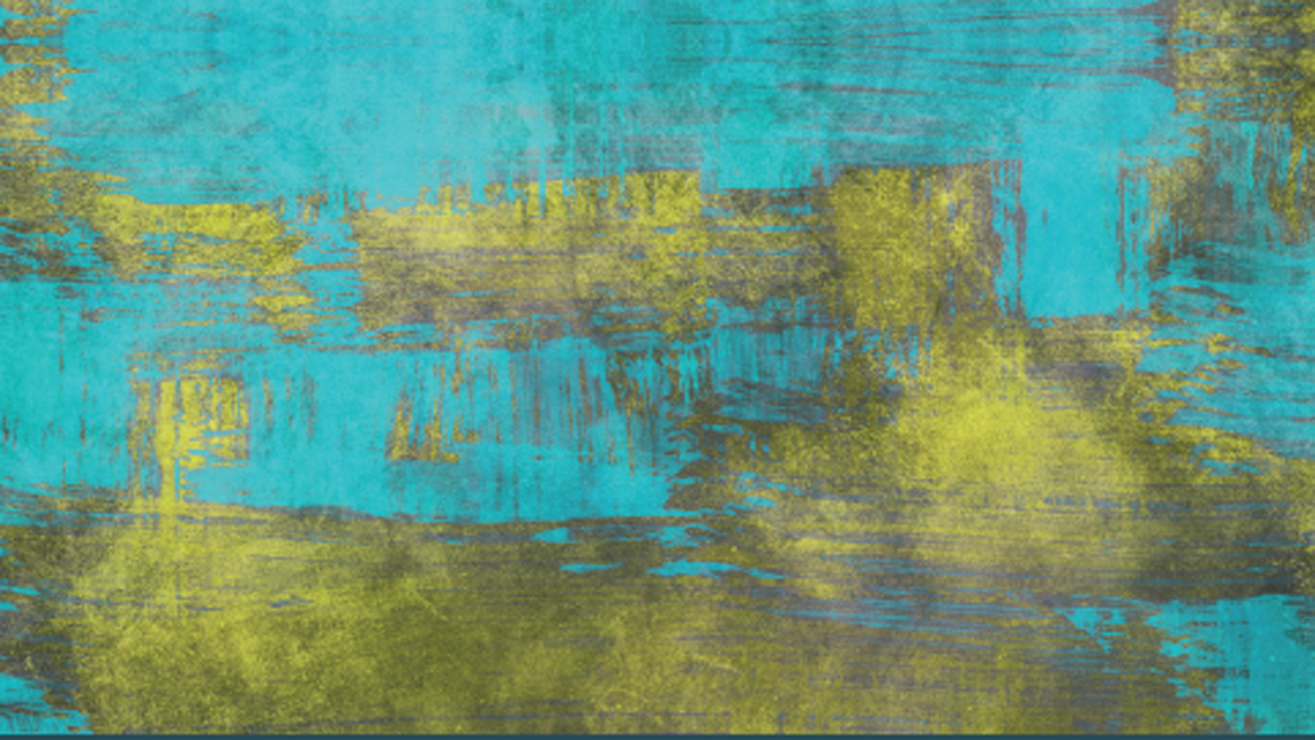
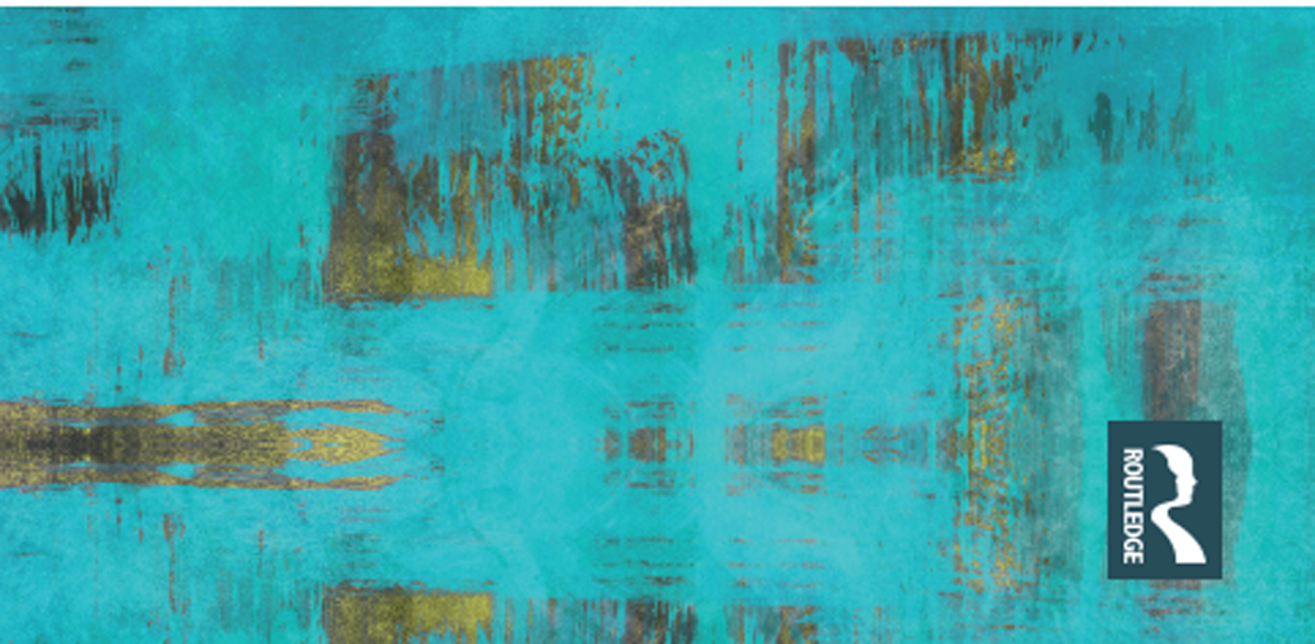


Routledge South Asian History and Culture Series

POPULAR CINEMA IN BENGAL

GENRE, STARS, PUBLIC CULTURES

Edited by
Madhuja Mukerjee and Kaustav Bakshi



Popular Cinema in Bengal

Popular Cinema in Bengal marks a decisive turn in studies of Bengali language cinema by shifting the focus from auteur and text-based studies to exhaustive readings of the film industry.

This book covers a wide range of themes and issues, including: generic tropes (like comedy and action); iconic figurations (of the detective and the city); (female) stars such as Kanan Bala, Sadhana Bose and Aparna Sen; intense public debates (subjects such as high and low culture, taste, viewership, gender and sexuality); print cultures (including posters, magazines and song-booklets); cinematic spaces; and trans-media and trans-cultural traffic. By locating cinema within the crosscurrents of geo-political transformations, this book highlights the new and persuasive research that has materialized over the last decade. The authors raise pertinent questions regarding 'regional' cinema as a category, in relation to 'national' cinema models, and trace the non-linear journey of the popular via multiple (media) trajectories. They address subjects of physicality, sexuality and its representations, industrial change, spaces of consumption and cinema's meandering directions through global circuits and low-end networks.

Highlighting the ever-changing contours of cinema in Bengal in all its popular forms and proposing a new historiography, *Popular Cinema in Bengal* will be of great interest to scholars of film studies and South-Asian popular culture. The chapters were originally published in the journal *South Asian History and Culture*.

Madhuja Mukherjee is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Jadavpur University, India. Her publications include *New Theatres Ltd.: The Emblem of Art, The Picture of Success* (2009), *Aural Films, Oral Cultures* (2012) and the award-winning anthology *Voices of the Talking Stars* (2017). She is co-editor of *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India* (forthcoming).

Kaustav Bakshi is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Jadavpur University, India. A Charles Wallace Fellow, he has worked on Anglophone Sri Lankan literature for his doctoral thesis. His publications include *Anxieties, Influences and After: Critical Responses to Postcolonialism and Neocolonialism* (2009) and *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender, and Art* (2017).

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Genre, Stars, Public Cultures

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A brief introduction to *Popular Cinema in Bengal: Genre, Stars, Public Cultures*

Madhuja Mukherjee and Kaustav Bakshi

The idea of 'Bengali' cinema, we would like to argue, emerged with the advent of sync sound in India; simultaneously, subjects of language and nation became significant within the debates on cinema and its making.[1] Prior to this, as evident from silent films such as *Jamai Babu/The Brother-in-law* (Dir. Kalipada Das, 1931) as well as from the *Indian Cinematograph Committee Report* (1927–1928) and articles and advertisements published in popular magazines of the period, intertitles of films produced from Bengal, rather Calcutta, included multiple languages such as English, Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and Bengali. Clearly, such films were circulating across northern, western, and eastern territories of British India. Besides, the scene was intercepted by popular films from Hollywood. The notion of 'Bengali'-language cinema and its materialization thus had to be contended, explored, and achieved through technology and form(s) which were being tried and tested during the late 1920s and early 1930s.[2]

The formation of the big studios in the early 1930s, investments in (sound) technology, and the involvement of eminent authors, playwrights, distinguished actors and performers, musicians, as well as of the iconic literary and cultural figurehead Rabindranath Tagore, marked the beginning of a self-conscious positioning of 'Bengali-ness' (and the Maha-jati/noble community) in cinema, which was coextensive with the cultural and political discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Indeed, the notion of a definable and 'respectable' cinematic form, dealing with *bhadralok* cultural practices and refined *bhasa* (language), became pivotal in popular discourses on cinema during the 1930s and continued persuasively to the 1960s through the Film Society publications.[4] Such problems of institutionalization of cinema in the regions, and the framework of 'regional' cinema, have been addressed in some recent scholarly articles, by questioning what Ratheesh Radhakrishnan describes at the onset as the 'dynamics of unification and difference, aggregation and disaggregation that is central to the production of the linguistic region'.[5] The development and acceptance of 'regional cinemas' as a category, we reason, is also connected to varied processes of political–cultural shifts, as well as to historiography and the changing modes of writing history of Bengali cinema based on periodization. Such periodization (for example, the 'golden era' of Bengali cinema during the 1950s–1960s), and the repeated focus on internationally acclaimed art-house films made by well-known directors, namely Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, as well as Tapan Sinha, Aparna Sen, and Rituparno Ghosh, and others, has become – by and large – a benchmark of the scholarship on cinema from Bengal. Subhajit Chatterjee, for instance, points out how:[6]

> [t]here is a critical consensus on the observation that Bengali cinema encountered a set of formative ruptures during the 50s, which reshaped the cultural imaginary of the Bengali community, albeit in incongruent ways. The two disparate 'moments of arrival', namely the modernist-realist watershed in Satyajit Ray's *Pather*

Panchali(1955) and the appearance of a 'new popular-modern' in the guise of film romances (*pronoydharmi chhobi*) featuring the star pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, seemed to offer a creative release from the conformist mainstay of popular studio *socials* dominating industrial landscape during the 40s.

In this article, Chatterjee proceeds to show how the Calcutta Film Society discourses influenced many of the attempts to chart the history of a professed Bengali cinema even when the public domain was criss-crossed by many conflicting 'tastes'.[7] However, we will not enter into the debates on 'Bengali' cinema histories and narratives of its construction; rather, we will focus on the possibilities of forging new approaches of writing histories of cinema and culture, and explore and assess the processes through which this volume on *Popular Cinema in Bengal* was shaped, and in what ways this project may be viewed as an intervention and a step towards a revisionist history of 'Bengali cinema' and the 'popular'.

Moinak Biswas in his unpublished dissertation on Indian cinema forms[8] examines arguments, themes, and formal concerns pertaining to post-independence Bengali-language films, through which he tackles the conventional dichotomy between 'realism' and 'melodrama'. By deliberating on a range of studio 'Socials', he illustrates in what way traces of 'realism' (location shooting and realistic settings, for instance) were integrated into popular melodramas. His framing of the 'Social and Beyond' and 'Historical Realism' of 1940–1955, and analyses of a wide range of films, along with the landmark social-realist text, *Chhinnamul/The Uprooted* (Dir. Nimai Ghosh, 1951), alerted us to the manner in which cinema and public cultures are interlinked, and could be reconsidered. Biswas elaborates on how, by '1948–1949, social realism had already produced its own formulaic compulsions in the mainstream "film"', and how 'a sign of the instability of the *social* of the 1940s is the relative lack of definition of melodrama whose classic contours appear (throughout its history of 200 years or so) in dialogue with realism'.[9] Thus, as is clear from a close reading of the films, multiple genres circulated in the public domain and there were, in fact, a spurt of quasi-thrillers during the 1950s, which continued to be popular until 'new hybrid' melodramas (predominantly starring the star duo Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen) appeared on the scene during the 1950s, alongside the widely circulated comedies. The popularity of the thrillers, which were also partly horror films, was a specific feature of the period and was obliquely speaking to the Hindi thrillers of the same period. Biswas' method of mapping the scene, through constant referencing of Hindi melodramas of the period, as well as literary, cultural, and political currents (for instance, by alluding to the influences of the Progressive Writers Association (1936) and Indian People's Theatre Association (1944) etc.), presented an alternative approach of the possible lines of research on the cinema of Bengal. Biswas argues that '*Pather Panchali* [Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1955] was both a culmination to the process set in motion in the 1940s and a break with it', and examines how the '*post-Pather Panchali* realist film was placed in critical discourse at the polar end to the contemporary melodrama'.[10] By drawing from such critical reflections on continuities, breaks, flows, and complicated networks of history, culture, politics, and historiography, this volume explores new methods and involves interdisciplinary research in an attempt to revisit categories like 'Bengali' cinema and its manifold accounts.

While Madhuja Mukherjee's work on cinema of the 1930s draws attention to public cultures, formation of a big studio like New Theatres Ltd.[11] and its formal explorations, industrial history, alongside the complexities of such cultural imaginings, Sharmistha Gooptu's reading of the formation of a 'Bengali' cinema as an 'Other' vis-à-vis Hindi cinema was the first critical book- length study on the advancement of 'Bengali' cinema and its negotiations.[12] Gooptu demonstrates, for example, how, in the post-independence era, in tandem with the 'all-India' socials, the Bengali film industry moved towards the creation of a singular regional cinema. She reads such transformations as a transition, from an 'aspiration to produce a "national" cinema to its turning "inwards", into the production of a "regional" cinema which was very consciously distinguished from the "all-India Hindi film"'.[13] Analysing the transition from the 'all-India' productions (of New Theatres Ltd., for instance), to more region-oriented films, she examines the emergence of the 'Uttam-Suchitra' love stories, or the comedies performed by the popular actor Bhanu Bandyopadhyay.

Prior to this, Biswas' chapter, 'The couple [Uttam-Suchitra] and their [social] spaces', examined the melodramatic form and how 'a feminine space has been opened up, how the 1950s [Bengali] melodrama can sometimes lay a special claim to that space, and also how the spectator has to adopt or even recover a certain femininity to rediscover these movies [in the recent times]'.[14] Furthermore, in the chapter of his dissertation titled 'Narratives of vernacular citizenship in the 1950s Bengali melodrama', Biswas deliberated on issues of the 'city' and 'citizenship', and the changes in the social space (in the 1950s films), as well as the ways in which the persona of Uttam Kumar became the face of emergent modernities and postcolonial deliberations. By presenting a reading of some of the landmark, Uttam-Suchitra hits, Biswas suggested that, '[i]n a large number of films, at least in the majority of the classics of the period, Uttam Kumar is someone who has come from the country in search of a career, or someone found living on the fringes of the city'[15]; moreover, he contends,'[t]he new melodrama was quick to respond to the phenomenon of women entering into jobs in substantial numbers. It is impossible to find any other actress being cast so persistently as Suchitra Sen in professional roles – as doctor, lawyer, social worker or teacher'.[16] Briefly, Biswas' work not only argued for a new mode of reading post-independence cinema in (West) Bengal but also generated many discussions, debates, and contestations.

Emerging from such existing research and taking an interdisciplinary approach, Sayandeb Chowdhury's chapter in this volume, 'A postcolonial *iconi-city*: Re-reading Uttam Kumar's cinema as metropolar melodrama', examines the postcolonial city of Calcutta against which a large number of popular Bengali films of the 1950s were set. Analysing the emergence of Calcutta with its exclusive characteristics of a post-independence/post-partition volatile space, Chowdhury argues how the city provided 'Bengali' cinema with a 'habitation', and also became a metaphor of modernity, a spatial equivalent of a newly independent and partitioned nation.[17] Although studies of the metropolis as a locus of modernity in the films of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak have circulated within wider orbits and have a larger currency, what is revisited through this study are the ways in which post-independence Bengali popular cinema had a significant cultural–historical function in addressing this 'metropolar' modernity within the formal configurations of melodrama, exemplified by the commercially successful films starring the matinee idol Uttam Kumar. Chowdhury chooses to present his paper as 'a cultural history' that seeks to establish that Calcutta's 'cinematicity', inaugurated by the partition films (produced straight after independence), continued for more than a decade in Uttam Kumar's films. Exploring the *visuality* of the city of Calcutta in these films, Chowdhury also argues that the institutionalization of the melodramatic form in the mid-1950s popular Bengali cinema effectuated a scopic interrogation of 'postcolonial' Calcutta as a *locus primaire*. He reinforces his argument by deploying the semiotics of stardom (of Uttam Kumar, in this case), which formalized cinema's aesthetic institutionalization and narrative function within the broader cultural politics of metropolitan postcolonialism.

Anustup Basu, on the other hand, writes about the dialogic exchanges of the Bengali film industry with other regional industries, as well as with international productions and Bombay, between 1955 and 1965. This was a prolific period in the course of Bengali cinema, when the pre-eminent English-language film magazine *Filmfare* featured the industry in its glossy pages. Basu focuses on the logic of regionalization of Bengali cinema within the pages of a nationally circulated magazine. During this period, *Filmfare* was still in its formative stage, and was making a mark in responsible film journalism. *Filmfare* thus would attempt to subsume the errant flows of regional cinema into a defining mainstream of a nation's grand cinematic conversation with itself. The discourse of a national cinema, the idea of peopleness which national cinema had to construct and address, and the contribution of regional films within that discourse, marked by their difference with films released for a pan-Indian audience, were consolidated within the pages of the magazine. Basu analyses the critical interventions of Saroj Sengupta and Chidananda Dasgupta who regularly wrote on Bengali film aesthetics, realism, and auteurs. In the process, Basu's paper contributes to understanding how such discourses constructed a 'history' of Bengali cinema which is, however, linked to the networks of national and international cinema.

Therefore, by revisiting the question of 'regionality' of Bengal, with all of its historical, cultural, and political specificities, this volume on 'Bengali' cinema aims to understand how a particular form of populist cinema was imagined, produced, and circulated across specific geographies and cultural landscapes. Hence, we consider the emergence and passages of certain genres, their heady absorption into one another, and certain types of narrative forms which were often articulated through the dynamics of stardom. We have paid particular attention to practices of film viewing, both in terms of locations (or theatrical spaces) as well as through studies of popular print cultures. This volume, though not necessarily exhaustive in itself, visits certain under-researched areas and brings forth new research. Drawing from multiple sources, such as film and other types of magazines, hagiographies, film, print and visual archives, social networking sites, and personal interviews with stars, film-makers, producers, distributors, theatre owners, site-specific research, as well as detailed textual analyses of film texts, this volume endeavours to capture the pulsating film ethos that cuts across locations and timeframes, and provokes us to rethink cinema's role in encapsulating Bengal's modernity marked by several irreconcilable contradictions. This volume comprising eleven papers and four photo essays, and covering eight decades of the Bengali film industry, explores some of the key factors that constitute popular cinema produced from Bengal.

One of the aims of this volume is to shift focus from studies of authors, auteurs, movements, and individual styles to newer analysis of industrial history, genres, its interconnections, function of the stars, and public cultures. Madhuja Mukherjee's paper, 'Rethinking popular cinema in Bengal (1930–1950s): of literariness, comic mode, mythological, and other avatars', and Spandan Bhattacharya's paper, 'The action heroes of Bengali cinema: industrial, technological and aesthetic *determinants of popular film culture, 1980s–1990s*', work as brackets so to speak and tackle the progression of Bengali popular cinema from the early period up until more recent times. Mukherjee refers to her earlier research on the 'studio era', and by detouring through a close reading of public cultures of the period, she discusses the conditions of film production, emergence of new generic forms (like the 'Literary') and their hybridization. Mukherjee revisits the history of the formation of studios, such as New Theatres Ltd. and Sree Bharat Lakshmi Pictures, and their experiments with the genres of 'the literary' and social melodramas, locating them within the scope of the 'popular'. Through close textual readings (especially, *Abatar/Incarnation* [Dir. Premankur Atorthy, 1941], a remarkable case of genre-mixing), Mukherjee argues how 'Bengali' popular cinema emerged as a peculiar form, borrowing from several existing popular styles and how the studio 'Socials' developed as a multifarious form by mixing several genres.

Although there has been some consistent research on popular Bengali cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, and on the exceptional star duo of the period, namely Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, as well as on 1970s new cinemas, the emergent popular cinema of the 1980s and 1990s has remained grossly under-researched and is only starting to receive critical focus.[18] These two decades were somewhat ignored by film scholars, and were commonly accepted as Bengali cinema's weakest moment (both in terms of industrial growth and aesthetic explorations). Anugyan Nag's unpublished dissertation, *The Contemporary Bengali Film Industry: From Tollygunge to Tollywood*, is a crucial investigation into these decades, including an exploration of the transition of the Bengali film industry in the post-liberalization era.[19] Nag charts in great detail the processes at work that created an industrial crisis of so-called Bengali cinema – the lack of good cinema theatres, the challenge posed by technically advanced Bombay cinema, the advent of New Wave films that barely found a commercial market, and the middle-class audience's gradual abandonment of cinema halls with television and the VCR entering their living rooms. Indeed, there was a remarkable shift in the viewership of popular Bengali cinema in these decades: instead of a *bhadralok*, city-based audience, Bengali cinema began to be consumed by a comparatively less sophisticated 'underclass' of viewers or the urban poor, consisting mostly of migrant workers to the city or urban working-class men and women which, to an extent, brought about thematic and aesthetic shifts in the films. Although these films kept the industry running, the Calcutta-based *bhadra* public, as is evident from coverage in newspapers and magazines, strongly dissociated themselves from them. Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha, Haranath

Chakraborty, and others churned out one commercially successful film after another, but rarely found acceptance within the *bhadra* public sphere. With the gradual corporatization of the Bengali film industry in the new millennium, there was a setting up of multiplexes and more structured publicity and distribution policies, along with the emergence of big production houses like Shree Venkatesh Films, Eskay Videos, and Surinder Films which, using new policies, gave the industry a facelift.[20] Although the commercial films produced by these new houses acquired the technical gloss of contemporary Bollywood, substantially in theme and content, they did not depart significantly from the kind of films that used to dominate the market in the previous two decades. However, these production houses, particularly Venkatesh Films, intelligently straddle both worlds of film viewership – while producing formulaic commercial films, they have also invested money in projects by critically acclaimed directors such as Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh.

While elitist dismissal and disparagement of popular Bengali films of the last three decades have largely kept researchers away from this genre, Spandan Bhattacharya, in his paper in this volume, turns the spotlight on the 1980s–1990s period, focusing on its implications as a cinematic era. Bhattacharya's paper, while analysing the *bhadra* revulsion towards these films, dissects the class question, the trope of illegitimacy, and the (revolting) anger of the protagonists, central to the plots of most of these films. Locating the films against the contemporary political conditions of West Bengal, he discusses (citing several examples) the emergence of a new breed of 'action' heroes – as opposed to the romantic hero – which was historically contingent.[21] Based on engaging primary research, the paper assesses industrial dynamics, conditions of film production, and extra-textual materials (such as magazines, posters, and interviews with stars, film-makers, and producers), to understand the figuration of the action heroes of this period, and the 'colour' aesthetics of these films. In addition, Subhajit Chatterjee's photo essay treads an uncharted terrain in Bengali cinema – its possible relation with certain established practices of exploitation cinema prevalent in Hollywood as well as many Asian cinemas, which problematize familiar generic classifications, and the dominant taste cultures. This photo essay presents his interview with the so-called 'Ghosh Brothers', a directorial duo working on a shoe-string budget in producing films which exhibit a unique encounter between high art and low-brow sensibilities. Chatterjee locates these productions within a larger socio-economic framework, and examines the conditions facilitating the emergence of such tropes and their inconspicuous viewership.

This volume has papers on three female stars of Bengali cinema – Kanan Devi, Sadhona Bose, and Aparna Sen. Viewing Sadhona Bose and Aparna Sen's stardom against Kanan Devi's, for instance, reveals an intriguing class and gender politics that undergirds film cultures in Bengal. While Bose and Sen belonged to two very elitist families of Calcutta, Kanan Devi had to struggle immensely to make herself acceptable to the *bhadralok* class – the producers and consumers of cinema – erasing her humble past, which was widely speculated upon.[22] Sharmistha Gooptu's paper, 'Kanan Devi: a Bengali star', addressing the transition of cinema cultures in Bengal during the life and career of the first big female star of Bengali films, shows how cinema, which started out as glamorous yet disreputable, went on to become an integral part of the imagined Bengali self, which allowed apparent outsiders like Kanan Devi access to the *bhadralok* fold. In fact, Kananbala's (later Devi) life as a star in the Bengali film industry provides an interesting study of how questions of respectability, decorum, and morality were (re)formulated within the *bhadralok* class of Bengal. It shows how a woman of uncertain birth could find a gradual acceptance through her own, and cinema's, imbibing of *bhadra* codes on the one hand, and on the other, cinema's (re)configuring of the *bhadra* public sphere itself through its emergence as a dominant medium of the *bhadralok's* cultural expressions.

If Kanan Devi's career shows the rise of a star from beyond the boundaries of polite Bengali society, the cinematic careers of Bose and Sen, both having a high cultural pedigree, reveal other dimensions of female stardom in a male-dominated industry. Despite being positioned at two disparate nodal points of history, the stardom of these two actors embody intriguing questions about class, gender, and modernity, which in certain ways popularized significantly the liberal views of Bengali women.

Bose, besides being an actor, was a dancer who was politically conscious, as underlined by the ballets she staged in Calcutta addressing the Bengal famine. Sen, on the other hand, raised Bengal's radical feminist politics up a few notches through her films, of which *Paroma/The Ultimate Woman* (1984) is iconic.

Pritha Chakrabarti's paper, 'Performing the region: Sadhona Bose and the modern Bengali film dance', historicizes the emergence of Bose as a star, while analysing her unique stardom as a dancer as contingent upon the invention of a differential 'Bengali-ness'; Chakrabarti shows how the modern eclecticism of film dance provided a space for Bose to negotiate a 'regional' subjectivity even while fulfilling the historicist demands of nationalism. Bose's stardom, as Chakrabarti argues, had the most visible manifestation in the wider emergence of a modern Bengali dance form; this dance form was not only popularized by cinema but also traversed across public stages and entered the inner chambers of middle-class women of Bengal at a time when dance on stage, as Bose herself noted in her autobiography, was 'strictly prohibited'.

Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K Dasgupta's paper, 'From *Teen Kanya* to *Arshinagar*: feminist politics, Bengali high culture and the stardom of Aparna Sen', while establishing Sen's stardom as a product of her radicalism as a feminist thinker, also examines extra-cinematic factors and discourses which allow us to have a deeper understanding of how Sen has been able to construct and preserve a widely revered image, namely of a humanist, philanthropic artist, which is coextensive with characters she has played on screen, or the ones that she created. This paper, based on a series of interviews that both authors conducted with Sen over a period of time, interviews with a cross-section of her fans, alongside an analysis of her media presence and, finally, her films, argues that the structured polysemy of Sen's stardom can be understood as a consequence of the multiplicity of meanings generated by her as an actor, film-maker, journalist, cultural commentator, and politically conscious public persona. Although there are a few publications on Aparna Sen, who made her debut as an actor in 1961 via Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya*, none of these actually consider Sen's stardom, which is rather unique when compared to her contemporaries and peers. Aparna Sen's stardom, the paper argues, has been instrumental in contesting certain norms, customs, and core values that were canonized by the Bengali *bhadralok*.

On the other hand, Sen's mentor, celebrated writer-director Satyajit Ray, had drawn upon certain core *bhadralok* values when he created 'Feluda', one of the most enduring characters of Bengali fiction and cinema. The 'special section' of this volume presents two (fictional) 'letters' or papers written by Rochona Majumdar and Kaushik Bhaumik, respectively, which are on the face of it written by the cult detective Feluda aka Prodosh Mitter and his arch-rival Maganlal Meghraj (a 'non' Bengali, in popular parlance). Written by Satyajit Ray, the stories of 'Feluda', as he is affectionately called, and his assistant (also cousin) 'Topse' or Tapesh Ranjan Mitter, have been published for more than 50 years now. While the narratives of Feluda may be located within the frame of Bengali detective fiction, the papers included here argued for us to relocate the Feluda genre, and especially Satyajit Ray's Feluda films, within the ambit of the shifting terrain of the 'popular'.[23] Indeed, despite the massive popularity of the Feluda stories (also available in English translations) amongst the Bengali readership, and the remarkable long-term commercial successes of their cinematic adaptations (through repeated TV screenings, DVD releases etc.), they have only very recently been addressed as subjects of academic research.[24] The two papers, in conversation with each other, speak to such a lacuna, and deliberate on the cult formation of 'Felu Mittir' (a variation of Felu Mitter) that has captivated successive generations. The plots of the two films on Feluda by Ray are crucial within this structure. *Sonar Kella* (Golden Fortress, 1974), deals with Mukul, a child who seems to remember his past life of 'riches', and is accompanied by a 'parapsychologist' Dr. Hajra, who takes up Mukul as a case study. Mukul's father, fearing the kidnapping of his child, hires the 'private detective' Prodosh Mitter. After Dr. Hajra escorts Mukul to Rajasthan in search of his 'past' home, the story moves through multiple locations, and much action follows. The success of *Sonar Kella* was followed by another Feluda film by Ray, *Joy Baba Felunath* (The Elephant God, 1979). In this film, Feluda, his assistant/cousin Topshe, and the

writer of pulp thrillers Jatayu (whom Feluda had encountered in the previous film) visit Varanasi during the Bengali Hindu (autumn) festival Durga Puja. During one of his visits to the house, a certain Mr. Ghosal, they come to know about an attempted theft of a coveted antique Ganesh idol. The head of the Ghosal household assigns Feluda the task of finding the person behind the failed burglary. Meanwhile, a 'sadhu'/ascetic named 'Machhli Baba' is present in Varanasi, causing much curiosity and excitement. It also comes to light that Maganlal Meghraj, a wealthy businessman (of the Marwari community), had been eyeing the Ganesh idol for some time. Thereafter, scuffles between Maganlal and Feluda follow, until the climax during which Feluda is able to solve the case. The dialogue established by the two 'letters' published in this volume brings forth the import of such iconic figures as Feluda within the Bengali public sphere, and also highlights the significance and continued acceptance of these detective films. Meghraj's 'letter' questions Feluda or Ray's middle-class imagination of reform vis-à-vis the economic conditions growing from, as Bhaumik puts it, 'the unregulated conversion of feudal wealth into a modern capital'.

In the new Internet era, however, Feluda has been re-imagined in interesting ways. His new avatar has been thrown out of his middle-class home and deep intellectual musings into a global frenzy of action, a necessary 'up-gradation' to suit the taste of the current net-savvy generation. Pujita Guha's paper in this volume addresses the changing mediascape, facilitated by the Internet Revolution, and Feluda's reinvention as an action hero, corporatized, suave, and contemporary, inhabiting a transmedial universe, which is remarkably different from what Ray initially imagined him like, within a Nehruvian socialist imaginary. Guha traces in meticulous details this transmogrification of Feluda, through various media, while examining this unostentatiously simple, middle-class, intellectual Calcutta-based sleuth's commodification in the global market of entertainment. While evaluating Feluda's transnational afterlife, as observed in the new film adaptations of Ray's texts, graphic novels, and web-series, Guha also shows how these texts often betray a deep nostalgia for the older media forms in which Feluda is ensconced.

The papers in this volume are interconnected by way of highlighting the specificities of cinema in Bengal as well as the movement between specific decades, genres, and industrial dynamics. The authors researching within disparate disciplines (Cinema Studies, Literature, and History) provide multidimensional perspectives on the complex forces – political, historical, and cultural – that converged to produce a particular form of popular cinema which underwent transfigurations over time, while still retaining elements which could be traced back to its initial years. Moinak Biswas in his photo essay, 'A booklets sequence', draws attention to the specific and vibrant practice of 'booklets' or 'song books' of films, which were widely circulated during the 1930s–1960s. Containing images of the films and a (thin) storyline, these booklets presented, as Biswas suggests, fragments of the films. By looking into a selection of booklets from the period between 1928 and 1958, he analyses the historical transformation, and studies how 'the female star was preponderant' in the 1930s, and in what ways the situation changed with the arrival of 'real male stars' during the later period. According to him, the booklets reveal 'the shifting role of the author/writer/director, the evolution of the "star text", the institutional dynamics of production'.

Madhuja Mukherjee's photo essay, 'Inside a dark hall: space, place and accounts of some single-theatres in Kolkata', focuses on specific locations and cultures of film viewing in Calcutta, and shows the single-screen theatres' 'survival on the fringes, despite their damp walls, cracked chairs, waning of audiences, and withering of their distinction'. By drawing a graph from the early period to the present, Mukherjee traces a history of cinema houses, most specifically in the north and central parts of Calcutta, the crises of the single theatres during the 1970s–1990s, and the means through which some old theatres still continue to exist. Based on archival and primary research (involving data collection, interviews, and on-site documentation), this essay documents Bengali cinema's complicated relations with the market economy.

Kaustav Bakshi's photo essay, 'Rituparno Ghosh, performing arts and a queer legacy: an abiding stardom', analyses the unique and enduring impact of the stardom of Bengal's queer- feminist

film-maker, Rituparno Ghosh, on the lives and countercultures of sexual minorities.[25] Discussing Ghosh's queer iconism constructed through his films and personal life, Bakshi shows in what way his two films, *Arekti Premer Golpo/Just Another Love Story* (Dir. Kaushik Ganguly, 2010) and *Chitrangada: A Crowning Wish* (Dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2012), which borrowed several elements from theatre, had a significant influence in queering the Bengali stage. Based on interviews with some contemporary theatre personalities who have addressed queer themes on the stage, the author shows the enormous power of Ghosh's stardom that has generated a queer artistic legacy, which is also carrying forward, in some ways, Ghosh's own cinematic rhetoric. The urban Bengali stage, borrowing from Ghosh's visual and aesthetic registers, trod hitherto unexplored sites of queer desires, sexualities, and relationships.

By and large, this volume proposes newer approaches, presents new material, and thereby focuses on new areas of study. We imagine that the field will open up further with advanced research, and that in the future we will have the opportunity to address the enduring popularity of comedies or detective films, or contemporary stars. We particularly hope that studies on contemporary 'Bengali' film forms and industrial networks, including mainstream, alternative, and marginal, will further problematize our understanding of what constitutes the 'Bengali popular'. We expect that this project will not simply be an addition to the work done on regional cinemas and popular cultures in India, but rather will encourage readers and researchers to look into the past and beyond from disparate points of view and consider the multifarious characteristics, overlaps, connections, and discontinuities of popular cinemas. This volume, hence, is a step towards fresh debates and contestations.

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Notes

1 See Mukherjee, *Aural Films, Oral Cultures.*
2 See Mahadevan, *A Very Old Machine*.
3 See Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* and Mukherjee, *New Theatres Ltd.*
4 See Dass, *Outside the Lettered City*.
5 Radhakrishnan, "Thiruvithamkoor, Malabar, Kerala", 126. Also see Mukherjee "Toward a New Frame".
6 Chatterjee, "Remapping Transitions of Bengali Cinema into the 50s", 118–119.
7 Also see Chapter 4 of Chatterjee's unpublished dissertation.
8 Biswas, "Historical Realism: Modes of Modernity in Indian Cinema 1940–60".
9 Biswas, "Historical Realism", 74–76.
10 Biswas, "Historical Realism", 91.
11 Mukherjee, *New Theatres Ltd.*
12 Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema*.
13 Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema*, 115.
14 Biswas, "The Couple and Their Spaces", 131.
15 Biswas, "Historical Realism", 105.
16 Biswas, "Historical Realism", 123.
17 Also see Kaarsholm ed. *City Flicks.*
18 For instance, Anugyan Nag and Spandan Bhattacharya's forthcoming book, *The Formation of Tollywood, the Journey of Bengali Cinema from 1980s to the Contemporary*.
19 See Nag, "The Contemporary Bengali Film Industry: From Tollygunge to Tollywood".
20 See Gopal, *Conjugations.*

21 On regional stars and fandom see Prasad, *Cine Politics* and Srinivas, *Megastar*.
22 Also see Mukherjee ed. *Voices of the Talking Stars.*
23 On the detective figure, see Chakrabarti, "The Bhadralok as Truth-Seeker".
24 For a recent collection of essays published on the occasion of the fiftieth year of Feluda, see Majumdar ed. *Feluda @ 50*.
25 See Datta et al. ed., *Rituparno Ghosh*.

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Rethinking popular cinema in Bengal (1930s–1950s): of literariness, comic mode, mythological and other avatars

Madhuja Mukherjee

ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of early industrial conditions in Bengal, focuses on the major studios and draws attention to emergent genres and genre overlaps. While a study on New Theatres Ltd. (NT) shows how the establishment aspired to produce 'respectable' films, the research conducted on Sree Bharat Lakshmi Pictures (SBLP) shows how we might reconsider the themes, styles and concerns of 'literary' versus 'popular' cinema in Bengal. Arguing for the *persistence of the popular* in relation to what I describe as 'literary', the article refers back to NT films, discusses their formal explorations and underscores the circulation of a range of other generic elements within the Bengali public sphere. I particularly examine SBLP's *Abatar* (d. Premankur Atorthy, 1941), which on one hand, could be seen as a loose adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Muktadhara* (The Waterfall, 1922), and on the other hand, mixes diverse elements of futurist films, comedy, documentary, etc., with the mythology. By locating *Abatar* within cinema-modernity deliberations, the article analyses how it operates through multiple registers and generates a complex field of possibilities. Studying the ways in which Bengali cinema borrowed from heterogeneous cultures of literature, theatre and 'the bazaar', this article reads Bengali films, film cultures and the mode of 'genre-mixing'.

How to read Bengali cinema?

'How to read Bengali cinema' also provokes the question, 'how to write about Bengali cinema'?[1] This article addresses this key question through an exploration into disparate genres, and revisits widely held, as well as somewhat linear and teleological, histories of 'Bengali cinema' of the 1930s–1950s.[2] It argues that early film cultures were much more complex and often replicated the larger Bengali public sphere, which had multiple facets of the 'popular' and the 'bazar'.[3] A fashionable Bengali film magazine of the 1930s, *Chitrapanji*, for example, regularly published fan poems, and not only celebrated international stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich or Mae West but also spotlighted Bengali actors such as Kanan Devi (then Bala), Sadhana Bose, Sabita Devi and others (see figures 1 and 2). A poem published in the same magazine in 1934 titled 'Make her my beloved' or 'Want her as my beloved' sets up a familiar milieu, a local teashop.[4] The verse thereafter presents the characters. 'There were six or seven of us' it states, including 'blunt-nose Gosto, squint-eyed Kesto, skinhead Dinu's brother, along with curly-haired Hare, one-eyed Subli, baldy Nashi and others'. It continues, explaining how, 'like every other day, we were endlessly discussing [matters ranging from] Buckingham Palace to [the problems of] the local oil mill owned by Panchu'. At that moment a groom's carriage passes by, and thus, they enquire of their

Figure 1. Picture plate of Marlene Dietrich in *Varieties weekly*.

(elder) friend Jogai, 'will you never get married?' To this Jogai says, while he is willing to marry, the right girl is still awaited. The remaining sections of verse are as follows[5]:

How do you want her to be?
Jogai says: Well, let me explain.
Have you seen the face of Kanan Bala?
And, her half smile?
[Joan] Crowford's eyes, Loretta's [Young] teeth,
Zubeida's [Begum] long hair?
Aha! Mary Pickford's lips,
Sabita's [Devi] nose?
I am amazed by the dimples of Miss U,
And can you show me a body like that of Marlene [Dietrich]?
How may I compare?
I like them all [....]

Chitrapanji also published studio reports and film reviews, short overviews of the life and careers of popular actors, along with more literary pieces, such as short stories and essays. In a 1937 issue, it published another poem titled 'Our Trio',[6] which described the singing sensation Kanan Bala (and others), while another poem by Girijakumar Basu provided a comparative reading of the noteworthy films and stars of the period (including Greta Garbo along with

Figure 2. Picture plate of Greta Garbo in *Varieties weekly*.

well-known local actors), and signed off with remarks on *Alibaba* (d. Modhu Bose, 1937), describing it as technically competent, and enjoyable.[7] Other poems solely dedicated to Hollywood icons and films also demonstrate a larger 'popular' within which Bengali cinema may be relocated.[8] In this context it is useful to refer Sumanta Banerjee and others, who have noted that Bengal's public culture was criss-crossed by a range of outlandish practices; moreover, 'purposeful' practices, proposed by the *bhadralok* cinema companies (like New Theatres Ltd. (NT)), were often infused with a range of commonly derided 'popular' traits. One may argue that, while certain 'respectable' magazines (including *Varieties Weekly* (Calcutta), *Film Land* (Calcutta), *Film India* (Bombay)), along with publicity mechanisms of the 1930s studios, upheld the notion of upright and social reform films, as well as those which explored a specific narrative style (discussed later), a body of (film) magazines, publicity material, narratives of the theatres – and certainly, the films as well – indicate the persistence of mixed cultural forms, which push us to reconsider the range and scope of a 'Bengali' cinema.

The story of *bhadralok* cinema

In an earlier study, I have drawn attention to the import of cinema within Bengali public cultures, and the ways in which cinema was imagined as a vehicle of modernity by the *bhadralok*.[9] While, the question of appropriation of a popular form by the *bhadralok* is crucial, with reference to NT (1931–1955), I have argued that the project of 'purposeful films', proposed by the English educated, urbane, upper-caste

elites, remained 'unfinished'. Various 'popular' genres and tropes, especially melodrama, infused with the elements of music and dance, and the comic mode (marked by characterization, speech and performance) persisted despite the pronounced aspiration for an idealized Bengali language cinema, following the advent of sync-sound. In this latter context, the institutional history of NT and the politics of canon formation are crucial, though I have analysed, in length, its many fissures.

NT's stature and its immediate popularity amongst elites, across the country, had as much to do with their creative films *Chandidas* (d. Debaki Kumar Bose, 1932), *Puran Bhagat* (d. Debaki Kumar Bose, 1933) and *Devdas* (d. P C Barua, 1935) etc. as the lineage and social standing of its proprietor, Birendra Nath Sircar.[10] Sircar was an England-returned civil engineer, and son of Sir N. N. Sircar, the Advocate General of Bengal.[11] He hired well-regarded directors like Debaki Kumar Bose and Pramathesh Chandra Barua, along with well-known music composers from All India Radio, Raichand Boral, Pankaj Mullick and Timir Baran Bhattacharya; eminent singers (from the stage) like K. C. Dey; and technicians like Nitin Bose and Mukul Bose (who instituted the playback system), as well as influential authors, poets and theatre-personalities including Premankur Atorthy, Nazrul Islam, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay and Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, and popular actors of the period including Kanan Bala (later Kanan Devi). Additionally, Bengal's cultural icon, Rabindranath Tagore's sole cinematic attempt *Natir puja* (1932) took place under NT's patronage; similarly, the celebrated author Sarat Chandra Chattophadhyay sold the rights of most of his novels to the company (see figure 3).

Making films in both Bengali and Hindi (and in other languages), NT's industrial power grew out of its well-structured production–distribution–exhibition system, as well as through the kinds of narrative films they produced and publicized. In their publicity flyers, for instance, NT sometimes quoted from authors like J. W. Goethe and Voltaire, and compared such figures with their own directors (especially Barua).[12] Nevertheless, while NT aspired to produce a particular kind of cinema that may be termed 'literary', a reading of the films, news, reviews, 'letters to the editor', photographs and publicity materials suggest that NT, in fact, produced very diverse films of popular genres. Likewise, double versions of the same film, as in the case of *Chandidas* made in Bengali (by Debaki Bose, 1932) and then in Hindi (d. Nitin Bose, 1934), were remarkably different, and were in reality, experimenting with disparate and widely held elements, including extended scenes of action, violence and emotional excesses (for the Hindi version). NT's Hindi films such as *Street Singer* (d. Phani Majumdar, 1938) and *Lagan* (d. Nitin

Figure 3. *Natir puja* lobby card, 1932.

Bose, 1941), featuring the all-India singing sensation K. L. Saigal, banked on Saigal's impressive star-value, enduring singing ability and his comic timing, rather than the 'literary' aspects commonly attributed to NT's films.[13] Furthermore, styles of distinguished directors, especially those of P. C. Barua, Debaki Bose, Nitin Bose, Phani Majumdar, and other lesser-known directors, differed considerably.

NT's industrial practices and modes of functioning, like many other houses of the times, involved very diverse sections of society, including performing women, who brought into the films the codes of the 'bazaar'. The open letters written (in English) by a lesser-known actor Ratan Bai (published in *Chitrapanji* during 1934) draw attention to the 'popular' or 'bazaar' component of NT, which the in-house publicity mechanism worked gloss over.[14] Ratan Bai, who was the actor of NT's Hindi film *Yahoodi Ki Ladki* (d. Aga Hashar, 1933), had enquired in the open letter about the editing of her songs in the film *Karwan-e-Hyat* (d. Premankur Atorthy, 1935). To such query, NT's publicity officer retorted by highlighting her erstwhile status, and reminded her (and the readers) that she – as Miss Imambandi – was 'picked up' from '216, Bow Bazar Street', Calcutta's 'red-light' area, by NT agents.[15] These letters show how NT operated through multiple – and not always 'reputable' – networks, just as there were forceful dialogues between cinema and other performance cultures. Ratan Bai's caustic replies (such as 'Mr. Sircar has laid much stress on the point that I have been picked upon from Bowbazar Street [….] Did I ever approached the officials of New Theatres Ltd, to give me a job or they approached me to join their company?') raise a few germane questions regarding (lost tracks of) film history (see figure 4), and (untraceable) material which might afford an entirely more complex view of film cultures. While it becomes obvious that

Figure 4. Picture plate adjacent to Ratan Bai's letters.

a history of NT's success is not singularly the history of Bengali cinema, the aforementioned incident also underscores the larger structures of contemporary studios, and the multifarious and mixed field of industrial networks and issues of gender and work.

This thing called 'literary' films

'Literary' films did not simply entail the adaptation of literary texts. Rather, 'literariness' ought to be read as a discrete narrative strategy, concerned with complicated plotting (often involving in the narrative, for instance, several generations, and/or settings, as in the case of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta* series (in four parts, 1917–1933)), presence of ambiguous and vacillating character(s), illustrations of the mindscape of the characters or the protagonist through visual and aural explorations (not merely songs), as well as an interplay of verbosity and so on. 'Literariness', however, especially implied characterization and the ways in which the character (s) negotiates problems, or speaks about them etc.; that is, a range of emotion crises, expressed through the 'discursive' style (of literature), like application of intense speech or (voice-over) narration, etc. While there were always major overlaps (as we will see) with melodramatic modes, 'literary' films were by and large concerned with realistic storytelling, and with detailing of the situation, meticulous settings, and therefore, were connected to the practices of novelist writing, or the practice of description in realist novels. Most importantly, such cinematic styles as elaborated by NT were significantly different from the practice of adaptation of literary plots as initiated by Madan Theatres.[16]

The 'interiority' of the characters, a literary characteristic that NT aspired to transport into films, was often described as 'psychology' in cinema by the press.[17] 'Psychology' indicated recounting of interiority in terms of narrative pauses, and creation of contemplative situations, such as sojourn. Furthermore, 'psychology' meant bestowing a 'depth' to the characters, by situating him/her in realistic contexts, against some definable past and unforeseen future. P C Barua's *Devdas*, for example, was described as a 'thinking' film. *Chitra*, NT's publicity brochure, in its Editorial stated the following[18]:

> There is something in Devdas, as I said before, which haunts one long after one has forgotten other films. It is a purely psychological effect which one gets, and Barua is a master of film psychology. He THINKS, he FEELS, he LIVES [caps in original] his sequences before he accepts them …

In this regard, one may also consider the extended uses of the *shehnai* in *Devdas (Hindi)*, which begins on a black frame, then dissolves into the scene of Parvati's (the heroine) marriage to the elderly widower, thereafter continues as Parvati, the young bride, arrives at her in-laws' house (and interacts with her step son and others), followed by a more intimate and complicated interaction with her aged husband (elaborated through the deployment of both track shot and panning of camera). While the music continues, it again dissolves into another black frame, and re-emerges in the scene set in Chandramukhi's (the courtesan) room. Here, Devdas, drinking heavily and speaking his famous lines ('I don't drink to tolerate, [instead] I drink to forget myself …'), suddenly reacts to the strains of *shehnai* in the background (associated with marriage) and shuts the window, thereby cutting-off the background score abruptly. Such doubling of background score and location sound, as well as aural and visual elaborations, comment both on union and separation, and establishes Devdas and Parvati's dilemmas and conflicts. Besides, one may also consider the lengthy night scenes inside the train, and Devdas' (Saigal) high contrast close shots, in which he, sitting near the train window, looks out into nothingness (with a melancholic expression). What emanates from contemporary film criticism is a concern for such characterization (which was described as 'film psychology'), and the aspiration to project the 'unconscious' in terms of time, spatial explorations, shot-taking (Barua's well-known track shots in *Mukti* (1937), for example), (double meaning) dialogues and thoughtful application music. Niranjan Pal, for instance, wrote the following in 1931[19]:

> In place of *action* [italics added] human psychology and characterisations have become very important factors in the progressive development of successful talkies … The talkies, … have shown us the value and importance of psychology and psychological actions …
>
> The talkies offer very little scope to speed and action …

While many other critics wrote about 'psychological acting' in NT films, Niranjan Pal also mentioned 'psychology of music' (or the uses of 'mood' music and background score).[20] Effectively, such repeated use of the term 'psychology' implied a desire for a particular kind of cinematic execution, as well as projection of thoughts, feelings, moods, etc., via sound and images. More important, as evident from the film criticism of the period, a value was bestowed on such representation of the 'psychology'. Eventually, NT's widely held 'literary' style, involved middle-class settings, characters, speech and uses of *Rabindra Sangeet* (songs of Rabindranath Tagore) as in *Mukti* (d. P C Barua, 1937), etc., and it is because of the appreciation of such styles that, amongst other things, NT established itself as the 'cathedral of culture'.[21]

Daktar (d. Phani Mazumdar, 1940), for example, is a story of a young man who returns to his village with pronounced reformist aspirations, and hopes to eradicate various prejudices that delimit social change. The village itself is presented as picturesque, and in fact, prior to the self-conscious (neo) realist films in Bengali during 1950s, the film uses expansive long shots, outdoor shots, etc., and produces imaginative images of lush Bengal. A story of three generations, *Daktar* presents the second generation (or the 'present') as the agent of change. The film opens with a song, and with imaginative imageries of the train entering the village. The train brings in the young doctor, who stands on the foot of the doorway, and sings the song of new life. In fact, the train in *Daktar* does not appear intrusive or demonic, as projected through the low-angle shots in *Devdas*; contrarily, through a lateral/horizontal movement, it creates a sense of movement, and appears to signify social mobility and transformation. Moreover, the long shots often allow the narrative to evolve through descriptive and functional shots.

In *Udayer Pathe* (d. Bimal Roy, 1944), NT's iconic 'realist' film, the 'literary' style is extended from realistic detailing or creation of realistic *mise-en-scene* to speech and content/context. The protagonist of the film is Anup 'Lekhak' (literally 'unique author'), whose identity as author is central to the plot. Anup Lekhak also works in a factory and writes revolutionary speeches for his employer. His boss' sister Gopa and his own sister Sumita are best friends. Anup gets romantically involved with Gopa and politically involved with the workers. In the end, Gopa leaves parental security to move on with Anup towards the path where the 'new sun' will rise someday (or towards 'udayer pathe').

In *Udayer Pathe*, words and speech ('*sabda o kotha*' in Bengali), its specific meanings and manner of deployment, play a considerable role in propagating the issue of political consciousness. Speech becomes an important element of narrative progression as 'dialogue-cutting' points become dominant in the film, as opposed to a visual or 'action match cut'. For example, at the end of the first sequence as Anup leaves for work, Sumita tells him that his shirt is torn and needs stitching. To this Anup says,[22]

Anup: Are you crazy? How can you fight a demonic instrument like poverty with a tiny thing like a needle?

Later, Anup is in 'Modern Industries' applying for a job. Souren (the factory owner and the one who plagiarizes his novel) exclaims:

Souren: Never heard of Lekhak as a surname!
Anup: You have Ghatak [literally the matchmaker], you have Pathak [literally the reader], [as surnames, then] why can't we have Lekhak [literally writer]?