Zee Bangla*. These activities have worked in his favor to highlight his educated, cultured *bhadralok* middle class identity, and have helped the audiences in imagining a *bhadralok* film maker. His physical presence and his voice have played a very important role in shaping his persona as an 'alternative' filmmaker. I would like to use quotations from Kaustav's blog to point out how an AIR interview of Ghosh could generate interest and create the image of a 'sensitive' film maker

...my enthusiasm for *Unishe April* was triggered off by an interview of Rituparno Ghosh that was aired on HMV-FM. Listening to Ghosh, I discovered I had never heard a man speak so sensitively or even for that matter so informally in a public space. Ghosh's mild voice, his effeminate accents, punctuated remarkably the thoughts he shared. I found myself meeting a very different man. He was not like the other filmmakers. I had heard Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen before, and was awed by their wisdom. But I never struck a chord with them. Rituparno's emotionally charged talk (not verging on the sentimental, mind you) almost seduced me into admiring him.¹¹²

If just an FM interview could generate that amount of curiosity regarding a new director and his film, we can imagine the impact of a regular weekend show *Ebong Rituparno*¹¹³ that lasted for two to three years. This idea of "meeting a very different man" was being extended in each show where Ghosh talked with guests from various fields- from senior film maker Mrinal Sen to the former captain of the Indian cricket team, Saurav Ganguly, from newcomer actress like Sudipta Chakraborty to veteran theater personality Chapal Bhaduri. The show structure was not typical of celebrity interviews since the host was no less well known than the invitee. Ghosh talked about his likes and dislikes, preferences and memories and reacted to what the guests said¹¹⁴. The show was famous for Ghosh's informal interaction with his guests, the way he showed respect and care for someone like Mrinal Sen, and how he treated his juniors in film industry with love and affection.

¹¹² Kaustav's Arden, Op. cit.

¹¹³ It was telecasted on Saturday and Sunday evenings regularly.

¹¹⁴ Like in a particular episode when Aparna Sen was invited, Ghosh shared his own childhood memory of watching an Uttam Kumar Aparna Sen film *Jay Jayanti*, and how he convinced his aunt to take him for this movie.

Generally, the two episode long conversation took the shape of a middleclass *adda* in a kind of informal drawing room chat session.

The other interesting dimension of this programme was its mise-en-scene; the arty décor, well lit room, designer show pieces, and a book case with well organized books all of which taken together conveyed the impression of the primary mise-en-scene of a Ghosh film. The decorated drawing room filled up with conversation voices could easily remind anyone of a scene from *Unishe April* or *Asukh*. This space associated Ghosh with his 'type' of films even beyond those film texts. This programme also established Ghosh as carrying on the legacy of the glorious Bengali film past. It also established his persona with a 'difference' in his style, the way he dressed or spoke. In the last four or five years however with the emergence of other discursive domains on the internet, Bengali music and news television and the press' increased interest in the Bengali film industry, this figure and persona of Ghosh has received more exposure than ever. I would like to quote an excerpt from an Orkut community forum discussion on Rituparno Ghosh's 'new look':

I admire him because he is not a hypocrite... he has enough guts to present himself the way he wants to ... and he really looks good in those junk jewellerys and designer attires... he carries himself pretty well... he has made his own signature by nullifying the so called male 'ism'... I simply adore him... I wish I could marry him... I'm serious.¹¹⁵

Then someone answered this post as

... (H)is present look is horrible, he behaves more feminine than even women do. As far as styling and make up is concerned, he should keep in mind that he is ageing and any and every experiment does not suit him any more, rather makes him look bizarre.¹¹⁶

I could illustrate this section adding how his turban, leather jacket, Yogi pants, pearl choker were brought into this discussion later by other members to suggest what suited their favorite filmmaker and what did not from their point of view. But my point is to take notice of how the interest and conversation regarding Rituparno Ghosh often exceeded the film texts he worked on. Along with his 'relationship films', a star persona

¹¹⁵ Link; <http://www.orkut.co.in/Main#CommMsgs?cmm=25825635&tid=2537633778527773292&na=4&nst=1&nid=25825635-2537633778527773292-5323666123176041414>. Access date 18th May, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

was also born in the public sphere at the center of the imagination of the post 1990s *bhadralok* cinema. It was unusual in Bengali cinema to generate that much interest regarding a film maker even when he was not making any films but was simply 'present' with his looks, style and charisma. In this aspect I consider Rituparno Ghosh to be the single star director of Bengali cinema. Sean Redmond and Su Holmes see stars as 'housing' our dreams and fueling our fantasies and this holds true for Ghosh's stardom as well; "they address and represent (often implicitly) some of the most important political issues of the day, and they can give us both ephemeral and lasting pleasure, even if, in the end, this is a pleasure built on artifice and the lie of the possible"¹¹⁷. For Aparna Sen, a similar interest could be observed in the public sphere, but Aparna Sen's almost three decades long successful acting career has a different logic of popularity and celebrity discourse.

The curious case of Ghosh's stardom as I've mentioned before lies in the intersecting axis of making a difference and carrying a chord of past-ness and nostalgia. The assurance of the 'difference' and the superiority from the vulgarity of mass market gave the post 1990s *bhadralok* cinema a place much valued and appreciated within the *bhadra* public sphere. Ghosh being a star director of these films secured his alignment in the *bhadralok* 'parallel' with a similar logic of difference and strategic media influences. In the crisis narrative of Bengali cinema a need was already constructed for some one who would carry the 'legacy' of good taste and of the glorious past and also one who would be influential in reclaiming the *bhadralok* narrative cinema and could circulate his/her 'difference'. Rituparno Ghosh's star discourse not only filled this cultural need of a class but also extended it in multiple dimensions and chain of desires. Rituparno Ghosh's physical presence in the media shaped the idea of a chatty, informal, sensitive film maker of Bengali cinema who is also educated, suave and eloquent.

But there is another aspect of this star persona. On the one hand with the emergence of newer media, increasing number of Bengali television channels, press' increased focus on Tollywood 'news', accessibility of Youtube interviews, blogs and

¹¹⁷ See Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (Sage Publication, 2007) p. 11.

social networking sites the persona of Rituparno Ghosh gained a wider popularity. On the other hand the mimicry of the specificity of Rituparno Ghosh's way of talking served in television shows and even in some advertisements for comic relief and became extremely popular. Especially a popular stand up comedy show *Mirakkel* (Zee Bangla) and another programme hosted by well known anchor of Bengali television Mir, made fun of this star persona and his mannerisms. This mimicry of Ghosh's 'effeminate' gestures and his distinct voice quality does not necessarily always appreciate the 'difference' of a personality, but generates a sexist pleasure that is widely present in the conservative *bhadralok* gender sensibility. Thus one can see that there are contradictions in Ghosh's star discourses. The appeal of Ghosh's stardom does not only lie in the simplistic acceptance of the 'difference', but in the plurality of its meaning making in the public sphere.

Conclusion:

This chapter has been a brief attempt to map the extra filmic texts produced by the discourse of the post 1990s Bengali 'parallel' cinema which I do think work as more than just an 'excess' in *bhadralok* film going culture. There are other aspects and areas such as television telecasts, awards, recognitions, DVD features that one could also include in this discussion. For instance in DVD shops in Kolkata, separate racks and shelves are maintained for contemporary mainstream and 'parallel' Bengali films. A recent award show organized by the Bengali television channel *Star Jalsa* maintained this 'difference' in a strange way, giving awards to mainstream and parallel Bengali films in separate categories, like best film/ best innovative film, best hero/ best actor etc. These approaches and their strategies did not always result in a wholeness of narrative but reveals the contradictions in the cultural and media worlds. My approach here has been to try and read these contradictions.

The logic of publicity for this parallel cinema and their parallel-ness faces a dilemma when corporate house involvement like that of *Venkatesh films* tries to target these films to a larger mass. Later films like Anjan Dutta's *Bong Connection* (2007) or

Sudeshna Roy, Abhiji Guha's *Cross Connection* (2009) followed a publicity language that was distanced from the dramatic model of the mainstream, but was also not close to the literary Bengali used in publicizing the parallel-ness of certain films. Ghosh's star discourse on the other hand, as I've tried to argue, is engaged with the plurality of its appeal. Thus my effort to study the extra filmic texts and their multiple dimensions does not lead to a closed study of these materials. I believe that further studies would be able to present different and more constructive arguments regarding these that I am unable to reach at this point in my approach and methodology. Therefore, as a concluding note, I would like to end my chapter keeping it open ended for further discussions and possibilities of research.

Conclusion

This dissertation is an attempt to read some features of the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' cinema with a focus on its nostalgia discourse. And at the same time I have questioned this very category 'parallel' as not something that is pre-given, and have tried to problematize the nostalgia discourse in its constructed-ness within its context. I have tried to interrogate the term 'parallel' in the post liberalization Bengali cinematic context, and have attempted to argue that this parallel-ness was formed because of its differentiating strategy from the mainstream and its imagined continuation of the earlier Bengali cinematic tradition. And hence I have tried to demonstrate how this cinema is formed in an intersecting plane of the idea of 'continuation' and the strategy of 'difference'. The strategy of 'difference' worked not only in terms of the film texts' conscious use of aesthetic devices and thematic content, but also in its exhibition logic, its publicity texts, its promotional strategies and even in the idea of the star director of this film culture, Rituparno Ghosh. Ghosh embodies this idea of 'different' Bengali cinema being a 'different' film maker who embodies the difference that is central to his star-director persona and to the appeal of his films. On the other hand, he and his films and the post 1990s 'parallel' stream were imagined as a continuation of the tradition of the 'good' Bengali films of the past, especially of the 1950s and the 1960s. And hence this dissertation engages with the question of the memory of 'good' old Bengali films with respect to which this 'parallel' stream was imagined. And in my dissertation I have tried to explore how the *bhadralok* memory of 'good'/ *bhadralok* cinema acted in shaping the post liberalization Bengali 'parallel' stream on different levels and in different registers. In the first chapter, I have attempted to map how the 'memory' of earlier Bengali films and the idea of the dissatisfied *bhadralok* audience of the contemporary acted through the narrative of reclamation in terms of the production-distribution-exhibition set up, and I see this as a departure from the earlier Bengali 'parallel'/ 'art house' cinema tradition. In my second chapter I have tried to problematize further this question of nostalgia and past-ness in terms of some film texts and their narrativization techniques and style. In the last chapter I have been concerned with the

extra filmic texts of this film culture with a particular emphasis on their constructions of parallel-ness, in its logic of continuation and difference.

Drawing clues from the theorists of memory studies, my dissertation did not see the 'memory of old Bengali films' as something fixed, available for memorializing in the post liberalization 'parallel' stream, but there to reread, rewrite, construct, develop, select and order. The question I have raised in my dissertation is: to whom does this memory belong? If the *bhadralok* is the obvious answer to this question, then how do we define the relationality between *bhadralok* cinema and *bhadralok* memory? The question that I wanted to raise further is that whether this memorializing when institutionalized in different sectors, rather than working as a class construction also produces the class that it belongs to. Similarly, if the memory of *bhadralok* cinema gave birth to the discourse of post liberalization *bhadralok* films, then whether or not these films themselves and the discourse generated around them took part in constructing the memory of the *bhadralok* cinematic past. The whole question of memorializing becomes complicated when it is located on the plane of Bengali cinema's history writing discourses. Because, in my observation, the 1990s is also the period when different public sectors became engaged with Bengali cinema's history writing practice. And in most of these narratives, the 'glorious' previous decades of Bengali cinema were established against the 'crisis' of the contemporary. From a crisis ridden present the 'glorious' past was historicized. It is interesting to observe that when this history was being 'made', the 'parallel' Bengali cinema imagined itself as a 'continuation' of the earlier good Bengali films and indulged in different kinds of nostalgia narratives and cinematic memorializing. One instance is the connection between the lamentation for the 'ideal' *bhadralok* self in Bengal's public sphere discourse and the cinema of generational conflict that came into practice in the later period. But largely, the post liberalization *bhadralok* cinema approaches and appropriates this nostalgia in cinematic form and expresses it in indirect ways and symptomatically. The flashback being a favorite narrational strategy of these films, forms a past-ness in these films and acts as both its appeal and its politics. In these narratives of relationship anxiety, past-ness is generated again and again in narrative form and content.

and it provides the *bhadralok* pleasure of the romanticism of the past and the 'inability' to approach the idea of the present or the contemporary.

With my reading of a limited number of film texts, some production histories and some observations regarding the logic of publicity and reception, I can not possibly claim to speak of the entire film production system of the Bengali film industry in the above mentioned period. Neither have I claimed that this nostalgia mode and the narrative of 'reclamation' is the only trope through which this film culture can be read. There must be other approaches from which interventions can be made. My method of interrogating this field and seeing it as a nostalgic film practice hence does not lead to a closed reading of this film practice, and I see that it must be open to further studies and queries. Here one might also observe that the mode of nostalgia that I am talking about can be found in other periods, in some other forms as well. Here I will state that I do not see these features as complete transformations or totally new. I would rather suggest that the shifts between two periods might not always involve complete changes of texts or practices, but might actually be reformulations or restructurings of certain features that did pre exist. It is through this logic that I periodize the body of films and the whole film practice. My point is not to discover something 'new' in this decade of Bengali film practice; rather it is how certain given features were being organized as dominant from marginal positions. I have explored how certain features and different concerns with no pre existing coherence have formed this film culture and also produced tensions within it.

And yet it is also true that the parallel cinema discourse did not sustain itself beyond a point of time, at least in the way it was designed or its discourse of parallel-ness was developed. The idea and the need of the 'parallel' that was imagined and came into being in the late 1980s, was based on a 'crisis narrative' of the *bhadra* public sphere as I've discussed earlier in this dissertation. Whatever the reasons may be, in the last two/ three years, public sphere discussions of Bengali cinema have moved from the 'crisis narrative' towards the 'celebration' of Bengali films. And in this celebratory narrative, the news of the recognition of Bengali art house films on national/ international platforms is shared along with the record breaking hits of 'mainstream' block busters like *MLA*

Fatakesto or some other films. It is too early to conclude if this is just a change in the approach of the Bengali public sphere towards the mainstream, or the nature of public sphere discourse itself is transforming. And the question that Moinak Biswas has asked in his essay regarding the broader context is relevant to mention here. Biswas, observing changes in certain aspects of Bengali cultural life in recent times has asked, “does that *bhadra* circle exist in the same form?”¹ He observes the dominance of a certain kind of entertainment and cultural form (for instance in song, dance and comic performances on television) which could not have been thought of a few years back in the Bengali public context.²

In the case of Bengali cinema, the *bhadra* nostalgia discourse also started functioning differently with new directors. A film like *Madly Bangali* (2009) by Anjan Dutta that narrates the nostalgia story of a Bengali band and its dissolution, adopts a style that does not quite follow the past-ness logic of parallel cinema, but refers to the present moment in youth culture in multiple registers.³ Another film like *Autograph* (Shrijit Mukharjee, 2010) starts narrating the story of a director who wants to remake Satyajit Ray’s *Nayak* and ends up as a story of a film star Arun Chatterjee (Prasenjit Chatterjee), almost playing himself in it. *Autograph*, in a way, starts with thematic and visual references to nostalgia icons like Satyajit Ray and Uttam Kumar, and appropriates the star actor Prasenjeet who was criticized and denounced earlier as a star for ‘lower class’ Bengali film in a discourse of urban sensation and youth culture.

With an increase in the average budget for a Bengali film and an increase in the number of Bengali films released per year in recent years, the media focuses on the growing market possibilities of Bengali films that includes regular slots given to Bengali films at multiplexes outside of Bengal, or the formation of *Databazar Media Venture* which facilitates the global circulation of Bengali films. The interventions of new technology, corporate house investments, and digital film making practices have a role in

¹ See Moinak Biswas, “Changing Scenes,” *Sarai Reader*- 08: Fear, p. 203.

² Biswas wrote “Not only the ceding of verbal ground, but an attendant physical idiom, flying in the face of *bhadralok* taste, is receiving a ‘performative sanction from the family on screen,” p. 204.

³ Like it appropriates the euphoria of Bengali band culture in its promos, publicity posters, used a “quasi English Bengali language”(Biswas, Op. cit, p-205) etc.

the changing scenario of Bengali cinema accompanied by a change in film discourses in the contemporary moment. Even *Nandan* has changed with its regular release of mainstream *Bollywood* films; and so has the imagination of the 'quality' of the film crowd earlier associated with it. Other significant changes that have come into the market since 2007/08 is that the rural belt has lost its importance remarkably as the major basis of the Bengali film market. The same rural belt and its mass audience imagined as habituated to folk entertainment that caused the 'rupture' in imagining the target audience during the industrial crisis in the late 1970s and 1980s has become less important in film promotions, publicity and advertisements in the contemporary moment. That's why Swapan Saha asserts that his 'kind of films' can not cope with the present market and the big budget approach of the contemporary.⁴ He admits that his era is almost over and that he has not had much work since the last two/ three years. The other end of the story is that production houses like Venkatesh Films popularly known for their Bengali commercial films have increasingly engaged with the niche film market and the alternative film-makers. Post *Chokher Bali* they have taken interest in the 'parallel' stream and produced films like Shrijit Mukharjee's *Autograph* (2010), Sanjay Nag's *Memories in March* (2011) or the very recent Aparna Sen film *Iti Mrinalini/ Yours Mrinalini* (2011) designed for the urban audience of Bengali films. A film maker like Haranath Chakraborty has recently made a film *Chalo Paltai* (Let's transform/ 2011) with a narrative style and a publicity logic that goes against his image of the successful 'jatra type' commercial Bengali film maker of the earlier period. That does not mean that the mainstream song and dance formula film has taken a backseat at the box office; nor that 'parallel' middle class relationship stories are no more treated as something of high quality in the public sphere. The thing is that the idea of the parallel and the binary that it formed with the mainstream does not work in a similar fashion anymore. How these changes are restructuring the 'parallel' discourse of Bengali cinema in the present scenario is a different issue to discuss and not within the scope of this dissertation. This dissertation is just an attempt to map the emergence of a 'parallel' film culture in the Bengali film industry during the 1990s that was sustained for more than a decade aligning

⁴ Author's interview with Swapan Saha, 15th December, 2010.

itself with the moment of the memorializing of Bengali cinema and the writing of a Bengali film history.

Filmography

- Abār Aranye* (Goutam Ghosh, 2003)
- Abohomaan* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2010)
- Antaheen* (Aniruddha Roychowdhury, 2009)
- Antarmahal* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2005)
- Anuranan* (Aniruddha Roychowdhury, 2007)
- Asukh* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1999)
- Autograph* (Shrijit Mukherjee, 2011)
- Ballygunge Court* (Pinaki Chaudhury, 2007)
- Bariwali* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1999)
- Bhalo Theko* (Gautam Halder, 2003)
- Byatikromi* (Ashok Viswanathan, 2006)
- Chokher Bali* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2003)
- Chha E Chhuti* (Aniket Chattopadhyay, 2009)
- Dahan* (Rituparno Ghosh, 1997)
- Dosar* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2006)
- Dekha* (Gautam Ghosh, 2001)
- Dwitiyo Basanta* (Abhijit Dasgupta, 2005)
- Ek Je Achhe Kanya* (Subrata Sen, 2001)
- Ekti Tarar Khnoje* (Avik Mukhopadhyay, 2010)
- Faltu* (Anjan Das, 2005)
- Hathat Nirar Janye* (Subrata Sen, 2004)
- Hemanter Pakhi* (Urmi Chakraborty, 2003)

Herbert (Suman Mukhopadhyay, 2006)
Hirer Angti (Rituparno Ghosh, 1992)
Iti Shrikanta (Anjan Das, 2004)
Jara Bristite Vijechnilo (Anjan Das, 2007)
Kaalpurush (Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 2008)
Khela (Rituparno Ghosh, 2008)
Laal Darja (Buddhadeb Dasgupta, 1997)
Mon Amour (Shubhajit Mitra, 2008)
Madly Bangali (Anjan Dutta, 2009)
Noukadubi (Rituparno Ghosh, 2011)
Paromitar Ekdin (Aparna Sen, 2000)
Prahar (Shubhadro Chowdhury, 2004)
Shob Charitro Kalpanik (Rituparno Ghosh, 2009)
Shubho Mahurat (Rituparno Ghosh, 2002)
Shukno Lanka (Gaurab Pandey, 2010)
Shanjhbaatir Rupkathara (Anjan Das, 2002)
Teesta (Bratya Basu, 2005)
The Japanese Wife (Aparna Sen, 2010)
Titli (Rituparno Ghosh, 2002)
Unishe April (Rituparno-Ghosh, 1996)
Utsab (Rituparno Ghosh, 2000)
Warish (Kaushik Ganguly, 2004)
Yugant (Aparna Sen, 1996)

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