

The Politics Around ‘B-Grade’ Cinema in Bengal: Re-viewing popular Bengali film culture in the 1980s–1990s

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Abstract. The 1980–90s was a turbulent period for the Bengali cinema, the events being triggered by a series of industrial problems, the anxiety of a new film public and the pressing necessity for newer forms of articulation. During this time, Bengali popular cinema responded with newer genres of narratives (elaborated later) that emerged from dissimilar aesthetic positions and different social perspectives. But it is unfortunate that instead of engaging with this diverse range of film making practices, the journalistic and academic discourses on the 1980–90s Bengali cinema present only the ‘crisis-ridden’ scenarios of the Bengali film industry—suffering from multiple problems. Interestingly, this marginalized and unacknowledged cinema of the 1980–90s almost became synonymous to the concept of the ‘B-grade’ cinema, although it is not similar in formation, circulation and reception like the other established B-circuit or B-grade cinemas across the world. This paper aims to criticize this simpler ‘crisis narrative’ scenario by looking at the categories of class and audience and questioning the relevance of issues related to the popularity of these films. In brief, our article aims to problematize the notion of what is ‘B-grade’ cinema in the context of the Bengali cinema of the 1980–90s and by referring to this film culture, it tries to open up some other possibilities to which this notion can refer.

Contextualizing 1980s:

Politics around distribution and exhibition of Bengali films

In the 1980s Bengali cinema was at a crossroads—ridden with the anxiety of industrial uncertainty, the possibility of a new filmic culture, and the pressing necessity for newer forms of articulation. The 1980s is a juncture in Bengali film history when a large section of the audience welcomed the new melodramas of Sukhen Das, Anjan Chowdhury or Bireshwar Chatterjee while a section of the urban intelligentsia maintained its distance from this emerging mainstream model; the

new Leftist Government¹ showed its interest to develop a 'healthy' film culture with autonomous bodies like the West Bengal Film Development Corporation, and the government sponsored Nandan Film and Cultural Centre also came up with a law for the resurgence of Bengali cinema and the industry. On 25 June 1981, The Calcutta Information Centre organized a meeting for the first time with the re-established Film Development Board that was attended by twenty-seven of the forty registered members. Vice-chairman Buddhadev Bhattacharya mentioned in his speech that,

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

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

The Board approved the State Government's stand regarding compulsory screening of West Bengal Films in cinema houses within West Bengal for a period of 12 weeks in a year. The Board has further requested the state Government to explore if such compulsory screening can be made a condition of license granted to the show houses. (Bureau 1981, 41)

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

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

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

And this came as a shock to most hall owners. The news created a tremor in the Tollygunge studios, the Dharmtala area of distributors' offices and especially among cinema house owners who ran Hindi or English films 365 days in a year. Simultaneously, several cinema halls were short-listed by the Calcutta Municipal

¹ In West Bengal the Left front came to the power in 1977 state election.

Corporation and a notice was issued (to them) to immediately amend the hall in order to keep their licenses intact, as the maintenance standards of these halls were below quality. Cinema theatre owners had earlier avoided the compulsory conversion to air-conditioning on the grounds of frequent power cuts, and frequent increases in rent, hiring or booking charges (Bureau 1981, 43).

On average in a year, these five chains would run new Hindi films for nine months and show old Bengali films for the remaining time. Though thirty new films were released in a year, there would always be more than ten films at a time that had also been certified, but not eligible for theatrical release due to the lack of cinema halls. The main problem for Bengali films was the large number of Hindi films that were released and those distributors (who exclusively distributed Hindi films) booked cinema houses and chains and paid hefty advance amounts to hall owners, who were then contract-bound to show only Hindi films. For instance, halls like Basushree-Bina-Darpana and Priya, which earlier showed Bengali films, now chose only Hindi films for the years 1981 to 1983 and several others followed this trend. This was a matter of concern because the regulation the government wanted to impose demanded at least seventy five feature films to be produced in a year in Tollygunge (Bureau 1981, 44). In 1981, West Bengal had 350 permanent cinema halls and roughly another 210 exhibition sites that were temporary. In order to meet the demands of the cinema halls, more films needed to be released. However, Tollygunge's condition at the time did not permit the production of so many films. The lack of actors, technicians, efficient producers and committed directors was a major drawback, alongside the poor and deteriorating condition of the studios. Though the prices of tickets had been reduced to one rupee, only hall owners who had a hit Bengali film running would make a profit (Bureau 1981, 44).

The reduced ticket price policy also affected new releases, because even old films were being run simultaneously for a one rupee ticket; this was another source of competition for the newly released Bengali films. These films, which had already earned huge profits, were again giving extra returns to the hall owners—but in this extra profit, producers or distributors received no share. Therefore, distributors made up for this loss by gaining greater control over the rural sector. On the one hand, they took a major portion of the profit from small hall owners in rural areas, and in return they gave them new releases (Bureau 1981, 43).

On the other hand, distributors and hall owners were stuck on the issue of how they would run Bengali films in areas where the audience was mostly non-Bengali. They would incur huge losses if they had to run Bengali films for twelve weeks in these areas. In such a situation, the government's intervention with the compulsory rule of screening Bengali films for twelve weeks further complicated the situation.

Moreover since the government had incurred huge losses by dropping the ticket price to one rupee as well as financing several feature films that both the audience and exhibitors had refused to acknowledge, the scenario for Bengali filmmakers, distributors, producers and hall owners became acutely tricky and challenging (Bureau 1981, 43, 44).

1980 was also a turbulent year for the Tollygunge industry, which was triggered by a prolonged strike during September and October by the Bengal Motion Pictures' Employees Union, who demanded an increase in the payment structure and bonus benefits as well as the subsequent lock-out by the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association. 98% of the approximately 400 cinema halls in West Bengal were shut down. Hall owners could not meet the demand for a hike in the bonus and salaries of employees. They argued that they had to pay 125% of the ticket price as Entertainment Tax to the Government so they barely earned enough to pay their employees. The strike and lock-out caused an estimated loss of Rs. 10 to 12 lakhs per day to the industry and Rs. 15 lakhs to the Government. This deeply affected the regular cinema-goers, especially the audiences for Bengali cinema. The death of super-star Uttam Kumar in 1980 and the gradual weakening of the Bengali cinema industry created a detachment in the minds of the audiences, making the film cultural scenario very dismal.

***Bhadralok* discourses around film culture in Bengal in the 1980–90s**

Calcutta as a metropolitan city was also changing—culturally, socially and politically—in the mid-1980s when the *bhadralok* Bengali middle class was familiarizing itself with television sets at home—which gave people the privilege of watching films in the comfort of their households. The VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) was also making its entry into the urban dwellings/ city dwellers' rooms that enabled people to watch films of their choice at their discretion, conveniently avoiding the drawbacks of the overall experience of going to the cinema theatres.

Producers and distributors, especially from the 1970s, were anxiously searching for a formula that could reclaim the praise and the dedicated viewership, which they had enjoyed in the past. Actor-director Sukhen Das started making films that made way for the new genre and aesthetic that Anjan Chowdhury's *Shatru* (1984) later robustly embodied. Some box-office hits of Sukhen Das were *Nayan* (1977), *Singhaduar* (1978), *Maan Abhiman* (1978), *Jibon Maran* (1983), *Milanti* (1985), *Achena Atithi* (1973), *Shunoyinee* (1979), *Rajnandini* (1980), *Pratishodh* (1981). A popular actor of the 1980s and 1990s, Tapas Pal (who acted in several films directed by Sukhen Das) said in an interview to *Anandalok* magazine that Sukhen Das was

like a *Gharana*—a school unto himself. Pal adds that the kind of films that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s by directors like Anjan Chowdhury was actually initiated by Sukhen Das. His films also dealt with social and contemporary issues. Most of his films had very successful musical tracks and songs. He was a pioneer in bringing talent in from Bombay—whenever the film needed some. Sukhen Das had a unique style of storytelling. He gave priority to the story, dialogue and drama as the most important aspects of his films. Moreover he made way for the voice of the suppressed to be heard and articulated through his films. But he was not free from criticism—some of his films were considered regressive, lacking in cinematic sense and high in melodrama similar to the *jatra* (Pal 2004, 16, 17).²

The 1980s Bengali cinema in general responded with newer, multiple genres of narratives and their popularity offered a gamut of trial and error methods across the film industry when a diverse range of Bengali films emerged in numerous genres and stylizations, as their makers and producers came from dissimilar backgrounds, diverse social and political positions and different perspectives. But it is unfortunate that instead of engaging in this diverse range of film making practice, the journalistic and academic discourses on the 1980s Bengali cinema present a bleak scenario of a film industry suffering from multiple crises. Beyond cinema and cinematic practice this is also a period when the elite class of Bengal was facing a crisis of their literary self and the specific term 'aposanskriti'³ (bad-culture) came into parlance (largely to indicate the emerging culture of the newly privileged urban class and also the westernization of the younger generation who were allegedly distanced from their literary roots of Bengali culture). In the midst of this crisis and the anxiety of the Bengali literary

² Jatra (origin: Yatra meaning procession or journey in Sanskrit) is a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, which spread throughout most of Bengali speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Tripura. The typical characteristics of Jatra were to present high and excessive melodrama, loud acting, and stereotypical characters—especially that of villains—as well as tacky dialogues, hackneyed plots, trite dialogues and songs often with lewd or vulgar lyrics, etc. It is interesting to note that newspaper columns, public sphere discussions and part of the film industry called the new popular Bengali films not only 'bad' or 'derogatory' but also described them as an 'art form' that was more close to one wall theater (Jatra) or folk performance than film. Precisely that's why this lack of 'film sense' was talked about when these films were described.

³ These two terms 'sanskriti' ('culture') and 'apo-sanskriti' (bad culture) that appeared in the press and public sphere in the mid to late 1980s and in the early 1990s spread almost like wildfire and created fear and anxiety regarding a certain kind of 'crisis', 'decay' and the degradation of (Bengali) film culture, and was also instrumental in constructing a nostalgia for an 'ideal' culture. The division of what used to be '*sustha*' (healthy) Bengali culture in earlier days and what it had become became a point of great concern in different sectors of public sphere discussions. 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, and reader's letters and editorials.

self of the *bhadralok* class, film makers like Anjan Choudhury, Swapan Saha, and others continued with their newer forms of melodrama. While being popular, these films earned widespread criticism from a part of the urban intelligentsia for the ‘vulgarity’ and ‘crudity’ of their narrative model. Popular newspapers and magazines published letters of dissatisfied Bengali film audiences and saw them as markers of the ‘crisis narrative’ of the Bengali Cinema. These critical perspectives of the Bengali intelligentsia (but not necessarily the industrial formulation, production or distribution circuit) relegated this other form of popular cinema to the ‘B-grade’ cinema status of the Bengali film history. The term ‘B-grade’ here is not applicable in terms of its production logic (or for that matter of legal discourse) but as a result of a section of urban intelligentsia’s discourse of culture, where they considered this cinema as a complete misfit.

To recognize this criteria of the ‘misfit’ in Bengali film history we have to briefly mention the cultural dominance of a particular (*bhadralok*) class in Bengal and its relation to Bengali cinema.⁴ The question of *bhadralok* taste and *bhadralok* film culture is central to the narrative of crisis in the 1980s. ‘*Bhadralok*’ literally meaning ‘gentle folk’ in the 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.⁵ In the Bengali film industry, however, this *bhadralok* presence gained significance in the 1930s with the remarkable success of the New Theatres that continued in the later decades of the Uttam-Suchitra⁶ era. Sharmistha Gooptu has tried to explain

⁴ For this brief narrative of *bhadralok* history in the following lines we drew from Tithi Bhattacharya, Sumit Sarkar, and Aseema Sinha.

⁵ 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, and later survived 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 *Bhadralok*’ (Bhattacharya 2005). See also Sarkar 1997, Sinha 2005.

⁶ ‘The era of ‘Uttam-Suchitra’, the mid 1950s through the 1960s, is commonly designated as the ‘golden period’ of Bengali cinema, and has been written and reminisced about pervasively. During these years Bengali directors were able to produce a genre of film melodrama that became integral to a Bengali sense of self. Identification was rooted in the figures of an idealized female and an idealistic and ethical male, embodied respectively by Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, and their romantic love became the stuff of intense emotional identification among Bengalis of the post-independence generation. The same prototypes were common in films of that era which did not actually feature

the narrative of *bhadralok* cultural dominance in the 1930s Bengali cinema in an article where she 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' (Gooptu 2003, 2413).

In *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Gooptu sees how the New Theatres' success led to a Bengali *bhadralok* cinema supported by its close connections with Bengali literature, the literati and the discourse of Bengali culture (Gooptu 2010). What she calls the 'perfect marriage of economics and respectability' (Gooptu 2003, 2413). 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. And in the 1980s the popular cinema model knowingly/ unknowingly causes a 'discontinuity' from that discourse. Therefore these popular films of the 1980s are seen as emerging from an oppositional plane of the 'realistic' mode of Bengali cinema of the earlier decades and its mode of address—and were criticized for remaking popular Bombay cinema. And along with this a discourse was formed that described 'it (Bengali cinema) has never been as bad as this'. This is strange since Anjan Choudhury and Swapan Saha responded to the social crisis that was evident in many other contemporary cultural events of that time and in other mediums of artistic expressions. Their films speak through symptoms, which demand a proper interpretation and not a direct literal meaning of what is expressed on the screen. The Manichaeian schema of opposition and 'the logic of the excluded middle' that Peter Brook theorized (Brook 1983) are translated into the problems of contemporary Bengali society through a series of metaphors. This aspect is largely ignored in the critical discourse; especially, the resurgence of the family melodrama in a body of films of this period, which to a great extent has its roots in the contemporary social and cultural crisis of West Bengal and borrowed its form and narrative content from Bengali folklore to the teleserial⁷ and its drama of middle-class domesticity. So interpretation of these film texts and the film culture, only in terms of copy-paste jobs from the Bombay cinema, would be a mistake. What Brook and Elsaesser said about melodrama and its formal characteristics with a crisis of expression holds true for this new Bengali film melodrama in which very often,

Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen together, and it has been suggested that 'Uttam-Suchitra ... be used as a sign'. See Biswas 2000, 122 for the broader genre of the 1950s and 1960s popular melodrama. Also see Gooptu 2010, 157.

⁷ Teleserial became an important influence bringing in domestic space and social conflict in the narrative logic of these films. For instance teleserials like *Humlog* and *Buniyaad* followed by *Rajni*, *Basanti* and *Nukkad* on national television established a pattern of familial dramas of domesticity that might be seen as a possible template for these films. Regional Bengali television as well responded with popular teleserials like *Janani* and *Janmabhumi* in the early 1990s which engaged with the narrative of crisis of filial bond and disrespect to the mother.

language became inadequate to express the subject matter (Elsaesser 1987, 70–2). It is interesting here to study the plot of a popular film *Baba Kano Chakor* (dir. Swapan Saha, 1998), which told the story of the ups and downs in the life of a Bengali middle class extended family and the central theme was the disrespect shown to the parents by the elder son and his wife. In this film the elder son borrowed money from his father that he had saved for his daughter's marriage and when the father needed it the son did not pay him back. The elder son eventually succeeds in his business while the educated younger son cannot get any job and is compelled to work as a driver. The rest of the narrative engaged with the humiliation of the parents by the elder son and his wife and how the father literally became a servant in his elder son's family. At the climax when the family needed the money to pay the medical bill of the mother, the elder son, instead of helping his father, invested in luxury for their nuclear family dream. But after his mother's death the son realized his selfishness and the father forgave him. The family reunited again.

The contradictions between the 'old' familial value system and values of the emerging life-style became one of the primary concerns of this narrative model. Along with it these films present a strong rejection of the possibility of nuclear family space and the life-style associated with it. New modern spaces like birthday parties, bars, pubs, etc, were seen as evil spaces, which destroyed traditional womanhood, familial ties and moral values. Issues concerned with generational drama, sibling rivalry and disrespect towards the elder members became repetitive in these melodramas—where the family also emerged as a space that would finally resolve the crisis and erase the source of evil.

Words and language played a central role in these films since they reflected the fascination and fear, trouble and trauma of an imagined crowd and developed a mode of language of 'unarticulated emotions and incommunicable ideas' (McLean 1965). Noted film journalists in Bengali and English newspapers did not hide their feelings of discomfort while listening to this unidentifiable, 'rowdy' Bengali in their review columns. This is possibly the reason why many film journalists of this period did not consider these films as Bengali films at all and described the Bengali film star Prasenjeet (who has acted in many of these films) as a Hindi film star. If on the one hand, filmmaker Haranath Chakraborty saw it as a part of their project to speak in a simple, colloquial Bangla dialogue addressing the common Bengali mass and that there was nothing 'unconventional' or 'unusual' in using that language; on the other hand, journalists in their columns felt that this language was a conscious 'rejection' of the *bhadra* cultural code. For instance, in a personal interview with veteran film journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta who discussed naming strategies of these films and cites this particular film, *Baba Keno Chakor*, as an interesting example. According to

her, instead of a direct and crude approach, the film could go for some title like 'pitar asamman' (Disrespect to the father) that would not hamper the sense of the theme that the film wanted to convey and the film would also have a 'presentable' name that was suitable for the *bhadra* tongue. But the makers did not use that name deliberately because they wanted to express that rejection of the *bhadra* cultural code and any kind of *bhadrata* in their populist strategy. However, close observation reveals that it is not about 'rejecting' an established (*bhadra*) culture or challenging the hegemony of a (*bhadralok*) class but of a certain claim over a culture that was being denied. Here we must remember that in being and becoming 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. Therefore, a problem arises if we completely ignore the slipperiness of this term while using it in historical writing. The 1980–90s is a period that offers heterogeneous tendencies of the term and also the possibilities of the plurality to which this term can refer in the context Bengali society and its cinema.

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 (Sarkar 1997, 169). This idea of *bhadralok* self-perception is useful for not only understanding the 'break' in the cinematic practice of the 1980s but also the dominant history writing mode of Bengali cinema. 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 the *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 of 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 us that this is a question that can be debated over endlessly without finding a final answer. Hence, here we would like to consider the question of a belief system and its dominance in structuring a cultural history that perhaps led to a 'break' in the *bhadralok* film history through the emergence and popularity of a certain kind of Bengali film of the 1980s, which further subsequently caused a rupture in Bengali cinema—in this period and the decades that followed.

The recurrent genre of popular Bengali films in 1980–90s

Within the diverse range of films in the 1980–90s there were four major tropes of film narratives that can be found repetitively: first, the narrative centring around the figure of the honest police hero fighting against the corrupt social and political system, which reflected the contemporary times of the 1980s' Bengal; second, the adaptation

of popular Bengali folklore, primarily revolving around the mythical tales of the snake goddess; third, domestic melodrama concentrating on the issues of daughter-in-laws and mother-in-laws; and fourth, action narratives centring on issues of illegitimacy and class. It is also important to note that there were instances where these tropes had overlapping tendencies in the narratives of a few films. In 1984 a young script writer Anjan Chowdhury made a significant entry into the industry quite drastically shifting from the earlier tradition of Bengali cinema with his directorial debut, *Shatru*, where he introduces the policeman as the hero or protagonist of the film, repeatedly played by Ranjit Mullick. In *Shatru*, Mullick's character was that of a noble, honest and dutiful police officer of a suburban village Haridevpur, who fights corrupt politicians and business goons to bring peace and social justice. Here it is perhaps important to note that the protagonist's figure can be identified with the angry-young-man image of Amitabh Bachchan in Hindi cinema, popular throughout the 1970s. *Shatru* had a mixed ensemble cast with a corrupt MLA played by Manoj Mitra, whose son is a rogue, troubling and ever-teasing the village school master's college-going daughter. There were other characters—a comic and corrupt police sub-inspector played by Anup Kumar and the figure of a local businessman dealing in illegal country liquor. The film had fight sequences, theatrical comedy and heavy melodramatic dialogues. *Shatru* ran successfully in city halls like Radha-Purabi-Ujjwala-Sri for seven weeks consecutively, mostly with 'house-full' boards. This situation of an overwhelming audience response was till then, associated with the so-called *bhadralok* cinemas of the 1950s, 1960s and to an extent the 1970s.

It is relevant here to discuss the film *Pratik* by Prabhat Roy (1988) based on a lumpen hero and his quest for a 'legitimate' identity in the *bhadra* circle of society. Pratik, the male protagonist of this film, grows up in a city slum and fights against the discrimination he and his mother experience in their lives. His mother works as a domestic helper and tolerates disrespect, embarrassment and the cruelty of society for giving birth to an 'illegitimate' son. The first part of the story engages with the crisis and humiliation the son and his mother face in their day-to-day lives. The word *Pratik-bejanma* (in Bengali Pratik, the bastard) is purposefully used in the film narrative to highlight the prejudiced Bengali society and its notion of legitimacy. Then the story moves in flashback to narrate the affair between Pratik's mother and a wealthy man. When she was young, a man came into her life and they fell in love with each other. When she became pregnant the man excused himself in the name of some urgent work, promised to come back but he never returned. The second half of the story tells of Pratik's search for his father and the final resolution. Apart from *Pratik* (1988), films like *Pratidaan* (1987) or *Ekanta Apan* (1987) narrated the struggle of *Rano-gunda* or *Pratik-bejanma* of Bosebagan or Panchanantala slums;

they also focused on these marginalized urban figures' desire to belong to a more legitimate *bhadra* circle of the society. Here lies the question of gaining/ not gaining acceptability and question of the legitimacy of belonging to an upward or respectable class.

Also, these new film narratives constantly try to portray this threatened existence of a class on the margins of society; their loss of hope and the everyday humiliation they had to face because they were not wealthy or could not afford 'the good life' in a society full of class inequality and injustice. In a film like *Chhhoto Bou* (1988), Anjan Chaudhury narrated the crisis of domesticity of a middle class Bengali family where the mother badly treated her elder son and his wife and the blind father witnessed this helplessly. The opportunist middle son and his ambitious and westernized wife were also a party to the mother's ill-treatment. The middle son and his wife were criticized and punished in this film since they posed a possible threat to the joint family structure with their plans to buy a flat and leave home. They also have a married sister who often visited her home and insulted the elder daughter-in-law. This situation changed drastically when the younger son married an orphan girl and he left town for work. The younger daughter-in-law resumed control of the family and restored its order by punishing the wrong-doers and giving respect to those who deserved it. Then the angry mother-in-law wrote to her younger son about her younger daughter-in-law, to which the son returned and after an exchange of several heightened melodramatic dialogues, the mother realized her fault and recognized those who really cared for her and the family. The film ends with the joint family reuniting. Anjan Chaudhury almost became an expert of the daughter-in-law series with films like *Mejo Bou*, *Baro Bou*, *Bourani* etc., which focused on the drama of domesticity between the elder, middle or younger daughters-in-laws of these films. Hence, with film after film we see this narrative plot of a joint family where its two sons get unequal treatment because they belong to two different income classes of the same society. The film texts formed their melodramatic trope—remembering these class equations in Bengal and the moral anger of a certain class.

Deviating from the dominant mode of the literary narrative, the fourth major trope borrowed its structure from the myth and folklore that are popular in the peripheries of the state of Bengal. *Beder Meye Josna* inspired by a popular 'jatra pala' narrative initiated this trend that almost acquired a cult status. This 1991 Bengali film directed by Motiur Rahman Panu was a remake of a popular Bangladeshi film. In Bengali language 'bede' denotes a gypsy community of snake charmers who make their living by entertaining people, selling medicinal herbs and jugglery. This film narrated a love story between a girl from a 'bede' community and a local prince. One day when the local prince was bitten by a snake, Josna, a girl from the 'bede' community was called

to cure him. The king requested Josna to cure his son and in exchange, promised Josna to give her anything she wants. Josna risked her life to cure the prince and when the prince recovered she fell in love with him. When the prince came to know about Josna he also fell in love with her. But the king objected to this since she belonged to the 'bede' community. However in the climax of the film it was revealed that Josna actually belonged to an upper caste family. The king finally agrees to get them married. Following *Beder Meye Josna*, Bengali cinema experienced a body of films that dealt with snake charmers, snake goddess, female figures that possessed special powers from the cult worshipping of snake etc. (in films like *Nagini Kanya*, *Nach Nagini Nach Re*, *Behula Lokhindor* and others). Also, there were films like *Pratirodh*, which narrated the love story of an honest police officer who fell for a girl, Lakshmi, who survived a snake bite and possessed special powers.

The period from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s was marked by new economic policies, new job sectors and the growth of the consumer culture—all of which merged and resulted in the idea of a 'new' middle class in India (Fernandes 2007, 29–35). If measured in terms of access to consumer goods, incomes and infrastructure, the Indian middle class grew by large numbers in the period and the definition of the new middle class was based on the ideal of middle class professionals as 'white collar workers' in private companies, possessing education, skills, and expertise (Donner 2008, 54). But along with the upwardly mobile segment of this new class there was a section of the population that did not benefit from the new employment opportunities of the private sector or from government initiatives. With factories closing down in Bengal and a relatively less developed private sector job market, this class increasingly felt betrayed and disillusioned in the Bengali society. 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 a segment of the population and its belief systems on a large scale. Hence the cinema we are concerned with reflected this anxiety and threat to the new consumer culture and it is criticized for affecting the social and familial harmony. Thus, it is important to note that while television advertisements and the overall media scenario engaged this portrayal of an aspiring middle-class (nuclear) family and its consumer dream, the popular cinema in West Bengal criticized even the possibility of this aspiration.

The above mentioned films mostly used 'masala' elements quite strategically in this period, since on the one hand they followed the literariness of the pre-existing film culture in terms of dialogue delivery while on the other hand, they used occasional action sequences, devotional songs, and even dance numbers in the plot. The general assumption that the 1980s Bengali cinema mostly remade popular Bombay films and catered exclusively to the rural and sub-urban audience can be challenged because it

fails to address the complexity of the popular film forms of this decade. It is interesting to note that these film texts respond and comment on a contemporary moment of Bengal's social history but the critical paradigm only looks for their 'masala' elements and escapist climax. In a number of films during this period the crisis of the old patriarch, unemployment, and price hikes are mentioned but the film texts are only seen as 'crude' copies of other regional hits. It is evident from these film texts that they tried to comment on the new social order, the new class politics and tried to form a perspective of the disillusioned and betrayed section of the society. But the dominant modes of criticism ignored them simply as the 'unreal' picture of the contemporary.

Here we need to understand why the dominant discourses of the state, the media and a section of the public sphere considered this segment of film makers and the film making practice as 'low quality' and of 'bad taste'. It is unfortunate that instead of acknowledging this new variety of film makers and the film making practices, the dominant critical paradigm neglected this new cinema culture and foregrounded the politics of a critical discourse that established the logic of opposition and not of differentiation or diversification. One personal interview with Swapan Saha, one of the most prominent mainstream filmmakers of the 1990s, revealed his assistant film making career in the Bangladesh 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.⁸ It is important to mention Saha here—his rural origin, his familial background of small-scale business for a few generations—since it is related to the way he imagines film spectatorship during this period of Bengali cinema. It is not only his personal past as a small scale businessman or his rural background, but also that with his figure as a film maker, Swapan Saha continued to make films that strongly deviated from the dominant tradition 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.

Conclusion

The problem with the dominant critical discourses is that they ignore the newer formations within the industry and fail to analyze this new phase of Bengali cinema from broader perspectives. This has been reiterated by several writers; for instance, Somen Ghosh in his book *Bangla Cinemar Palabadal* (The Changing Phase of

⁸ Authors' interview with Swapan Saha, 15 December 2010 and 15 October 2011, Kolkata.

Bengali Cinema) has tried to analyze this ‘crisis’ ridden period of the 1980s 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’ (Ghosh 1990, 135). It is 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 for the Bengali film industry’s ‘crisis’. 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 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. (Ghosh 1990, 162)

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 (ibid.). 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) (Raha 2004, 80–1). Rajat Roy in his book similarly recognizes the ‘declining’ quality of Bengali films and studies the fragmentation of the Bengali audience (Roy 2001). Most of these writings present a crisis story of the Bengali cinema from the perspective of a section of educated Bengali *bhadralok* class, which feels distanced from the ‘crudity’ and ‘vulgarity’ of the contemporary mainstream model and the target audience of this model. Whereas Sharmistha Gooptu argues that the appropriation of Bombay cinema’s ‘ clichéd plot’ and action genre ‘overturned the pre-existing middle-class orientation and pandered to more sub-altern groups’ (Gooptu 2008, 155) veteran journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta sees it more as a ‘denial of *bhadrata* and *bhadralok* culture’ in the new generation of film makers.⁹ In this article we suggest that it is problematic to read these filmic texts’ narrative logic and aesthetics simply as ‘targeting sub-altern groups’ or the ‘denial of pre-existing *bhadralok* film-culture’

Going beyond the narrative of lamentation, how Sharmistha Gooptu identifies the 1980s Bengali popular cinema as a departure from the order of ‘*bhadralok*

⁹ Interview with Ratnottoma Sengupta, December, 2010.

Bengaliness' is useful for our studies (Gooptu 2010, 254). 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') and the death of Bengali cinema's top star Uttam Kumar that resulted in 'a profound transition' (ibid., 263). She maps her argument in terms of firstly, the changing scenario of West Bengal's socio-political situation when the Leftist government came to power in 1977 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' (ibid., 266–7). 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 labour 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 class.¹⁰ 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, 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. And it would be problematic to place the categories like *bhadralok* or sub-altern on opposing planes and to consider them a mutually exclusive class in Bengali society. Thus, this claim of a cinema 'exclusively' made for a class not having television sets in their homes and directly addressing them is problematic.

If it is taken for granted that in the 1980s and the 1990s television provided *bhadralok* entertainment that caused the decline of *bhadralok* spectatorship of Bengali cinema resulting in a certain kind of Bengali film exclusively made for a certain kind of film audience who lacked television sets, 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, which is fine with this kind of film practice on TV, but is reluctant to visit the film theatres to watch these films? Or are there other factors beyond the textual and narrative logic that caused this middle class' reluctance? Moreover, here TV became an important site since in many of these popular film melodramas the influence of television is not only evident in terms of narrative structure but in its aesthetic and ideological imagination. Therefore, what appears as the marginalized and unacknowledged cinema of the 1980–90s almost became

¹⁰ For details see Kohli 1987; also see Kohli 1990 and Sinha 2005.

synonymous to the concept of B-grade cinema, although not similar in formation, circulation and reception of the other established B-circuit or B-grade cinemas from Hollywood or even the Bombay cinema. It is interesting to see the complexity and the class politics behind a dominant cinematic history that remained unexplored and critically evaluated. This paper perhaps opens up possibilities to re-think Bengali cinema, and particularly the categories of mainstream and popular cinema, its tradition, styles, genres, audience, reception and discourse from a newer perspective and problematize the simpler argument that 'a more localized form of content that could be most closely identified (with) by an audience segment, which had never been directly catered to'. Thus, audience and class have both been very vital for our project. But within the limited scope of this paper, we have not been able to work on a proper study of audience reception or do a 'cultural reading' of the films that fall within these periods. Rather, we have problematically looked at the categories of class and audience, questioning the relevance of issues related to the popularity or success of films that could form subjects of further research and analysis.

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