S U B H A J I T   C H A T T E R J E E

Remapping Transitions of Bengali Cinema into The 50s

Prologue

This article seeks to problematize historical narratives representing a specific phase of transition in Bengali cinema. However, my additional interest is to reflect upon the conceptualization and production of histories for popular cultures such as cinema. Thus, while attempting to remap concrete historical transformations in Bengali cinema, from the 40s into the 50s, my argument shall frequently pause to reflect on methodologies of historical narration in relation to its ever suspect and transient object. Let us begin with a relevant pause. It has become commonplace to argue that historical understanding is framed by narrative concepts notwithstanding the status of its constituent objects. However, the same argument does not entail a conflation of film history with other narrative enterprises, thereby requiring a specialized field to justify its specificities as critical discourse. To my mind, a series of relevant issues that have been hitherto ignored demand intellectual attention in the face of the perceived urgency to write organized histories for Indian cinemas.

Does a film historian's account have any specificity other than the one constituted by its object? Do film scholars require a historically specific conception of the cinematic apparatus in order to organize their narrative in a given social context? More importantly, in what way can the film historian's approach towards 'evidence' be distinguished from the multitude of methods employed in other disciplines? At a formative stage of an ambitious enterprise and in a cultural context where the historical object itself is shrouded in ontological and epistemological uncertainty (eg. dearth of primary materials, the dubious status of information sources), a conscious encounter with the above questions becomes an imperative for any film historian. In other words, I argue that writing histories for enigmatic objects such as popular cinema should in principle become a process of reviewing existing models of historical inquiry, if not forging alternative ones.

With such broad historiographic issues in mind that I shall revisit the existing historical accounts of transition in Bengali cinema from 1940s into the 50s. My aim shall be two-fold: to isolate the problems associated with existing narratives in order to reframe them with respect to a variety of freshly acquired research materials and to reflect upon the nature of historical evidence and processes of their mobilization or analysis so as to delineate points of tension in the film historian's customary encounter with the archives. I contend that such a retrospective gaze infused with self-reflexivity may help in modulating regional film histories in their pre-institutional phase (journalistic and amateur writings) as well as the disciplinary incarnation (the advent of film studies and consequent interventions from other academic disciplines such as history, anthropology or cultural studies).

Moments of arrival

There 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[1], seemed to offer a creative release from the conformist mainstay of popular studio *socials* dominating industrial landscape during the 40s. The transitions in question have been studied under two broad analytic parameters, often at cross-purposes with each other despite sharing certain critical concerns. One strand of argument seeks to locate the consolidation of the modernist-realist aesthetics in the mid 50s as providing an ideal vantage point for evaluation of regional film history. On the other hand revisionist paradigms, while frequently sharing the progressive jubilation, have treated such cinematic events as symptomatic of broader negotiations between aesthetic, cultural and historical forces.

The former evaluative paradigm, predating institutionalization of film studies, has been persistent amongst a host of thinkers and critics bearing the reformist ethos of the film society movement. In retrospect it seems that their approach to Bengali cinema have till date been largely determined (and perhaps constrained) by Satyajit Ray's influential evaluations and reminiscences of popular cinema.[2] These commentaries have mostly repeated Ray's bemoaning of the consistent aesthetic and political lacunae at the heart of regional film culture. Despite sporadic displays of artistic skill and political will across the 40s, popular cinema could not supersede the poisonous combination of crass commercial interest and 'feudal value system' that orchestrated industrial enterprises. As eminent film critic Mriganka Sekhar Ray noted, "… a feeling of disgust and distaste for the conventional Indian cinema became the arsenal for the film society enthusiasts." [3] According to this narrative, the general malaise of the system owed largely to the middle class insensitivity towards contemporary socio-political milieu as well as their inability to develop an indigenous 'cinematic' sensibility, thereby encouraging passive emulation of Hollywood products.[4] Reflecting on erstwhile decades of Bengali cinema, another noted film critic Suryo Bandyopadhyay complaints, "…even the subject matters selected for making films were of inferior quality. In films such as *Dhooli*, *Achyutkanya* …or *Bordidi* there was no image of patriotic terrorism, no agitation— in one word anything whatsoever pertaining to Indian politics. Lots of dull, lifeless films full of sentimentality (*nyaka nyaka*) ran in the halls and the middle

class used to watch them. And got so engrossed in them that they even used to forget the Famine [1943]...[5]. This narrative further entails that the 50s ushered in significant transformations in economic and organizational aspects of the film industry, to which popular cinema reacted by exploiting the star appeal and romantic aura of the screen pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. In combination with traditional narratives steeped in feudal values these new forms of escapist entertainment quite efficiently camouflaged the 'real' historical traumas impinging upon the Bengali nation across the decade. Thus, at such a restless historical juncture where post-Partition political crises were rocking the foundation of traditional value systems of the Bengali community, Uttam Kumar's star charisma embodied their "memory, being and future... not in reality but on the silver screen..."[6] To make things worse, widespread populism and artistic ignorance hindered the desired public impact of revolutionary events such as the appearance of *Pather Panchali* as well the more complex representational politics of Ritwik Ghatak's early work. [7]

Revisionist prospects

The aforementioned critical lineage seems to assume a linear correlation between historical reality and cinematic representation, one that allows for either a reflection or distortion of social facts. Moreover they explicitly draw upon a reformist framework that devalues popular film melodrama against progressive, realist tendencies discernible since the mid 40s, which seem to culminate in the moment of *Pather Panchali*. In addition to recognizing the problematic nature of such simplistic and teleological presuppositions, it is important to register that the melodramatic forms overseeing the popular form facilitate representational work that is frequently at variance with realist protocols. Moreover the economy of such melodramatic modes lie not so much in their fidelity to social history or academic realism but rather in their ability to render visually and symbolically palpable the domain of conflicts that constitute the heterogeneous matrix of our cultural modernity. Revisionist accounts started appearing in the wake of efforts to institutionalize studies of cinema, paralleling pioneering developments in theory, historiography and interdisciplinary

scholarship in the Western academia. The new found intellectual zeal revived and in many ways reorganized the scholarly enterprises undertaken by regional film societies in various parts of India. However, these new critical departures sought to distance themselves from the earlier paradigm particularly through their reappraisal of the 'popular'. Along with pioneering attempts at database building and renewed enquiries into the silent and early studio era, critical reassessment of pan-Indian popular cinematic forms and institutions has become a crucial scholarly enterprise.[8]

Albeit scarce in quantity, the new wave of scholarship had resonances in studies of Bengali cinema as well. Interestingly, most of the revisionary accounts dealing with—regional studios, cultural histories of popular cinema, 'new melodrama' in the 50s, analysis of stars and *auteurs* (eg. Pramathesh Barua, the Uttam – Suchitra pair, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak),[9] have critical relevance for the phase of transition under current scrutiny. Such studies have rightly conceptualized film styles or genres as sites of contest rather than grounds for historical reflection. Drawing on insights gained from melodrama studies in the West and contemporary social sciences in India, they strive to understand how popular cinema could articulate significant discourses on cultural identity and historical belonging. In other words, budding scholarship trends have begun to address the critical ruptures in 50s Bengali cinema responses to shifting aesthetic sensibilities and to historical and cultural demands at the post-colonial moment. However, the revisionist paradigm continue to work with a univalent register where historical and aesthetic realities seem to enter into negotiations against a neutral backdrop, producing various stylistic configurations in accordance to the nature of critical processing afforded. While meaning production certainly entails an assimilation of existing representational and historical facts, it is also implicated in discursive domains that define its conditions. I wish to argue that traditional as well as contemporary scholarship is yet to grasp the complex and polyvalent structure of 'historical interfaces' that constitute cinematic institutions and modulate production and circulation and of meanings in a public domain.

The rest of this article shall disentangle these cryptic observations through analysis of specific historical instances and

allied commentaries from the period under scrutiny in relation to recently acquired research evidence, both primary and secondary. To begin with, an uncritical celebration of a high-point in cinematic realism ironically ignores the complex history of the indigenous development of this progressive strand through subtle and uneven interaction with competing popular forms. In fact, the speculative nature of such teleological arguments around aesthetic forms often stumble in face of archival evidences that lay out the larger institutional practices within which formal and textual mechanisms remain embedded. As I shall demonstrate below, the representational styles, ensuing marketing trends and reception contexts of the era depict a contrasting picture where a dynamic interface seems to emerge between transformations in the melodramatic form and its relationship to more progressive discourses around regional assimilations of modernity. The notion of a 'historical interface' brings into view processes of meaning production in the public domain which is precisely the space of contest between competing cinematic genres or styles and their modalities of consumption. Perhaps such an approach could also problematize the perceived opposition between purely formal histories or ideological analyses and an excessive focus on reception cultures Indian cinema studies.[10]

Revisiting the 40s

In one of the few critical accounts on popular cinema of the period, film critic Rajat Ray, attempted to analyze the status of Bengali cinema during the politically turbulent 40s, through a tabulation and statistical survey of prevalent narratives. He offered brief synopses of more than 90 randomly selected films from the period, followed by an evaluation of the prevailing aesthetic and ideological currents. Hailing from the film society tradition Ray predictably concluded that a few rare glimpses of historical sensitivity and technical excellence apart, the bulk of products are condemnable as commercial fares propagating feudal or at best conformist values.[11] Before revisiting the specificities of popular forms, let me draw attention to some of the methodological issues related to such prevalent styles of historical analysis. The article acknowledges

researcher Abhijit Goswami for contributing to the statistical data through archival work. During my own discussion with Goswami his reflections foregrounded a set of relevant methodological problems.[12] For example, the nature of Goswami's contribution to the article, to provide information regarding inaccessible films, revealed the rarity and dearth of primary materials that haunt such projects. To compensate the lack scholars often rely on existing synopses and reviews afforded by contemporary songbooks, journals or newspapers, all of which are inappropriate material for describing film practices of an erstwhile era. As evident to any film historian, these sources would frequently display incomplete information on film plots for strategic reasons. Moreover, such accounts will rarely, if at all discuss stylistic elaborations of the plot, thereby making the historian dependant on a general impression of studio era techniques condensed from other secondary sources (published biographies, autobiographies or oral narratives). But more importantly, Goswami's comments seem to point towards the conventional academic trend to treat relevant source materials (newspapers ads, songbooks, reviews etc.) as 'textual records' whose value are exhausted by the primary information they provide. Evidently, such a framework would result in ignorance towards significant features of these research materials for example their nature of display, arrangement or modes of address. [13] But before revisiting the issue of publicity materials and research methodology in some detail let me dwell briefly upon the problem of narrative form and their ideological implications on which such discussions could shed new light.

The vengeful reformism of film society tradition is aptly revealed in Chidananda Das Gupta's caustic comment "Add culture to Indian films and you have the film society movement in India".[14] Amongst the various genres popular during the 40s (*historical, devotionals, biopics* or *crime/detection films* etc.) the *socials* were configured as the customary target for such stern criticism, evidently owing to their growing dominance in the pan-Indian as well as regional markets.[15] As indicated before, a lack of reappraisal to the bulk of these films owing to problems of access facilitated a homogenous perspective on their formal and narrative structures. Moreover, critics would often work with assumptions regarding modernization

in representational forms that entailed its expression either through a progressive rhetoric on the content plane or adoption of a realist aesthetic on the formal plane. Inadequacies in both these registers seemed to offer conclusive proof of developmental stasis in popular cinema. The fallacies of such critiques are often predicated on a common confusion of the theoretical distinction between 'statement' and 'enunciation'. While popular cinema has frequently propagated 'traditional' systems and values, their articulation of same discourse operates under the aegis of modernity, always working in tension with alternative mores of image making and spectatorial address.

The primary evidence at hand suggests that some of the major *socials* produced during the 40s display significant patterns of critical engagement with the processes of modernization through the familiar tope of 'social reform'.[16] A closer scrutiny reveals a set of complementary tendencies that animated contemporary film *socials* in their bid to qualify as discourses on cultural modernity. In the 40s and well into the 50s a dominant segment of Bengali *socials* were primarily concerned with elaboration of cultural conflicts between a 'traditional' and a 'modern' ethos, a usual thematic that encapsulated and organized romantic plots as one amongst its many expressive dimensions. The problems of conjugality and romance

Bharatlakshmi logo

in representative 40s studio *socials* such as — *Daktar* (Phani Majumdar, 1940), *Garmil* (Niren Lahiri, 1942), *Samadhan* (Premendra Mitra, 1943) or *Dui Purush* (Subodh Mitra, 1945) —- are treated as one amongst the various narrative tropes that facilitated the depiction of social dichotomies elicited by the arrival of modernity as a familiar cultural frame. In such narrative structures, the construction of conjugal autonomy in terms of its psychological and spatial manifestations is hindered by overseeing patriarchal agencies, thereby enabling a single resolution to tie up diverse narrative threads, often symbolized by images of social harmony such as marriage ceremonies and/or the reunited family. These symbolic representations mostly attempt to validate the effective function of

traditional community ties as social cement despite the significant historical transformations in both public and private spheres.
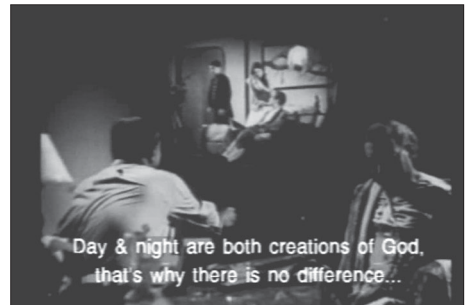
The Ludic mode in Bengali melodrama

However, the Bengali *socials* produced by another major studio, Sree Bharatlakshmi Pictures, provide an ironic twist to the seemingly normative pattern through their divergent focus on the theme of conjugality. Samples from the latter studio display a systematic concern with the issue of 'reform' but often modulated in ways contrasting to the approach of dominant studios such as New Theatres or the bulk of smaller, independent production concerns. Bharatlakshmi Pictures, formed in 1933 (renamed as Sree Bharatlakshmi Pictures in 1936),[17] in spite of being a relatively minor studio compared to the prestigious New Theatres was historically significant in terms of the quality of production. The owner Babulall Chowkhani[18], who began his career around the early 30s by producing and exhibiting films for Madan Theatres during the studio's economic distress, soon built his own studio and started production with the popular *mythological* talkie *Chand Sadagar* (Prafulla Roy, 1934).

The sarcastic concounter of art and commerce

Metropolitan theatre: the 'tele-visual' quotation

Bharatlakshmi gradually gained industrial foothold with the huge success of the spectacular *musical, Alibaba* (Madhu Bose, 1937). From the late 30s the studio gradually mobilized an assortment of talented technicians, writers and stars (such as Bibhuti Laha, Charles Creed, Madhu Bose, Gunamay Bandyopadhyay, Tulsi Lahiri, Bidhayak Bhattacharya, Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, Ahindra Chowdhury, Chhabi Biswas, Chandrabati Devi, Padma Devi among others) and ventured into production of *socials* dealing extensively with contemporary issues.[19] From *Abhinaya* (Madhu Bose, 1938)

onwards a substantial number of the studio's Bengali productions reveal persistent and excessive investment into moral dilemmas elicited by modernization, often articulated in relation to themes of polygamy, adultery or illegitimate birth.[20] Interestingly, the formal elaboration of such thematic features frequently accommodated a

Abhinaya: Mirroring of affect

Garmil: The clock of Kaliyuga

multitude of generic and stylistic frameworks that were relatively unfamiliar in mainstream popular features. I would argue that the Bharatlakshmi *socials* worked with an array of satirical narrative tropes having affinities to a certain strand of reflexivity in the modernist ethos, which could be aptly described as a 'ludic propensity'.[21] Such proclivities become all the more significant owing to their productive role in formulation of critical discourses around the contested terrain of 'reform', which by the 50s began to accrue aesthetic, social as well as legal nuances. Madhuja Mukherjee alerts us to a self-conscious, strategic aspect of the studio culture evident in Bharatlakshmi's use of two elephants in their logo in contrast to the single elephant in the familiar New Theatres icon.[22]

I would draw the reader's attention to a startling sequence from Madhu Bose's popular *social, Abhinaya* (1938) that works as a prototype for the 'ludic reflexivity', which began to pervade the stylistic idiom of Bharatlakhsmi *socials* from the late 30s. Such a sensibility, frequently mobilized in combination with sardonic or deadpan humour, would involve conscious foregrounding of textual and cultural processes that oversee legitimacy of modern life worlds. The sequence in question acquires a prophetic dimension owing to its uncanny similarity to one of Satyajit Ray's celebrated anecdotes. In the introduction to his collection *Our Films, Their Films*, Ray

narrated his frustrating experience during the late 40s at an informal conference involving established technicians of the studio era. His intentions to negotiate with a script was met with sarcastic and bizarre enquiries regarding the number of 'climaxes' or 'song-dance items' his story could offer. [23] This tale of recurring crescendos has been extensively cited by regional critics to demonstrate the theatrical incongruities infesting mainstream industry and their naive public consumption. In the sequence from *Abhinaya*, a blind, aged writer (Ahindra Chowdhury) on approaching the manager of a popular theatre company (Tulsi Lahiri) with his script, gets increasingly outraged by demands for sensational thrills such as song-dances, lamentations, suicide, murder, and finally elopement or adultery, which is claimed to be the dominant formula. The sequence plunges into a further level of irony when the manager in order to demonstrate contemporary trends in theatrical performance switches on a huge television screen. The performance on display, a domestic wrangle between a 'wayward' woman and her suspicious husband, bears a curious resemblance to a generic mise-en-scene of domestic interiors to be mobilized by a variety of film *socials* across the decade.

In fact, due attention to intricacies in the uses of mise-en-scene could help us to decode such reflexive tropes persistent in popular cinema from the period. In the dominant volume of *socials* the patriarchal predicaments are rendered palpable through the protagonists' entrapment and continual encounters with the overwhelming presence of modernity symbolized by plethora of signs representing urban homes and public spaces (for eg. *Abhinaya* , *Jiban Sangini*, *Garmil* or *Samadhan*.). Emblematic arrangements of mise-en scene and editing patterns would systematically foreground an array of inanimate objects such as smoking pipes, pianos, flower vases, staircases, brass decorations, abstract paintings etc. that often seek to compete with the dramatic action and dialogue to attract audience attention. For example orchestrated camera movements, repeated reframing, uses of multiple mirrors frequently draw attention to the structuring of cinematic performances and also endow the seemingly bizarre assortment of props and set designs with an autonomous agency into the process of narration.

I would argue that in such instances the specific system of

organizing details that the melodramatic form excels in, serves to symbolize the absent coordinates of historical modernity, albeit through a processes of displacement and condensation. Thus, through such stylized cinematic treatment the spaces of modernity acquire enunciative capacities that move beyond the limited and static parameters of theatrical framing from which they may have originally derived inspiration (as in *Abhinaya*). Such strategic uses of cinematic devices often laced with a ludic excess facilitated the articulation of contradictory moral valences in operative frameworks of colonial modernity.

Padma Devi: *The Color Queen*
Film India, December 1937

The Bharatlakshmi samples of the same genre are distinguished by a secondary set of specificities. Firstly, as indicated above, most of their vehicles involve compulsive evocation of adulterous liaisons, through plots regularly featuring promiscuous male protagonists, marital infidelity, bigamy or diegetic situations that threaten the moral legibility of domestic spheres. A dominant narrative strategy in these films entailed a splitting of the feminine agency into two contrasting social forces, usually involving a mapping of the nurturing-destructive binary onto the spatial registers of home-world divide. Interestingly, in order to locate the masculine moral dilemma in relation to the legitimacy of patriarchal values in the emergent public domain, the same narratives customarily rupture these binaries through the use of ludicrous tropes. The plot of *Abhinaya*, dealing with a philandering husband's reignited passion for his disaffected wife after she attains success as stage actress, is an interesting case in point. Similarly in *Grihalakshsmi* and *Ganyer Meye*, the persecuted housewives (both played by Padma Devi) are endowed with a specific sort of agency that allows for their symbolic relocation into the public sphere as amateur or professional performers. Incidentally, the performances in question tend to dissolve their traditional identity markers producing transitory spaces of enigma for the masculine agencies concerned. Furthermore, the fragmentary and farcical treatment of such moral dilemmas followed by contrived narrative resolutions

in most cases (eg. *Jiban Sangini*, *Grihalakshmi and Ganyer Meye*) bear allusions to the inadequacies of conventional representational tropes in the face of emerging demands for social as well as legal reform of conjugal relations, already circulating in public forums by the late 40s.[24] One could argue that such melodramatic renderings of conjugal tensions seem to operate, however obliquely, as representational analog for the ongoing transactions between the discourses of legal reform and socio-political aspirations of 'independence'.

Secondly, the mobilization of such narrative tropes systematically incorporate a variety of references to the prevalent conventions and biographical anecdotes pertaining to the popular film industry as well as other generic forms. For instance, the narrative of *Abhinaya* could easily be read as a popular reworking of Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Maanbhanjan* (1895) that in itself bears subtle reflections on critical questions regarding identity, performance and the public.[25] Such intertextual mechanisms often attain the status of a meta-commentary on the diegetic universe owing to the incorporation of 'ludic' strategies in comic interruptions as well as the central plot line. For example in *Ganyer Meye*, the ridicule is directed specifically at the incongruities in industrial conventions and practices, harangued by progressive film critics and intellectuals. Here the sarcasm centers on the ludicrous fancies of an established scriptwriter portrayed by the film's own writer Bidhayak Bhattacharya. [26] Similarly in *Grihalakshmi* (also written by Bhattacharya) elaborate comic situations centre around a production unit in the process of shooting a film titled *Romeo- Rami*, a triangular romance involving Shakespeare's literary creation Romeo, the historical poet Bidyapati and his love object, the mythical washer woman Rami.[27] The central plotline of *Grihalakshmi* involves the travails of a doting housewife to win back her straying husband by masquerading as 'Hindustani' milkmaid.[28] At a crucial point in the narrative, Padma Devi portraying the seemingly docile bride in a feudal household makes a startling revelation that she is already endowed with the requisite knowledge and efficiency to trace and reclaim her philandering husband in an alien city. The endowment of such agency in this case is legitimized by intertextual rather than social or divine authority as a cursory glance at the actress's

career reveals.[29]

Padma Devi's career in the Bengali film industry was predated by her brief but successful stint at Bombay during the early 30s. According to biographical accounts, her husband's sudden disappearance necessitated her to relocate for work in order to support her children. After an initial struggle she gained foothold in the Bombay industry and achieved public recognition as the 'Colour Queen' through her appearance in the first Cinecolour production *Kisan Kanya* (Imperial Film Company, 1937). Her close association with influential personalities like Baburao Patel, the editor of the popular trade journal *Filmindia*, allowed her to travel back and forth between Calcutta and Bombay during the 40s. Interestingly by the time she started regularly appearing in Bharatlakshmi productions, Padma Devi was an efficient performer having proficiency in Hindi as well as other regional languages. In a similar vein, a song sequence from *Ganyer Meye* describing the estranged wife's initiation in the film industry features contemporary posters from filmmaker Gunamay Bandyopadhyay's earlier box office success *Jiban Sangini*. Here again the citation attains narrative significance by contrast, as the earlier film dealing with a similar theme, the persecuted woman is denied agency, leaving her to resolve the crises through penance and perseverance alone. Evidently, in all such self-reflexive instances, the comical energy frequently seeps into the main plotline layering it with uneasy ironic connotations that allude to the historical exhaustion of existing representational as well as social codes.

Reframing transition narratives

Thus thematic and formal elaborations on conjugal relations in the 40s studio *socials* speak volumes about popular cinema's inscription into larger debates around colonial modernity as well as the ensuing crises in existing representational practices. Alongside, various historical evidences hint towards a conscious redefinition of regional film culture in the 50s, in tandem with crucial transformations in industrial, marketing, aesthetic as well as critical practices. As I shall demonstrate below, while the dominant critical paradigm articulated a specific notion of 'reform' in the face of widespread populism, a series of parallel and often
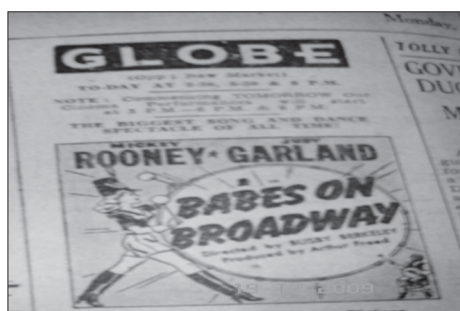
contending discourses were accumulating charge in the popular domain itself. Taking into consideration the constellation of demands it might be possible to re-evaluate Bengali cinema's transition into the 50s as a series of responses to a desired 'adulthood' in its myriad connotations (autonomy/ independence/ maturity/ progress).

It may not be out of place to begin with a few speculations regarding transitions in the regional star system based on the accumulating evidence. It is worth noting that the dominant stars of 40s popular cinema were customarily represented as authoritative, aggressive and even decadent figures in their feudal or modern incarnation. The performances of younger and rising talents across the decade, such as Rabin Majumdar, Asitbaran or Nirmal Kumar, even when they acted as romantic leads were frequently overshadowed by the display of masculine authority by veteran character actors with stage experience (eg. Chhabi Biswas or Ahindra Chowdhury). It is also worth remembering that the gradual industrial dominance of *socials* over *mythologicals* around late 30s is not merely an economic or formal issue but also one which involved transformations pertaining to gender and performative norms.[30] For example, the fact that eminent film star Kanan Devi had acted in male roles in a few instances during her early career draws attention to an interesting aspect of the *mythological* genre. Dhiraj Bhattacharya's reminiscences amusingly capture the cultural anxieties underlying such industrial demands. He speaks at length about his obsessive desire to be cast as decadent characters, even as villain, in contemporary settings in order to shed his effeminate screen image of a traditional deity, which caused him ample public embarrassment. Ironically, the historical phase that marks the fulfillment of such desires (Bhattacharya portrays the decadent husband in *Abhinaya*) also testifies to gradual permeation of ludic tropes into the popular, and the consequent assemblage of a reformist critique of colonial masculinity. In fact the ludic incorporation of mythological elements in Premankur Atarhthy's *Abatar* (1941) could perhaps be read as ironic commentary on such industrial transformations.[31] This initial phase of such reformist critique addresses an image of the star that is rooted in a masculine, aristocratic milieu frequently

transgressing moral limits imposed upon the traditional hero figure. I wonder whether the palpable vulnerability of the romantic hero in the 50s articulates a larger social anxiety regarding notions of masculinity that such contemporary reformist discourses inevitably puts into question.[32] The image of a modern, romantic persona that Uttam Kumar came to symbolize in the 50s may historically involve a reformist construction of the prevalent star image in accordance to the new legal and social constraints placed on the masculine subject. This complex discursive web developing during the turn of the decade could possibly shed light on the configuration of a 'historically feminized space'[33] so intimately tied to Uttam Kumar's star persona. Thus, it may not be an accident that the codification of the new romantic couple is almost coterminous significant legal amendments such as the Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.

Jagadish Chowkhani, the son of the late studio proprietor Babulall, claimed that the demise of Bharatlakshmi was partly caused by the rise of a modern ethos in the industry culture that endowed centrality and power to new stars and independent producers. But his observations also revealed a general unease with emerging representational styles almost echoing his father's alleged preference for 'serious melodramas' of the pre-independence era.[34] In retrospect his cultural taste might seem exceptional for a young man during the 50s, likely to be in tune with the new film romances and the emerging star couple. However, contrary to public memory

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, August 31, 1942

and existing historical narratives, the newspaper archives establish Chowkhani's reaction as a fairly commonplace one. Both traditional and contemporary studies of Bengali popular cinema have taken for granted the sensational popularity of the star duo, ignoring the context of historical reception. My own work on the period reveals the vigorous hostility towards 'romantic films' that started accumulating charge immediately after the release of *Sagarika* (February 1, 1956). Even as the Uttam-Suchitra films gained

widespread success, popular journals like *Roopmancha* as well as mainstream dailies such as *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* and *Dainik Basumati,* among others, were mobilizing public opinion against the 'undisciplined modernity' of youthful passion, often reverberating into public feedbacks and addressing larger concerns about regional community life.[35] Moreover, the sporadic resentments of the period appear to formulate a specific notion of reform that is quite at odds with the dominant discourse of Calcutta Film Society as well as the aesthetic configuration of the earlier 'film sense' discourse.[36] However, such revelations also draw attention to prevalent modes of historical research and their attitude towards reading the archives, on which I shall now reflect in greater detail.

Sarmishtha Gooptu's recent book on Bengali cinema provides an interesting revisionist account of popular cinema during period under enquiry. She argues that parallel to the development of an 'all-India film' during late 40s and early 50s, 'Bengali film industry moved towards the creation of a singular regional cinema' that would
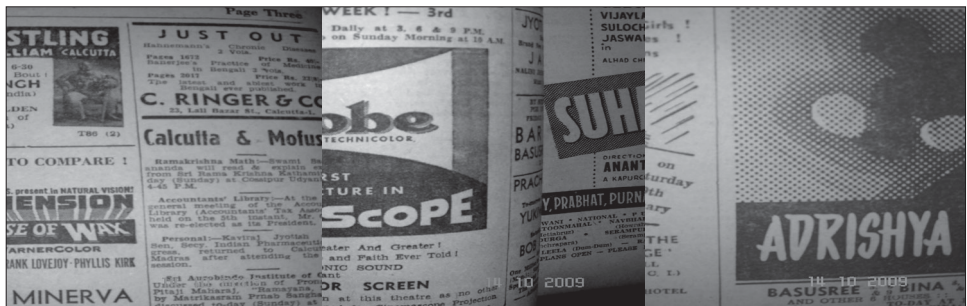
Amrita Bazaar Patrika, January 10, 1954   Feb 19, 1954   January 3, 1954

ensure the industry's survival amidst various emerging challenges in the socio-political as well as economic arena. Gooptu outlines the transformation as an attendant shift from the industry's "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' ".[37] She further maintains that the conscious creation of a culturally specific regional cinema "cannot be neatly attuned with the imperatives of contemporary political economy. Built upon the certain ingrained notions of selfhood and difference, it spoke of the vibrancy of the

Amrita Bazaar, January 15, 1954

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, Feb 19, 1954

region in the face of the rise of the nation." [38] Gooptu bases her argument on various observable tendencies in the industry that articulated a communitarian sensibility through exploitation of cultural affects and generic tropes familiar to a Bengali audience. Historical evidences scattered in the archives definitely articulate a public consensus for regional aesthetic that supports her case. However, this argument, despite its merit, is predicated on a specific method of using archives more common to mainstream historical enquiries. In other words the regional tendencies Gooptu correctly identifies would merely constitute one amongst the many contradictory discourses erupting at this historical juncture. These various other tendencies when plotted against the alleged discourse of Bengali nationalism would render the picture more complex than she presents it to be. Here, I wish to distinguish between the processes of 'data retrieval', which treat the archives as a source of supplementary evidence and the processes of 'data mapping' which considers archives as constituted of layers that require to be juxtaposed in order to derive meaning. I further contend that the latter method is of critical significance to the discourse of film history, which deals centrally with various subsidiary media. For example, histories of the cinematic institution shall remain incomplete unless one takes into consideration the very function of the public domain where production and consumption of cultural meanings are mediated through processes of promotion and marketing.

Mapping the archives

Let me elucidate the research problem and the relevant methodological distinction cited through my own work on print

archives of the period that problematizes both traditional and revisionary accounts of the transition narrative. Barbara Klinger's work on Douglas Sirk and the 50s domestic melodrama in the U.S. gives us a few relevant clues in this context. She attempts to problematize the retroactive formulation of 'progressive tendencies' in a variety of film

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, February 19, 1954

melodrama by drawing attention to the promotional strategies that frame their contemporary consumption. Her analysis, based on the print archives, reveals that most of the films that seem to bear subversive charges through their focus on moral decadence or sexual tensions would be products of conscious marketing strategies that constitute what she describes as 'local' or transitional genres, in this case 'the Hollywood adult film of the 50s'. [39] Klinger's approach draws attention to the ways in which subsidiary media constitutive of the cinematic institution not only provide sources of information regarding film texts and public opinion, but rather contribute to production of meaning and their retrospective public consumption. If we consider the print archives as such a dynamic space where social discourses meaningfully compete to derive public attention and thereby modulate intended generic and textual codes, the histories of Bengali cinema's transition into the 50s would appear more multifaceted   than an idealistic journey towards 'progress' or a one-dimensional conflict between 'nationalist' and 'regionalist' tendencies.

The range of promotional materials available at the newspaper archives shed new light on the contested location of film texts in the public sphere. For the sake of brevity I shall restrict my observations to a sample of archival materials that I have began to access, for the time being concentrating on the popular English daily *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*.
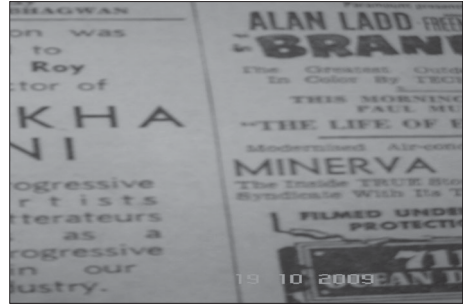
Even a cursory scanning of the newspaper advertisements from 40s and 50s draws attention to certain details in textual design and spatial arrangements, which problematize our critical assumptions regarding generic and qualitative distinctions that textual analysis
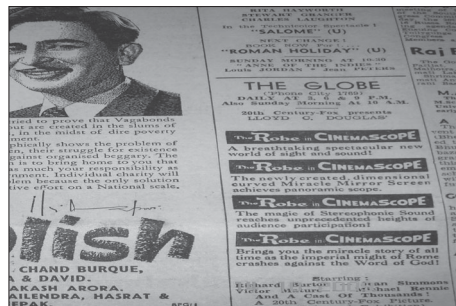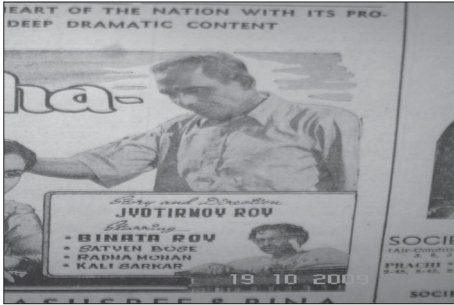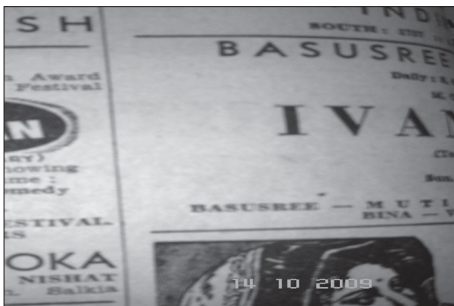
Amrita Bazaar Patrika, May 5, 1951

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, May 20, 1951

often confirms. In such public forums the standard repertoire of Bengali popular dramas were regularly placed alongside other spectacular genres and foreign language products resulting in juxtapositions that would often produce comic effects that are significant. For example the contemporary promotion of a night long screening on account of the Janmashtami festivities consisted of popular melodramas such as *Shapmukti* (Pramathesh Barua, 1939) or *Banglar Meye* (Naresh Mitra, 1941). However the promotion acquires farcical effects by virtue of its assignment next to a bawdy poster for the Busby Berkeley musical *Babes on Broadway* (1941). [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, August 31, 1942] In a similar vein, promotion for re-release of the domestic fare *Sonar Sangsar* (Debaki Bose, 1936) would be accommodated in the same box that advertises the hall's next release, an exotic adventure film from the Tarzan series (*Tarzan's New York Adventures,* 1942) [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, September 28, 1945].

More interestingly, film promotion would invariably compete with myriad forms of popular entertainment, generically described as

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, February 19, 1954

'amusements'. A detailed scanning of newspapers from early 50s reveals a disparate range of entertainment forms as well as technological developments that would make significant impact on the public imagination often compelling film production concerns to reconfigure their promotional strategies. If we consider archival samples from 1954

(Jan – March), the promotional milieu clearly reveals its sensational nature that would influence regional popular cinema to reorient their modes of public address. Apart from regular Hindi and English features, the competitive forms varied from circus shows (eg. Kamala Circus ads), 3-D technology (eg. Minerva Theatre ad for Andre De Toth's *House of Wax,* 1953), Cinemascope projection and new sound technology (eg. Globe cinema's promotion for Henry Koster's *The Robe*, 1953), cabaret and dance ball shows (eg. regular ads by Great Eastern Hotel and the Firpo's restaurant), wrestling matches at the Fort William (regular ads featuring sensational wrestlers including the popular star Dara Singh) and most interestingly promotion of 'adult films', about which I discuss below.[40] The miscellaneous images below, taken from the promotional pages of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, should give an approximate indication of the Bengali spectator's general encounter with media images associated with cinema.

The promotional strategies for Sree Bharatlakshmi Picture's vehicle *Maa o Chhele* should drive home the point I make. In contrast to its thematic design, a domestic drama centering on family ties, the film's promotion situates it as a modern, star studded vehicle. A series of ads before and after the film's release advertize it as the biggest assortment of stars in the Indian film history. The paradox is apparent from the ads that describe the film as the 'story of a mother and son' offering 'salutations at the alter (sic) of motherhood' and simultaneously announces it as the first Indian film to feature 43 stars and boasts a budget of 'half a million'.

The logic is complemented in the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* review of *Maa o Chhele* by influential resident critic Nirmal Kumar Ghosh popularly known as NKG [January 15, 1954]. NKG's review draws the reader's attention to the pilgrimage sequence in the film, which in terms of the plot is associated with the mother's process of penance. But the montage of outdoor location shots constituting the pilgrimage are extrapolated as apt instances of narrative and technical sophistication, providing the modern audience with an opportunity for a virtual excursion, evidently bearing comparison with spectacular uses of cinematic apparatus afforded by Western films.

The paradox takes on a curious dimension if we compare the

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, March 3, 1954
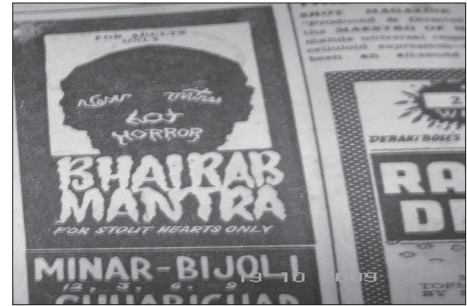

Amrita Bazaar, May 5, 1951

promotion of another contemporary film by an established filmmaker and renowned progressive writer, Premendra Mitra, dealing with a relatively serious social theme. One of the ads for *Moila Kagaj* describes it as 'Bengal's boldest bid for international honour in the film world' [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, January 5, 1954] and consequent promotional images consistently situate it as an exceptional film with international aspirations. If we take notice of the parallel promotion for Raj Kapoor's celebrated production *Boot Polish* (1954) dealing with similar social problems of beggary and destitution, the semantic dynamics is rendered more explicit. Prominent ads for *Boot Polish,* such as the one cited below, show a specific form of juxtaposition in text and images that attempt to legitimize an alternative generic sensibility in contrast to the conventional mobilization of stars or emotional effects. Here the star's image offers to legitimize the product by drawing comparison with popular cinema's developing inclination to address contemporary reality and attendant socio-political crises.

By this time the marketing of 'progressive genres', often citing realist conventions and reformist causes, becomes a recognized practice at a national and by implication at the regional level. For example, the R.K. Films' promotions consciously invoke the issue of nationalism and social reform in order to identify its new film as socially relevant exercise. At this point it is worth recounting a series of crucial affairs that consolidated the development of a progressive, reformist discourse around the cinematic form. In the recent past the formation of Calcutta Film Society (1947) along with an array of historically significant events including visits to Calcutta by internationally renowned artists like Jean Renoir (1949 and 1950) and Vsevolod Pudovkin (January, 1951) as well as the first

International Film Festival of India (1952), opened up a horizon of expectations around possibilities of formal and thematic experiments in Bengali cinema. Progressive critics have cited internal premonitions of such alternative development in exceptional artistic instances across the decade such as *Bhabikaal* (Premendra Mitra, 1945), *Udayer Pathey* (Bimal Roy, 1944), *Bhuli Naai* (Hemen Gupta, 1948), *Paribartan* (Satyen Bose, 1949) or *Chinnamul* (Nimai Ghosh, 1951), among others. According to contemporary press and other biographical accounts Pudovkin was shown unedited rushes of two Bengali films at a private screening (in late January, 1951).[41] Both the films, namely Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* and Jyotirmoy Roy's *Shankhabani*, were considered as works of artistic and social significance by mainstream critics as well as contemporary detractors of the popular. In order to pursue the argument in process, it is instructive to consider the promotion of *Shankhabani* which was released soon after (May 11, 1951). As the first directorial venture of the progressive writer, who had won acclaim as the scriptwriter of Bimal Roy's landmark *Udayer Pathey*, the film highlighted a socially sensitive theme. It also

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, April 1, 1951

testified to the progressive lineage by casting the noted director Satyen Bose as well as Radhamohan Bhattacharya and Binota Roy (nee Bose) of *Udayer Pathey* fame in lead roles. From April, 1951, onwards regular ads began to appear in popular newspapers that clearly located the film as belonging to a specific genre and also formulated a relevant mode of public address. As the archives reveal, the early ads made a direct appeal to an audience concerned with the 'prestige of Bengali motion pictures' to support the movie as 'harbinger of a new era' A second set of promotional items featured images of its ensemble of artists and foregrounded its
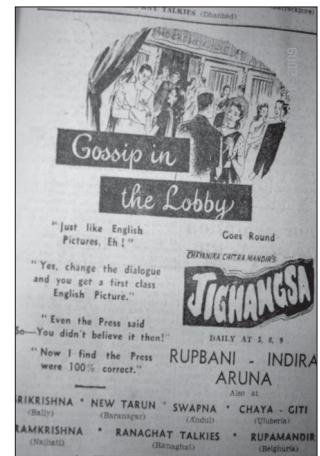
Amrita Bazaar, May 11, 1951

'progressive outlook' framing a 'deep dramatic content'. [42] After its release the promotional pattern attested the film's contribution to the qualitative improvement of Bengali film culture and identified its ideal audience as the modern spectatorial community that film society movement had began to mobilize.

As the historical interface reveals, reformist demands pitched at an aesthetic and intellectual plane would have to necessarily compete with popular perceptions regarding the cinematic institution's progressive possibilities. It is interesting to note that such competing discourses in the popular domain occurring in the wake the famed International Film festival and the making of *Pather Panchali,* testify to a multiplication of genres that can begin to accommodate the notion of 'art cinema' as a viable regional enterprise. In other words, a mapping of archival data reveals processes of discursive framing in the public interface that begins to problematize the narratives of 'arrival' as merely successive achievements in cinematic styles and critical sensibilities.

The ensuing dynamic reaches a strange culmination within a short time when landmark instances of modernist aesthetic begin to get framed by populist discourses. A promotional ad for Vittorio DeSica's festival sensation *Miracle in Milan* in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, [see Figure 16] reveals that the film was screened with a Hindi commentary along with a series of popular attractions such as the Laurel and Hardy short *The Chimps* (1932), 'Film Star Cricket Festival', and 'Play Back Singers'. [43]

It is instructive to notice a set of parallel developments, generally ignored in studies on the period, that render the process of historical mapping more exciting. The late 40s saw the gradual codification of transitory popular genres which included *crime/detection films* as well as *supernatural dramas.* Beginning with *Kalochaya* (Premendra Mitra, 1948)[44], the appearance of a series of films such as *Kankal* (Naresh Mitra, 1950), *Bhairab Mantra* (Mani Ghosh, 1951), *Jighangsha* (Ajay Kar, 1951), *Sanket* (Ardhendu Mukhopadhyay, 1951), *Hanabari* and *Adrisya Manush* (both Premendra Mitra 1952 and 1953) testify to the emergence of this popular trend. Sarmishtha Gooptu has attempted to locate the tendency within a larger discourse of Bengali nationalism during late 40s that sought to generate commercial products catering to a regional taste. Such activities

would involve a variety of generic instances including *quasi-historical films* and *biopics* (*Kabi Joydeb*, 1941, *Mahakabi Kalidas*, 1942, *Michael Madhusudan* and *Vidyasagar*, both 1950) as well as *patriotic films* (*Bhuli Nai*, 1948 and *Chattogaram Astragar Lunthan*, 1949) based on historical events and figures popular at the regional level. This general phenomenon would subsume and thereby explain the persistence of the new genre of *crime film* as an 'extension of the Bengali crime fiction market' Thus she goes on to argue that "regional signifiers acquired an unprecedented preeminence, unlike in an earlier period when 'Bengali' signifiers were balanced in terms of 'all-India' markers, whether in respect of the Bengal industry's double versions, or its use of stars like Saigal and Ashok Kumar to create an 'all-India product,".[45] While the regional popularity of literary genres like detective and adventure stories is well established, there is no major evidence to explain their relevance to film productions at this specific point in history. However, mapping available archival evidence onto a relevant historical event helps us to relate this generic upsurge to the multitude reform narratives cited earlier. A careful scanning of the visual organization of contemporary promotional materials brings into relief a major historical dynamic that reinforces my earlier line of argument. The proliferations of crime thrillers were coterminous with ongoing transformations in the discourse of censorship at a national level. The power of certification of films remained with regional authorities during the pre-colonial era as indicated by the Cinematograph Act of 1918. The post- colonial period saw several attempts to formalize these random diversities in regional control beginning with the Bombay Board's 'suggestion in regard to production of films' in 1948. The consequent appointment of an enquiry committee under the chairmanship of S.K. Patil (August, 1949) testified to the reformist zeal to oversee the promotion and development of 'healthy entertainment'. The set of formal amendment procedures achieved further consolidation through the Cinematograph Act in 1949 (First Amendment, Act 39), that introduced two categories of certificates distinguishing between universal exhibition ('U') and restriction for only an adult audience ('A'). Finally, with effect from January 15, 1951, the autonomy of regional censor boards were abolished giving formal consensus to

the Central Board of Film Censors with its head office in Bombay and regional board offices in Madras and Calcutta.[46] The stratified method of control opted by the new censorship regime gave rise to a set of creative responses on aesthetic and promotional practices of the era. Archival evidences clearly suggest the growth of a broad category of 'adult entertainment' to compete with the range of sensational amusements already described above. The restrictive measures were creatively exploited by regional sectors to modulate promotion in the face of ongoing national competition as well as the demands for 'maturity' of regional products. A number of genres strategically displayed the 'Adult' certificate on their promotional campaigns to presumably sensationalize the product but also to address a modern audience constituency. Evidences from *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* between 1951 to 1954, draws attention to a variety of instances that include Hollywood features with adult theme (eg. the campaign of *Because of Eve*, 1948), an assortment of erotic exploitation fares masquerading as educational tracts for adults (eg. *Secrets of Life,* original release year unknown), Hindi *socials* with suggestive themes (eg. *Bikhre Moti*, 1951), among others.

As the advertisement for *Because of Eve* from 1954 demonstrates, most often these campaigns would be placed alongside more conventional regional fares (a Bengali *social Maa o Chheley* and a *mythological Maa Annapurna* in this case). To cite another relevant example, the above promotion for S. M. Yusuf's *Bikhre Moti* from 1951, categorically announces novel thrills meant for adults only. Similar promotions of the film drew attention to its 'bold and exciting theme' with the image of a woman in an erotically suggestive pose underneath. [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, May 11, 1951]. In the above image, the juxtaposition of the official adult certification, with such sensational promotional phrases and the intimate image of two women clearly allow a free play of public imagination that could perhaps compete with lures from foreign products as well as parallel indigenous genres. For example, the same ad is displayed beside the promotion for *Shankhabani* that foregrounds the latter's 'progressive outlook'.

It is interesting to notice that the allegedly 'Bengali' genre of *crime/detection thrillers* started investing in similar practices as soon as the adult certificate arrived on the scene. Circulating around

the same time promotional campaigns for supernatural or crime dramas such as *Bhairab Mantra, Sanket,* and the hugely popular *Jighangsa,* would often seek to compete with the erotically suggestive Hindi and foreign features. Most of these promotional materials would feature sensational images such as skeletons or harrowing faces juxtaposed with a textual address towards an audience with requisite maturity and tolerance. For example the promotional campaigns for *Bhairab Mantra* couples its adult certification with appeal for audience 'with stout hearts'. While ads for the popular thriller *Jighangsha* would advertize its repertoire of 'roaring, raving shocks' with a conscious evocation of Hollywood style technical finesse. [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, April 15 1951]. One of the posters for the film juxtaposes the hand drawn image of a sophisticated crowd mostly in Western attire at the cinema hall lobby with imaginary excerpts from their gossip on the film's international standards in matters of technique and aesthetics. Interestingly again, the same ad for *Jighangsha*, cited below, is framed on both sides by promotions of *Shankhabani* and *Bikhre Moti* mentioned earlier. The consequent ads would legitimize *Jighangsha* as Bengal's prestige picture of the year, echoing the *Shankhabani* rhetoric discussed earlier. [*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, May 12, 1951**].

Coda

   Despite significant achievements in theorization of forms and sharpening of analytic tools, recent trends in cinema studies have refrained from addressing some central questions pertaining to historiography and research methodologies. One could argue that revisionist models have developed sophisticated modes of theoretical and textual analysis rather than producing complementary models for history writing. Contemporary discussions pertaining to methodology have most been restricted to heuristic anxieties regarding objectivity and verification, problems of data access, reliability of popular narratives (biographies, journalistic accounts, interviews etc.). While such issues continue to be of legitimate concern for historians of cinema, I have attempted to displace such pragmatic concerns for the time being in order to foreground a set of conceptual problems regarding historiography.

   I have tried to establish that evidence of publicity materials when

contexualized and mapped onto relevant formal and industrial developments could modulate our understanding of multifaceted historical forces shaping a regional film culture. This process would require a specific method of deployment and analysis of evidence that is at odds with the standard practice of 'data retrieval'. Such conventional methods attempt to assemble arbitrary archival data into a systematic pool of information for their strategic mobilization. Evidently, this process neither treats the 'historical interface' itself as an active participant in the process of meaning production nor addresses the specific configuration (structure, organization, modes of address) of information sources. In other words, methods of data retrieval would facilitate reading of evidences at face value often resulting in a simplistic and linear rendering of historical processes. I argue that a sensitization to the structuring of archives that the method of 'data mapping' provides, could help the film historian to achieve a more subtle understanding of the research object as well as to conceive of complementary models for narrative production. This is especially relevant in case of the cinematic institution, where the historical interfaces have crucial investments into the very discourses they accommodate. Perhaps one could describe this method of archival scanning as 'spectral' owing to their facilitation of unexpected collisions among disparate data that often reveal overarching structures and patterns hidden to the commonsensical eye seeking to retrieve mere information. Such methodological approaches, that allow for various levels of connection amongst historical data could perhaps inform the film historian's conceptual framework and eventually guide the processes of building new archival forms and designs. Incidentally the design of Gourangaprasad Ghosh's popular historical database Sonar *daag*, cited earlier, provides us with such an alternative conception of archival structuring and data mapping. Ghosh's narrative breaks down the linear arrangement of conventional histories to allow for myriad juxtapositions of data and unforeseen relations between historical objects. Considered non-academic and populist by conventional standards, this mode of narrative production that predates the logic of digital hyper linking comes closest to what I have tried to describe as spectral processes of data mapping.

References:

[1] The emergence of a 'new melodrama' in the 50s with significant generic specificities has been identified and charted by Moinak Biswas in a number of articles since the late 90s. Biswas's work critically reflects on thematic and formal intricacies of the 'new popular', which problematize the conventional hierarchical opposition between 'realism' and 'melodrama' under discussion here. For recent versions see Moinak Biswas, 'Saharer pathe: Uttam Kumar o panchasher nabya melodrama', *Ababhash* 5/3, 2005, pp.183- 200 and 'In the Mirror of an Alternative Globalism: The Neorealist Encounter in India', in Laura E Ruberto and Kristi M Wilson (eds) *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2007). Dulali Nag's parallel argument about the star pair focuses primarily on the reformulation of the 'women's question' in post-colonial Bengal and in my opinion, uses thematic reading of an assumed representative text, *Agni Pariksha* (1954), to illustrate an argument about social history. See Dulali Nag, 'Love in the Time of Nationalism: Bengali Popular Cinema of the 1950's', *Economic and Political Weekly* April 4, 1998, pp. 779-787. For my critique of Nag's essay see Subhajit Chatterjee, Chapter 5, '(Mis)reading Romance: An Enquiry Concerning Representation of 'Love' in Bengali Literature and Cinema', unpublished PhD. diss. Manipal University, January 2008.

[2] Ray's own perspectives are elaborated in, 'What is Wrong with Indian Films?'(1948) in *Our Films Their Films* 3rd edition (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993), pp. 19-24; 'Atiter Bangla chhobi' (1978) in *Bishay chalachitra,* 5th edition (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2002), pp. 37-42; *Jokhon Chhoto Chhilum* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1982). The formation of Calcutta Film Society (1947) formalized this critical ethos , endorsed periodically by amateur writings in the vernacular. See Kamal Majumdar, Chidananda Dasgupta , Satyajit Ray etal. (eds.) *Chalacchitra: Pratham parjay* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1950). For an influential version such critique of Indian popular cinema see the later writings of Ray's film society colleague and reformist peer Chidananda Dasgupta. *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinem*a. (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1991) and *Seeing is Believing: Selected Writings on Cinema* (New Delhi:Viking Penguin

Publishers, 2008).

[3] Mriganka Sekhar Ray, 'The Birth of a Film Culture', *West Bengal,* 1993, p. 19.

[4] Echoing Satyajit Ray's observations decades later, Mriganka Sekhar Ray observed, "Most of the Indian filmmakers at this time were under the hypnotic spell of Hollywood. But they never cared for a creative assimilation of Hollywood's superb craftsmanship; they only basked in the tinsel glamour." ibid. p.19. For a more contemporary formulation see Supriya Dasgupta, 'Bharatiya chalacchitre Hollywood priti' in Kamal Majumdar, Chidananda Dasgupta , Satyajit Ray etal. (eds.) *Chalacchitra: Pratham parjay*, pp. 33-39.

[5] Suryo Bandyopadhyay, 'Mahanayak Uttam Kumar: Swadesh o samay' in Partha Raha (ed.) *Bangla chalachitra chinta* (Calcutta: Raibatak Publishers, 1996), p. 107. The films cited in the passage broadly belong to the genre of *socials* but the citation does not follow any logical or sequential order. Neither do the films concerned share any strict thematic similarity, nor did their plots necessitate any systematic engagement with contemporary political movements. For eg. *Achyut Kanya* (1939), a reformist *social* set in a rural context is a love story dealing with the issue of 'untouchability' whereas *Dhooli* (1954) narrates the traumatic experiences of a traditional village drummer in an urban milieu mobilizing the framework of a triangular romance. *Bordidi* is a domestic melodrama adapted from celebrated writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's work and Bandyopadhyay could be referring either to the 1939 version or the 1957 remake. In all probabilities, Bandyopadhyay expresses his unconditional reservation against film *socials* exhibiting populist elements. Also see Kiranmay Raha, *Bengali Cinema* (Kolkata: Nandan Publications, 1991).

[6] Saibal Mitra, 'Uttam Kumar – Bangalir dukhodiner raktakamal', *Chitrabhaash*. Uttam Kumar Special Issue, Vol.36 (No.1-4), 2001, North Calcutta Film Society, p. 15. I have paraphrased Mitra's quotation due to its confusing and virtually untranslatable syntax. Also see the writings of Suryo Bandyopadhyay and Mriganka Sekhar Ray in the same issue of *Chitrabhaas*.

[7] Commentaries on modernist, progressive tendencies in early

works of Ray and Ghatak are voluminous in the regional language. For my current purpose I have restricted my descriptive account to the initial reformist rhetoric and their resurgence in contemporary writings. While most of the early writings were shaped by reformist agenda of film society movements pioneered by Ray himself along with his peers, the critical current underwent significant transformations during the 60s owing to the volatile political climate and the dominance of leftist intellectuals. The modernist-realist rhetoric infused with liberal humanist values came under attack from diverse quarters that demanded for a politically charged cinema able to address the contemporary historical contradictions. The uneven perspective on the nature and scope of progressive cinema in various phases of Chidananda Dasgupta's writings is symptomatic in this regard. See Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1980) and *Talking About Films* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1981).Interestingly, Ghatak's own films bore testimony to this internal critique from a very early stage. For a relevant and path breaking analysis see Moinak Biswas, '*Ajantrik* and the Logic of Remnant in Film Narration', *Thoughts*, Book Fair Issue 2000. Also see Subhajit Chatterjee, 'The Logic of the Gaze in Ghatak's Melodrama', unpublished Masters thesis, Jadavpur University, 2000.

[8]See Suresh Chabria and Paolo Cherchi Usai (eds.) *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema*, 1912-34 [filmography compiled by Virchand Dharamsey] (Pune: National Film Archive of India, 1994); Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (eds.) *Enclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, revised edition (British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, 1999); Kaushik Bhaumik, 'The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936', unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 2001; M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ravi Vasudevan (ed.), *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010).

[9] See Madhuja Mukherjee, *The New Theatres Ltd.*: *The Emblem of Art, The Picture of Success* (Pune: National Film Archive of India, 2009), Sarmishtha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, (New

Delhi: Roli Books, 2010); Moinak Biswas, 'The Couple and Their Spaces : *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now' in Ravi Vasudevan, (ed.) *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, New (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 122-144; Subhajit Chatterjee, **'**Bengali Popular Melodrama in the 50s' in *South Asian Journal*, Volume 29, July-September, 2010, pp.12-25 ; Moinak Biswas (ed.) *Apu and After* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2006); Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Ritwik Ghatak : A Return to Epic* (Bombay : Screen Unit 1982) ; Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar (eds.) *Ritwik Ghatak: Arguments/Stories* (Bombay :Screen Unit/ Research Centre for Cinema Studies,1987).

[10] Ranjani Mazumar's critical review of Ashish Rajadhyaksha's recent book on formal histories of Indian cinema is an interesting case in point. See 'Celluloid Machine at the Crossroads', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, No. 10 (March 6-12), 2010, pp. 33-39.

[11] Rajat Ray, 'Uttal chollisher dashak ebong nistaranga Bangla cinema' in *Banglar chalachitra o sanskriti'* (Kolkata: Srishti Prokashon, 2001), pp. 75-91. Ray's commentary is explicitly informed by the variety of teleological assumptions discussed above.

[12] Abhijit (Chandan) Goswami, currently working at Nandan Film Archives, Kolkata is an amateur researcher and the compiler of a number of significant databases on Bengali cinema. See Angsu Sur (ed.) *Bengali Film Directory* (Kolkata: Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, 1999) and *Bangla bhashay chalachchitracharcha: ekti tathyapanji* (Calcutta: North Calcutta Film Society, 1995). The following observations are based on his conversations with the author at the erstwhile Nandan Library premises in October, 2009.

[13] Abhijit Goswami himself confirmed that while noting down relevant details from newspapers reviews or promotional advertisements, the same images or texts, let alone associated materials, were never considered as significant in themselves and therefore worthy of archiving. While recording images would indeed present practical problems a decade ago, I shall address this tendency as a conceptual rather than pragmatic limitation in the discussion below.

[14] Editorial of the first issue of the journal *Indian Film Culture* (1961), quoted by Mriganka Sekhar Ray in 'The Birth of a Film Culture', p. 19.

[15] In fact a cursory scan of Rajat Ray's above mentioned list reveals

that around 55 of the tabulated films can be broadly categorized as *socials*, ie. films dealing with themes centered on the family, social relationships or emotional discords in a modern context. In the earlier decade the dominance of *socials* over popular genres such as *mythological*s or *devotionals* in various regional sectors was considered as signs of progress owing to their interest in contemporary socio-political issues. However, the optimism soon vanished in face of the genre's debasement into populism through undesirable linkages with melodramatic elements.

[16] The bulk of Bengali popular melodrama that articulated such critical textures, however, would not strictly qualify into the subgenre of 'social reform films' as defined in other regional contexts (films such as *Kunku* (1937) in Marathi or *Malapilla* (1938) or *Thyagabhoomi* (1939) in Telugu would be major examples of this tendency). For a relevant discussion see S.V, Srinivas, 'Gandian Nationalism and Melodrama in 30's Telugu Cinema', *Journal of the Moving Image*, No. 1 Autumn, 1999, pp. 14-36.

[17] Gourangaprasad Ghosh, *Sonar daag* (1982), 2nd edition (Kolkata: Jogmaya Prokashoni, 2002), p. 174.

[18] I have retained the spelling used on the nameplate at the late entrepreneur's own South Kolkata residence. In its early and middle phase the studio also had a huge investment in production of features in several regional languages. For basic information about the studio see Gourangaprasad Ghosh, *Sonar daag*, pp. 156-157 and Sougata Bhattacharya, 'Bharatlakshmi Studio' in *Baisakhi* 8 (2009), pp. 16-22.

[19] I thank my friend and colleague Madhuja Mukherjee for facilitating access to copies of these rarely discussed films. An essential critical study of the studio and its cultural significance is currently being supervised in The Media Lab, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University. For the time being I merely draw attention to a few significant tendencies that are relevant to the historiography of Bengali popular cinema.

[20] Such thematic patterns are explicit in films like *Parasmani* (Prafulla Ray, 1939), *Abatar* (Premankur Atarthy, 1941), *Jiban Sangini* (Gunamay Bandyopadhyay, 1942), *Grihalakshmi* (Gunamay Bandyopadhyay, 1945), *Ganyer Meye* (Gunamay Bandyopadhyay, 1951), and *Maa o Chheley* (Gunamay Bandyopadhyay, 1954). I have

excluded *Matir Ghar* (Hari Bhannja/Bidhayak Bhattacharya, 1944) to which I have not yet acquired access. However, the synopsis and images provided in the contemporary songbook for *Matir Ghar* do suggest its affinities with the studio's dominant stylistic and ideological concerns discussed below.

[21] I borrow the term from Robert Stam who classifies the 'ludic', 'aggressive' and 'didactic' as three modes of reflexivity in media texts with increasing degrees of political valence. See *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University press, 1992).The sorts of reflexivity afforded by Bharatlakshmi products would belong to the 'bohemian, flippant' variety associated with the ludic mode in Stam's terminology. My own intention is not to valorize certain popular, studio productions as 'progressive' or 'modernist', but rather to delineate a mechanism of critical commentary that enabled popular melodrama to respond creatively to historical dilemmas relevant to their thematic concerns (for eg. the accruing historical dilemmas and demands pertaining to the domain of conjugality and affect that constitute the very stuff of the melodramatic imagination).

[22] The point was analyzed by Mukherjee in her panel presentation on 'Film Studies, Archives, Film History' at the International Seminar on *Writing Histories for Indian Cinema* organized by the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, October 29, 2009.

[23] See the introduction to *Our Films Their Films,* p. 8.

[24] See Monmayee Basu, *Hindu Women and Marriage Law: From Sacrament to Contract* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[25] Tagore's *Maanbhanjan* had been adapted for the screen in the silent era by Naresh Mitra in 1923.

[26] Bidhayak Bhattacharya was intimately associated with Babulall Chowkhani and contributed to Bharatlakshmi productions mostly in the capacity of story or dialogue writer and also infrequently as an actor. Bhattachharya, who had a parallel career as a popular writer with a special skill for comic farces, consequently ventured into film direction during mid 40s through independent production concerns.

[27] At one point while convincing the heroine (Chandrabati Devi, who portrays the mistress of the male protagonist in the main plot) the producer claims that the novelty of the production will force

artists like Griffith, Korda and De Mille to leave their trade and seek recluse in the Bible. The shooting sequence itself contains sarcastic references to populist conventions in décor and costume as well as contemporary issues like film rationing during the War [28] The plot loosely alludes to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's popular novel *Indira* (1873), which was adapted for screen by Tarit Bose in 1937 and remade by Ardhendu Mukhopadhyay in 1950. In the original novel the female protagonist estranged from society owing to her abduction by dacoits, attempts to win back her husband by masquerading as a seductive house maid.

[29] See Gourangaprasad Ghosh, *Sonar daag* , p. 206. Also see Sadat Hasan Manto, *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World of the 1940s* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000).

[30] Kanan Devi and Dhiraj Bhattacharya's autobiographical accounts provide evocative accounts of the cultural dimension of such industrial transformations. See Kanan Devi, *Sabare Ami Nomi* (Kolkata: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1973); Dhiraj Bhattacharjya, *Jakhan Nayak Chhilum* (1956), 3rd edition (Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 2007).

[31] The plot of *Abatar* centers around the incarnation of Lord Narayana, Godess Lakshmi and their accomplice Narada to oversee the prevalent moral disorder on earth embodied by a decadent king under the vile influence of an alien invader. However, instead of developing a narrative of redemption through divine intervention, the plot narrates the moral lapses of the mythological figures themselves, who begin to inculcate modern values and thereby resemble character types in film *socials*, the philandering young hero, decadent aristocrat, the independent woman and so forth.

[32] Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay has noted a reconstruction of the male star in the image of an ordinary, middle class citizen in 50s romantic melodrama from a tradition of stardom having distinctly aristocratic or 'larger than life' appeal (for example Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, Pramathesh Barua or Chhabi Biswas). However, the important observation could gain critical significance if only placed in context of the transformations in industrial and narrative practices, as I refer to. See 'Chand aashey eklati', *Ekak Matra* 7/1, 2006, pp. 15-18.

[33] This valuable observation was made by Moinak Biswas in 'The Couple and Their Spaces', p. 131. However, my speculation in this

regard would require further evidence to validate itself.

[34] Interview with Jagadish Chowkhani, by Madhuja Mukherjee, September 2009.

[35] To my knowledge, no critical work on the period has ever mentioned this historically significant phenomenon. For a considerably detailed account of historical reception of Uttam-Suchitra romances see Subhajit Chatterjee, Chapter 4, '(Mis)reading Romance'. I have argued elsewhere that the representational texture of film romances produce a specific form of resistance to the normative demands of modern socialization thereby facilitating dual responses in the contemporary milieu. However, my observations regarding the critical and cultural significance of such debates require to be revised in light of new evidences obtained. See Chapter 5, '(Mis)reading Romance' and 'Bengali Popular Melodrama in the 50s', pp. 23-25.

[36] Multiple strands of critique that addressed formal and narrative specificities of popular cinema, particularly dominant in the aftermath of the transition into talkies. See Moinak Biswas, 'Bengali Film Debates: The Literary Liaison Revisited', *Journal of the Moving Image* , Autumn 1999, pp. 1-12 and Debiprasad Ghosh, *Chalachitrachinta*, (Kolkata: Pratibhash Publications, 1993).

[37] Sarmishtha Gooptu*, Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2010). p. 115.

[38] Ibid. p.116.

[39] See Barbara Klinger, "Local' Genres: The Hollywood Adult Film in the 1950s,' in Jacky Bratton, Pam Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds.) *Melodrama: Stage, Picture Screen* (London: BFI, 1994), pp. 134-146 and 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism Revisited: The Progressive Text', *Screen* , Volume 25(1), 1984, pp. 30-44. For a more elaborate version of her argument see *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[40] For a representative sample see *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, January 3-15, 1954

[41] See *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, January 28, 1951.

[42] See *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, May 3-11, 1951.

[43] See *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, February 19, 1954. The second item presumably refers to the recording of cricket match featuring regional film stars as part of the entertainment programme designed

to accompany the Calcutta exhibition schedule for the first International Film Festival (February-March, 1952). I have not been able to locate any detail about the third item which seems to be a film on popular singers in the industry.

[44] Sarmishtha Gooptu locates its origin in Pramathesh Barua's *Maya Kanan* which started production in 1947 but found release only in 1953 after Baruas's death. See Gooptu, *op cit.* p. 136.

[45] ibid. pp. 136-137.

[46] See Someswar Bhowmik, *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), pp. 69-73.

Notes

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