

# SRFTI *Take One*

Volume Three, Issue One, May 2023

edited by  
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Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute

Under Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India

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Biswa Bangla Sarani, E. M. Bypass Road,  
Panchasayar  
Kolkata - 700094

cover design  
Sudipto Shankar Roy

printed by  
Aphrodite  
1/254, Naktala  
Kolkata 700 047

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## *Director's Desk*

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It brings me great pleasure to introduce the latest volume of SRFTI Take One, our annual peer-reviewed research journal. This volume continues our tradition of fostering academic excellence and promoting diverse perspectives of Indian cinema, electronic, and digital media.

In this edition, we are proud to dedicate a focus section to the esteemed film maestro Mrinal Sen, as we celebrate his birth centenary this year. This section features an insightful article penned by the eminent writer, Samik Bandyopadhyay.

Research on cinema and digital media remains at the forefront of SRFTI's endeavours. As part of our commitment to independent researchers, we have included two papers from our fellowship program. Additionally, we are pleased to present two independent research papers on Filmmaking Pedagogy and Odia Cinema.

The third section of this volume delves into 'Gender and Media,' showcasing three outstanding articles presented at a National seminar hosted by SRFTI.

Furthermore, in honour of Satyajit Ray's birthday on 2nd May, SRFTI organized the 'Ray Memorial Lecture,' delivered by the eminent academic film critic Prof. N Manu Chakravarthy. His profound insights into Ray's films enrich the treasure trove of this volume.

We hope that readers will find a diverse range of topics in this issue, reflecting our commitment to supporting emerging scholars, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue, and embracing new research areas.

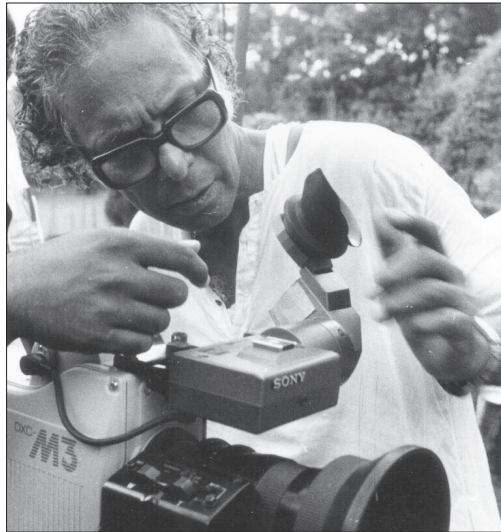
I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Editorial Team, Dean, Registrar, Film Research Officer and Faculties for their support in bringing this publication to fruition. Special thanks also go to the authors who have generously contributed their work to 'SRFTI Take One.' We are honoured to showcase their contributions.

Himansu Sekhar Khatua

Director, Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute



*Centenary Tribute* Mrinal Sen









## In Search of Sen's Politics

Samik Bandyopadhyay

It was one of those maddeningly hectic days, sometime in the 1980s, when I was poring over proofs and rushing between the printing press and my work-table at Seagull Books, pursuing the production of a book through its final stage. Reinhard Hauff was in town, shooting his *Ten Days in Calcutta*, his film dialogue with Mrinal Sen. The evening before I was part of a conversation with Sen and Hauff at Sen's place, where we argued over the urgency of recording the immediate real and decoding it, and how the cinematic ways and means remained so elusive, especially under the pressure of popular taste and sensibility. There was a host of doubts besides as to what the real *was* after all, a facile look of the scene/situation/action as it appeared to a viewer, or the experience of the actors/engagés in the slice of reality, or a critical, historical reading, or? Or should the director step out of the dilemma altogether, and tell a story of his own making, for a unique telling? At the close of it all, an accumulation of enigmas lingered. The following day, when I returned to my work-table late in the afternoon, there was a note for me on my table secure under a paperweight, signed 'Mrinal Sen'. Taking a short break from *his* busy schedule, he had dropped in to share his choice with me. The note (that I still preserve) reads:

At times, when the moments of crisis overpower me, I withdraw into myself, seek silence and ask myself : Am I going wrong? Do I betray my

cause which I had been cherishing since I had come of age, in the early forties, during the turbulence of political upheaval?

There, like a godsend, comes to me an important document, a gem of a statement, made by one of the foremost Marxists in Europe, Elio Vittorini, who, in a letter to Palmiro Togliatti, wrote : 'The point is not to pocket the truth, but to chase the Truth'.

And that is how Vittorini combated the fanatics among the Marxists and that is where I find solace and, perhaps, a certain amount of conviction.

There is no way one can experience and ponder over Sen's cinema without locating it in a conscience and a concern carrying the searing memories of a famine that left a few millions dead, many of them on the streets of the city of Calcutta (that Sen would call 'my El Dorado' in the title of a documentary he made in 1986) ; the brutal communal riots and bloodshed of 1946-47 ; leading to the Partition, with its toll of arduous migration and displacement, life in refugee settlements and deaths ; followed by independence, flawed and under strain, leading to the upsurge of a militant left, banned and incarcerated almost immediately. Unlike his slightly senior contemporary, Satyajit Ray, who lived through the same times, but maintained a distance from it all, in his absorption in music and cinema and in his rigorous and dedicated self-training in graphics and design (leading to his professional career in advertising), Sen, with a close group of friends, *lived* the times, responding to the happenings, positioning and repositioning himself politically and emotionally with the developments, sharing and debating it all with his friends, all of them at the time creative, but groping minds, artists in the making often getting involved with 'action' at the margins, taking on risky assignments ! It is this *engagement* with the quotidian flow of history in its tortuous toils, opening up possibilities of an egalitarian freedom that soon crumble and crash, bringing inevitable frustration in its train; that marked his life-long tryst with cinema. In his choice of cinema as his medium, more as an instrument of mediation in an agenda for social change than as mere media, he would soon come face to face with the innate resistance to action that photography brings into play and stands in the way of action for change. At one charged point of his political film-making, this is an issue that he addresses simultaneously politically and artistically in both *Akaaler Sandhaney* (In Search of Famine, 1980) and *Khandahar* (The Ruins, 1983). Significantly enough, this scepticism over the medium, can be read, given its coincidence with the assumption of power by the Left in the late seventies, in terms of his mistrust of the real efficacy of the Left in power! He could read in the complacency and the Triumphalism of the Left the beginning of a deadly erosion of values and an obfuscation of the original visionary ideal. Through the entire life span that he covered, and the political course that he witnessed, his Leftist orientation notwithstanding, Sen retained a sceptical

criticality not judgementally, but more engagedly and self-laceratingly, in his pursuit of the ultimate socialist vision.

Initially, the visionary passion, clouded over from time to time by the gross reality, left him groping and for a time may be even driven to submit to the compulsions dictated by the entertainment industry, particularly the popular cinema for a film language of his own, which he found only in *Baishey Sravan* ('Wedding Day' 1960) and *Punashcha* ('Over Again', 1961). In both, he took a probing look at post-Independence middle class life and its travails, a discourse that he explored throughout the 1970s, into the 80s in *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta 71* (1972), *Padatik* ('Urban Guerilla', 1973), *Chorus* (1974), *Ek Din Protidin* ('And Quiet Rolls the Day', 1979), *Chalchitra* ('Kaleidoscope', 1981), *Kharij* ('The Case is closed', 1982). A quizzical, ironic perspective surfaced after the initial realism of the first two films mentioned, the irony underscoring the limitations and inner contradictions of the class, at its different levels, identifying and distinguishing the rururban, the lower middle class in dire straits, the upper middle class in a comfort zone, the intermediate sections, all in their particularities. For Sen, as part of the middle class, looked forward to an initiative for change, rising from this class, enlightened and deprived at the same time.

His critique of the middle class led to his self-critique of his medium, a fallout of the playful use of technical disruption and subversion in both *Akashkusum* ('Up in the clouds', 1965) and *Bhuvan Shome* (1969). Even as the thrill of this adventure enthralled him, the ever searching/doubting filmmaker could see the magical power in cinema of appropriating and framing reality and imposing its 'reading' on a hypnotized viewership in a dark auditorium, that breaks the community up into isolated/ individualized spectators stuck in their seats. *The Ruins* opens significantly with the photographer in his studio remaking/redefining/constricting reality, with stills from Sen's own films plastered iconically on his walls!

**About the Author :** Samik Bandyopadhyay is a film critic, publisher - editor ; formerly academic consultant, SRFTI ; Vice-Chairman, National School of Drama ; Faculty, Film Appreciation Course, conducted by FTII and NFAI ; Tagore National Professor, JNU ; Member CBFC ; SNA Generl Council ; Professor Emeritus, Akashvani and Doordarshan.



*Independent Research*

# Streaming Wars, Platform Capitalism, and the Telugu film industry

C. Yamini Krishna

## *Introduction*

The film industry around the world has been experiencing tremendous changes redefining cinema as we know it. Its business models, production systems, theatrical experience, audience, almost everything is undergoing a change. The coming of the Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has redefined the boundaries of the film industry. This project examines the changes in the Telugu film industry, and places them in the global context. It also examines the political economy of the Telugu OTT industry in the context of platform capitalism and creative labour. In other words, I examine the shifts in the Telugu media industry due to the coming of OTT, the streaming wars in Telugu industry. I argue that OTT in the Telugu film industry has added force to the existing problems in the star dominated business model. The OTT business, while seemingly new, is also dominated by the existing caste-capital networks. The OTT business leads to restricting the theatrical business to big budget heavy investment films or those with huge capital backing. Hence it further consolidates the hold of the industry in the hands of very few big stars.

In the first section, I discuss the changes in the ideas of a) audience b) labour c) cinematic experience in Hollywood with the growth of OTT business. This is to set context to the workings of platform capitalism in other geographies. In the second section, I discuss

the nature of film business in Telugu film industry in detail, and in the third section, I discuss the changes in the functioning of the industry in terms of the film production, labour, capital flow and the audience.

### *Methodology*

To understand the global changes, I have relied on the research on Hollywood, which is the biggest film producing industries and has also gone through the OTT wave ahead of India. In many ways the discussions in Hollywood help us think through the changes happening in multiple industries in India. I have interviewed film directors, distributors, professionals working in Telugu OTT platforms, professionals working in third party content aggregators, members of labour unions to understand the various contours of the OTT- film business in the Telugu speaking regions.

To be able to trace the small changes that have been happening in the Telugu film industry I have done archival work on Telugu newspapers and magazines both print and digital. I have collected all the news pertaining to the changes in the industry and have used it to draw a historical trajectory of change of the film business.

### *OTT: the definitional problem*

OTT stands at the intersection of several technological and operational changes in the media business and hence it is not an easy task to determine where to place OTT. In this section, I examine the literature on OTT in Hollywood to understand how the relationship between cinema and OTT has been discussed. Originally OTT, a British slang to mean exaggerated and extreme has in the recent times come to mean the Over-the-top services i.e., businesses which provide content over the internet. Tracing a historical trajectory of the OTT platforms is useful to understand which businesses it intersects with, draws from and has influenced. OTT comes at the intersection of the television, 'on-demand' home video and the internet.

Roberta Pearson (2014) divides the history of television in the United States into three phases. TVI between 1950 to 1980, the early days of television when it was characterized by mass audience, limited networks and very few channels. TVII, between 1980s and 1990s which Pearson describes as the era of network expansion and branding of channels through specific kind of content. TVIII after 1990s the era of large number of channels and fragmentation of audiences. In terms of technology TVII is marked by VCR, remote control, cable television and satellite TV and TVIII by digital (Jenner, 2018). Jenner also points that the TVII had more viewer control to choose what they could watch than TVI

and TVIII had even more than TVII. Control was marked by technologies like remote control, ability to record, choose the programs. Jenner (2018) characterizes Netflix as TV IV, arguing that Netflix changes the existing paradigms in TVIII. Jenner points that Netflix makes all episodes of a season available at once and on the same date across the world thereby changing the practices of TV. While the characterization is debatable it is important to note that Jenner characterizes Netflix as TV, as an extension of an existing medium and not a new medium. It is also not seen in relation to the film industry. While both film and television often have strong interflows as captured by the concept of convergence of media where we see the same actors and networks mobilized by media, it is significant that Jenner calls Netflix TV IV and not Film 2.0. The characterization is based on the place of viewing, hence places common viewing or sociality of viewing in a common public space as central to cinema and viewing in a private space of home as central to television. Hence OTT which is a personalized viewing experience features as an extension of TV and not cinema.

Silver and Alpert (2003) discussing the 'digital revolution of video on demand' place the "Video On Demand" (VOD) as one of the channels of exhibition, that is, a particular film is produced by a production company, and is distributed across the geographies by distributors and exhibited in cinemas by the exhibitor. Satellite television, free-to-air network TV, Home Video are all various channels of exhibition. In this definition the function of distribution is separated from the function of production. However, they note that the major production companies maintain vertical integration and hence control the exhibition network. Because of this vertical integration the opportunities of capital recovery for small producers are limited. Writing in the early 2000s, they anticipate that this kind of oligopolistic control over the market would be broken by the digital technologies, as they would in principle enable any small producer to take advantage of the internet and reach the audience. They term it as a possibility of democratizing the industry. Silver & Alpert (2003) are one of the many studies which were very hopeful that the digital would transform the political economy of the industry. In this phase when both the internet and streaming was in its nascent stage, digital streaming was thought of simply as another channel.

Jenner's (2018) discussion is useful to understand when Netflix becomes more than just another channel with potential to revolutionise the film industry. Jenner (2018) describes the 2007-08 Hollywood writer's strike where one of the points of conflict was the share of the revenues earned via new delivery systems as one of the events which marks the shifts in the media industry due to the online streaming. Roughly the first decade of the new millennium marked the definitive shift in the usability of the internet as a significant distribution channel. In fact, the conflict within the media industry due to the entrance of OTT is famously referred to as "streaming wars." Another marker for Jenner (2018) is the

production of Netflix originals in 2012. It is significant to note that streaming service which was thought of as an exhibition channel now became the producer. The line between the exhibitor as one among the many channels and the producer blurred, and Netflix became a single large exhibitor now producing content for its channel. This can be thought of as a completely integrated business with the power now in the hands of the large exhibitor-producer, what is called the OTT.

Jenner's(2018) distinction between television and Netflix is useful to map out the OTT space. Jenner pegs her comparison of Netflix with television on the fact that Netflix marketed itself as television. Some existing media conglomerates such as Disney have their own OTT platforms where the content they produce is also distributed in this particular channel, and here the OTT remains one among the channels. Unlike television, which banks on 'liveness', Jenner characterises Netflix as a post-network television which does not aim to deliver 'liveness' and puts in all episodes of the series online at once which allows for the much-discussed new viewing behaviour called “binge watching”. Netflix draws from the viewership of DVD box sets in this aspect than that from television. However, Jenner's understanding of liveness can be challenged by Phillip Auslander's (2012) discussion of liveness, which places the digital technology's ability to respond to us in real time as the basis of determining its liveness. I would extend this to say that it is the experience of shared time that creates liveness, in that sense streaming can also be live, particularly in case of shows which take in questions from audience and respond in real time. Perhaps then the ability to control would be a better differentiator, as discussed earlier.

Jeong Suk Joo (2020) writes that the foray of Netflix into content production instead of just being a channel has changed the film business. Netflix was acquiring films from the producers and populating its lists. However, the film producers had a window period of 90 days during which the films would be exclusively screened in the cinemas. After the screening period they would have a certain window for DVD/video, several months after that it would be available for pay cable and network television (Joo, 2020). Thus, Netflix had to wait for several months before it could get new films. In order to solve this problem of fresh content, it entered special deals where films would be released solely on Netflix. As a next step it became a producer of original content (Joo, 2020).

Being interested in making films available to the subscribers at the earliest, Netflix has ignored the window periods and has often bypassed the theatrical release (Joo, 2020). Four largest theatrical chains AMC, Regal, Cinemark and Carmike have boycotted Netflix (Joo, 2020). Joo (2020) terms this as defying the privileged status of the theatres as the first place to screen films. Along with the business aspects, Netflix's redefinition of what film means is also a point of contention. For instance, directors such as Christopher Nolan have vowed

that they would not work with Netflix. Stephen Spielberg also had proposed stricter rules of theatrical release to separate TV from cinema. However, Netflix also changed its game to meet the Oscar category. It has been giving three to four week limited theatrical run for those films which are considered to be potential nominations for the Oscars (Joo, 2020). This contention between the 'new TV' and the classical cinema is on-going. This was very visible in case of the Oscar nominations of films such as *Roma* and *The Irishman*. Joo (2020) wrote that an insider mentioned that a vote for *Roma* would mean a vote for Netflix and a vote for the death of cinema in favour of ? TV. A similar scene was observed at the Cannes Film Festival 2018. Cannes has a rule that the films need to be released across the theatres in France to be eligible for the awards, Netflix was not willing to oblige and had withdrawn from the festival (Joo, 2020). In June 2021, the French Government announced the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMS) which was intended to enable a level playing field for existing media producers with the new giants like Netflix and Amazon (Keslassy,2021). According to AVMS, streaming services need to invest 20-25% of their revenues from France in French content. This was the precondition to access the French content after 12 months of theatrical release. The existing window was 36 months (Keslassy, 2021). According to the decree, 80% of the 20% investment was to be invested in French TV movies/ series not meant for theatrical releases and the remaining 20% for films which have to be released in theatres (Keslassy, 2022). In response to the AVMS, there were dissenting voices from the existing media networks who were getting films after 22 months, alleging that Netflix was getting a much better deal than them. Netflix signed the deal to get access to films after 15 months of release and for an exclusive period of seven months (Keslassy, 2022). The French agreement has specific provisions for financing, 17% of Netflix's investment has to go into films under 4 million Euro and it also needs to invest in a minimum of ten films at a prefinancing stage (Keslassy, 2022). These rules can be seen as the government's intervention to protect the French media businesses, to safeguard the existing media networks from the onslaught of the new platform conglomerates. They also can be seen as setting regulations to prevent the complete Americanization of the French cinema.

Another aspect to understanding the conflict between the OTT and the existing network of film is the question of labour. Often the labour terms and the processes followed by a technological conglomerate business such as OTT have been different from the traditional film networks. In May 2023, the Writer's Guild of America went to strike, the first time in sixteen years. The writers have argued that “the streaming world has eroded their working conditions. Many streaming shows have 8 to 12 episodes per season, compared to more than 20 episodes made for traditional television” (Koblin and Barnes, 2023). They note that it is a fight for viability of writing as a profession. They also are fighting



for better residual pay. The middle-class writer “has been upended by streaming” (Koblin and Barnes, 2023). These are only the recent developments in the series of earlier labour contentions over OTT platforms. In 2021, an overwhelming majority of over 90% of members of the International Alliance of Theatre and Stage Employees (IATSE) voted to strike on their labour contracts. IATSE represents below the line workers such as sound technicians, light men, makeup artists, carpenters, costume designers etc. One of the points raised by the strike was that the new media got greater flexibility on payment and employee benefits i.e., the streamers were allowed to deviate from the payment norms when they were setting shop in 2009. While a lot had changed since then and the streaming companies had far higher budgets than traditional producers, their payments were much lower (Keck, 2021). These technology companies had very high balance sheets, but their pay was much less: this issue was at the centre of the impending labour strike in 2021. Furthermore, the working conditions were also very difficult, with 16 hour shifts without breaks, no lunches etc. (Roettgers, 2021)

Streaming has thus impacted every sector of Hollywood. However, its position as a part of the film industry is still ambiguous, as it is viewed as TV. Joo (2020) notes that Netflix has been producing more films than traditional producers as it has been supporting diversified content which the existing producers do not do, because they think it is not profitable. Joo(2020) also asks whether theatres still need to be seen as central to cinema or is it time to rethink? Film theory also has responded to the challenge of OTT, Veilen (2018) drawing on Thomas Elsaesser (2011) discusses the need to update apparatus theory to incorporate Netflix. Apparatus theory was a popular film theory in the 1970s which connected the experience inside the dark hall of cinema with that of the Plato's parable of the cave and also discussed it through the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In its original form the dark hall and the transfixed position of the audience is very significant to the dream-like state created for the audience. However, for spectators of Netflix there is no dark hall, there is no question of being transfixed and no subjection to the images without control.

Francesco Casetti (2015) rethinks cinema in relation to the digital shifts through seven key words - relocation, relics/icons, assemblage, expansion, hypertopia, display, and performance. Relocation is the movement of cinema from the dark hall to other devices, assemblage is the breaking of the cinematic narrative into many platforms. Casetti (2015) describes the viewing of cinema on mobile devices as semi-cinematic and the presence of devices in the theatre as relocation. For Casetti cinema is an assemblage of different technologies, experiences, symbolic practices and spectators. Through these key words Casetti argues that the cinematic persists but undergoes deep transformation. Casetti's work is useful to think of the OTT as a part of the new definition of cinema. In this definition,

cinema is not rigid and does not fixate on the notion of the dark hall or the audience experience. It might or might not have these in it. For this project, I draw from Casetti (2015) to think of cinema afresh through its interaction with OTT. I will use this idea further when working with the data from the Telugu film industry.

### *Platform capitalism and political economy of OTT*

Platform capitalism is a word now widely used to discuss the new phase of capitalism centred around the huge technology conglomerates such as Google, Facebook, Uber etc. who operate through digital platforms (Srnicsek, 2017). Srnicsek (2017) argues that with the decline of manufacturing, capitalism has turned to data-based extraction methods. At the heart, the digital streaming 'platforms' are a part of platform capitalism, today they are the biggest businesses in the world. There are three kinds of ownership patterns which can be observed in the OTT platforms, a) where content is the main business, platforms such as Netflix, Hulu are a part of this section. These are primarily focussed on OTT business and might be involved in vertical integration for sustaining the OTT business. For example, Netflix produces films, but its main business is OTT subscriptions b) where OTT has come as an extension of an existing business, Disney Plus can be seen as a part of this: in this model Disney was already a production studio and an entertainment business. OTT was another channel c) Where OTT is a part of the offerings for other products. Apple TV, Amazon fall under this model where OTT emerged as an extension of other product businesses. Apple TV initially begun as a promotion for Apple customers, Amazon Prime is still bundled with its store. This distinction is useful to think about the various levels of vertical integration and the extent to which these streaming platforms are interested in film business.

The anxiety of the changing of the film business discussed in great detail in the above section can be explained using the political economy framework. This anxiety is not solely about the purist's idea of cinema as it is often presented as, but about the shifting of the power of capital from the existing actors of the media industry to those perceived as outsiders. For example, much of the threat to cinema perceived by the Hollywood network has been centred on Netflix. This is because Netflix's main interest is content production and it has entered from the technological space to the film network space and hence the perception of threat and loss of business territory is higher. Businesses such as Disney are not perceived as a threat as they were already large actors in the media network and the OTT platforms have just come as a forward integration to it. Hence the discussions about the changing ideas of cinema or the centrality of theatrical need to be seen as efforts to conserve the existing industry networks.

The coming of Platform Capitalism to filmmaking brings in new twists to the existing film story. While the domination of Hollywood on the film industries around the world is well known, now Hollywood itself becomes a part of the even larger American techno-capitalist story. The legislative moves by France in this context are similar to what was seen in case of the National Cinemas, safeguarding of the local film industries to retain some sense of a national film industry.

### *OTT, the Telugu story*

In this section, I will first document the coming of OTT to the Telugu film industry, as well as the various milestones and discussions which happened in the industry. I specifically focus on some of the conflicts which have come to the fore in the Telugu film industry due to the growth of OTT business. I will then categorize the OTT story in various phases based on its relationship with the film industry.

The OTT business took its nascent steps in India in the first decade of the new millennium. However, it was not until a decade later that large platform capitalists began eyeing the Indian market aggressively. Hotstar was launched in 2015 by Star India, Disney Hotstar entered the Telugu streaming market in September 2021, with the popular hero Ram Charan Tej as its ambassador. It is focusing more on producing series and shows instead of films. Netflix entered the Indian market in 2016. In August 2018, it added Telugu to its offering with the film *Spyder* being the first film to be streamed on it. The film was not a success in the cinemas and had also bad viewership on TV. From there to announcing the first original Netflix production *Pitta Kathalu (The Hindu, 20 Jan 2021)*, a series of short stories, the platform took a journey of not just acquiring new content but becoming a producer. It thus became one of the rare transnational corporate producers in Telugu film industry which is dominated by caste-based networks, specifically Kamma capitalists from coastal Andhra. Amazon Prime is also producing series with TV film stars. These global players entered into a market with stalwarts like Sun Nxt, which was the earliest player in the OTT field, starting 2017. However, the OTT adoption only gathered force with the pandemic. Many studies have discussed the significance of the Covid-19 pandemic in forcing the change in media access habits in India.

To document how the Covid-19 pandemic played out in the Telugu film industry and to understand how OTT grew during this period, I use the film-news pages of *Eenadu* Newspaper, which has a special section dedicated to film news. *Eenadu* works closely with the Telugu film industry and has a specific focus on film news. Along with *Eenadu*, I also use other digital platforms such as Telugu-one, *Sakshi*, Telugu filmibeat. This close reading of media

reports enables us to see how discourse around OTT and the industry was built.

The first case of Covid 19 in Telangana was found on 3 March 2020. By this time the global media industry was already reeling under the effect of Covid. The news media was thus reporting and anticipating how the media industry would be affected by the pandemic. For instance, *Eenadu* reported on 3 March that Hollywood was losing several million dollars of revenue due to the shutting down of the industry (*Eenadu*, 3 Mar 2020). Several big productions - such as *Mission Impossible* were postponed. The effect on the Indian film industry was just beginning to be seen: the cinema occupancy was down by 10-20% and there were cancellations of pre-booked tickets. Here we see theatres, being social spaces, were the first ones to be affected (*Eenadu*, 3 Mar 2020). In the initial days, the Telugu film chamber of commerce was reluctant to shut the cinemas, as it thought that there would be a great loss if the cinemas were completely shut. However, the occupancy of the cinemas was drastically reduced: cinemas which could accommodate more than a thousand people had only ten or twenty ticket sales.

Within a couple of weeks all the spaces for public gathering were shut. Cinemas were also shut on the government's directive. The Telugu film industry which, until then, was discussing the shutting of Cannes and the effect to Hollywood, saw the changes in their home ground. The overseas business was the first affected, then the internal business also was affected with the shutting of the cinemas. New films changed their release dates. Summer season is considered to be an important business season for the Telugu industry, as films of the big stars often release in summer to cash in on the vacations of schools and colleges. All the films scheduled for summer release were postponed. By the end of summer, it was estimated that the Telugu film industry had lost 600 crores (*Eenadu*, 15 Mar 2020). Following the shutting down of the cinemas, the Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce and the Movie Artists Association also decided that the production work will be stopped. With the stalling of work in the film industry, the film labour which worked on daily wages was very severely affected. Various stars made donations to help the struggling daily wage film labour such as spot boys, junior artists, drivers, lightmen etc.

As all the physical spaces were shut, slowly there was discussion on moving to the digital. The existing infrastructure in terms of bandwidth and download speed was falling short due to a sudden increase in the demand. ETV, a prominent Telugu media house announced ETV Win app, with the programming from its seven channels accessible on it (*Eenadu*, 3 Apr 2020). Within a month of the shutting down of the industry, there was an increased discussion on the investment of the producers being stuck in films which could not be released due to the pandemic. *Aha*, a fully Telugu OTT platform was launched on 25 March 2020. This app was the foray of *Arha Media Works* belonging to the media network of

the star Allu Aravind. Cashing in on the digital turn during the pandemic, the app was priced at Rs.365/- for one year.

It is at this juncture that we see an increasing reference to OTT platforms in the industry. For instance, *Eenadu* reported April 15, 2020, that some dubbed films were directly releasing on OTT platforms. While there were rumours of some films on OTT most Telugu films were not wanting to go digital. *Eenadu* quoted some producers stating that the money which OTT gives was much lower than their investment and hence they would want to release in theatres. There was also an air of condescension towards OTT. Release of film directly on OTT was considered to be a loss of reputation for the stars. However, as time passed some producers felt that the film, if not released for more than six months, would be thought of as 'old' and would not be acceptable for the market (*Eenadu*, 15 Apr 2020).

Within the next month, the discourse around OTT completely changed in the Telugu industry. As described by a particular news story, OTT until then was an additional channel for revenues after the theatrical run was over, but with the uncertainty brought by the pandemic, OTT became an alternative to theatrical release. Several producers were thinking of releasing their films on OTT and more importantly of producing content for OTT. For instance, Allu Arvind, a mainstream film producer, shifted his focus to OTT content (*Eenadu*, 23 Apr 2020). Suresh Babu of Suresh Productions, another big production house, also got into OTT production. In an interview, Suresh Babu noted that while they were making content for OTT, films were glamour, and everyone would want to be a filmmaker. He also anticipated a split in the market such that family films, big budget films would have theatrical audience and the rest of the films would be watched on OTT.

The transition from aversion towards OTT to OTT being considered an alternative business proposition happened within a few days. Some directors also began perceiving OTT as competition and began strategizing to combat it. For instance, the Telugu director S.S. Rajamouli is reported to have said in a film industry webinar that the filmmakers need to do better than the OTT (*Eenadu*, 8 May 2020). He noted that the introductory scene of the protagonist can only be watched on a big screen among several hundreds of people. Watching it with earphones would not give the same experience and hence filmmakers need to make films which get the audience to the theatres (*Eenadu*, 8 May 2020).

By May 2020, a long list of films was queuing into the OTT platforms, and this began a rift between the producers and the exhibitors. The management of PVR, Inox, were unsatisfied with the move to the OTT and were pressurising the producers to release their films only in theatres. However, the Producers Guild of India supported the decision to move to OTT as a crisis decision (*Eenadu*, 16 May 2020). Along with this, there was also a

discussion on how to make theatres more attractive to the viewers. Some suggestions such as serving liquor in the cinemas were being discussed (*Eenadu*, 17 May 2020). As the intensity of the pandemic began easing, the important stars of the Telugu film industry such as Chiranjeevi, Nagarjuna and producers met the Cinematography Minister Talasani Srinivas Yadav to begin preparations for restarting film work. Further, there was also a meeting with the Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao (*Eenadu*, 23 May 2020).

Immediately following the end of the lockdown, there was an increased discussion on the making of pan-India films i.e., the big budget films which could be released simultaneously in multiple languages (*Eenadu*, 3 June 2020). This was the film industry's response to the challenge of the OTT platforms. The pandemic also brought the internal conflicts in the exhibition sector to the forefront. The single screen theatres which were run by individual entrepreneurs wanted to open the theatres but the aggregators who have leased out many theatres did not want to open, due to the fear that there would not be sufficient audience. For the single screen theatre any income was welcome but for the big distributors if there was no sufficient occupancy, they would still need to pay the lease rent and hence opening up was not attractive. However, the big distributors who leased out hundreds of theatres had higher bargaining power in determining how the industry functioned.

The earlier operational conventions of the Telugu film industry were unsustainable after the pandemic and hence there were multiple discussions on rescuing the industry from the challenge of the pandemic. There was discussion on reduction of 20% remuneration for all the actors (*Eenadu*, 4 Oct 2020). Further, as the theatres were opening up, the industry perceived a strong competition from the OTT platforms. As a result, some actors of the industry appealed to 'stand with' the theatres. There were also repeated appeals to the government to rescue the failing exhibition business. Once the Telangana government lifted the lockdown, the theatres in Telangana remained shut and submitted a series of demands to the government to recover the effects of the pandemic, they had requested a waiver of electricity bills during the lockdown, flexible ticket pricing and liberty to increase the number of shows (*Eenadu*, 11 Aug 2020). Andhra Pradesh state government announced a relief package for the cinemas in the state. It waived electricity charges for a few months, deferred payment for some time, also 50% interest subvention on bank loans was given. Further, the actor-producers had requested the Andhra Pradesh chief minister to increase ticket prices.

At this juncture the producers of some films such as *Maestro* and *Tuck Jagadish* wanted to release their films in OTT inspite of the opening up of the theatres. This brought out the simmering conflict between the OTT and the theatre business. The Telangana Exhibitors Association had its first meeting in July 2021, where they requested the producers to put off

the release of their films on OTT until October. They had come together under the banner “Save cinemas from OTT” and had announced that in case the producers did not oblige they would have to take measures against them such as “boycotting the films of such producers or stars who have acted in the films that release on OTT” (*Eenadu*, 21 Aug 2021). In spite of these warnings the film *Tuck Jagadish* went for a release on Amazon Prime on September 10th, 2021, the same day that another film - *Love Story*- was to be released in the theatres. This angered the exhibitors at two levels a) choosing to release the film on OTT vs. a theatrical release b) releasing the film on OTT on the same day when another competing film was in theatres. As a result, the exhibitors association conducted a public meeting where they hailed the producer of the film *Love Story* as a real hero who was safeguarding their livelihoods and Nani and his producer (of *Tuck Jagadish*) as traitors to cinema. They announced that *Love Story* would be a great success because they were morally right. They also expressed a concern that the OTT poses a threat not just for the exhibitors but to the survival of the industry as a whole.

After the pandemic, the viewership in the cinemas did not pick up to the earlier level. Furthered by OTT, there was a crisis in the Telugu film business, which resulted in the strike of the Active Telugu Film Producers Guild in August 2022 (*Indian Express*, 26 July 2022). According to the news reports, the multiple reasons for the strike were as follows: the Telugu film budget had increased hugely due to the increased remuneration of the actors and directors, the audience in the cinemas had drastically dropped after the pandemic, even the star films in a star-dominated industry like the Telugu Film Industry were not getting an audience. The exhibitors were unhappy that the theatre exhibition window was less and this was further hastening the decline of the single screen theatres. The discussions were held in four committees: one was to discuss the theatrical window after which films could go to OTT, the second on Virtual Print Fee, the third one on federation wages and working conditions, the fourth one on measures needed for reducing the production costs and to ensure better productivity. In this regard, there were discussions between the Movie Artists Association (MAA) where the need for the OTT artists to have MAA membership was discussed (*Sakshi*, 6 Aug 2022). OTT was perceived as one of the important reasons for the crisis in the Telugu film industry.

On account of these discussions, some of the senior producers such as Ashwini Dutt said that the increase in the ticket prices were the reason for the decline in the cinemas (*Telugu filmibeat*, 28 July 2022). The governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have a cap on the cinema ticket prices with the idea that the tickets have to be accessible to the general public. However, recently, the multiplex managements have filed cases in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana high courts and got rulings in favour of increasing the ticket prices for



new releases. As a result, the ticket prices of the new films have gone up tremendously. However, during the discussion on saving the industry from crisis, it was said that the ticket prices and other consumables in the multiplexes need to be lowered in order to attract the audience back to the theatres (*Telugu filmibeat*, Aug 4 2022)

At the end of the discussions in the Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce, it was decided that the big-budget films should be released on OTT only after 8 weeks and small budget films after 4 weeks. The ticket prices were also fixed, small movies were to be priced at a maximum of Rs 125 and big budget at Rs. 295. (*Etimes*, 26 July 2022)

In order to address the lack of audience in the theatres and the perceived threat of OTT to Telugu film industry, the industry attempted a variety of tactics. Specific films began advertising that their films are theatre experience worthy. Thus, there came in a division in the type of films, one which could be watched on OTT and the other which needed the theatre experience. The theatre experience was being associated with big budgets, special effects, presence of stars, larger than life stories. Everything else could be watched on OTT. Changing networks of cinema.

The Telugu Film Industry operates through 24 unions. Along with the workers unions, there is Movie Artists Association (MAA) which is the association of the film actors, Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce, which houses the producers' union, and there are also associations of distributors and exhibitors. These associations function as lobbying bodies to decide the terms of working in the industry. The workers unions negotiate the labour charges with the Film Chamber of Commerce and also work as arbiters in case the wages are not paid. The unions issue cards to its members and insist that producers only employ union members for work. They exercise control on hiring of labour through negotiation and threat of strike.

The film labour can be understood in terms of mobility and negotiation power. The chief technicians such as directors, camera person and music directors have much higher negotiation power and mobility. They are treated as artists, whereas the other crafts are treated as low skilled/ unskilled labour and are paid as per the rate card of the union. The labour categories' are akin to daily wage labour and are highly vulnerable to changes in the industry, as they do not have financial or property security. I will use these ideas of mobility and negotiation power to discuss labour in OTT platforms as well.

The Telugu Film Capital is agrarian surplus from the Coastal Andhra which has flowed into the industry from the 1930s (Srinivas, 2018). It is predominantly Kamma caste capital which runs the industry. The capital in the industry is circulated via the star-capitalists i.e., the stars determine the investment and returns on a particular film. The star-capitalists also control large section of the exhibition sector and hence have the capacity to determining



whether a particular film gets a theatrical release as well as how much space it gets. In many ways the industry can be considered as vertically integrated but the mode of integration is through the caste capital. Any new entrant to the industry succeeds only by affiliating to the star capitalists or the dominant producers.

In this context, the Telugu OTT landscape can be thought of as divided into three kinds of players a) global technology content companies such as Netflix and Disney + Hotstar which have Telugu as one of the offerings. Amazon can be thought of as a separate subcategory of this as content is not its main business, but it uses content as an add on to its store. There is also a difference between Disney which has come into OTT from the film business and Netflix which came via the technology route. But for the Telugu context this division is not relevant b) players like Zee 5 which look at OTT as an extension of their TV channels c) Local players such as Aha which have grown out of the star capitalists.

The approach towards producing and acquiring film-based content is different among these three categories, Akash (Personal communication, 2022), an executive at Zee 5, noted that they primarily cater to the audience of the television channel Zee 5 and hence their approach towards acquiring films is also to appeal to that core audience. They do not seek out new films or exclusive deals aggressively. Here OTT clearly becomes another way of accessing TV. Suneeta (Personal Communication, 2022), a media professional who has worked in print, television, film and OTT, pointed out that similar discussions on the future of cinema had happened when satellite television was growing in India. When should films be released on TV? Would audience be interested in going to the cinemas if films are available on TV? These were questions that were discussed. She opined that once the OTT business settles down operation conventions would be established. OTT was thus seen as similar to TV, comparable to the idea of TV IV of Jenner.

On the other hand, for Netflix, which is in the business of selling content, acquiring new content becomes very important. In this case, OTT sometimes blurs the lines between being a channel and the producer. In case of platforms like *Aha* which aim at being the preferred local OTT platform, the platform becomes a way of forward integration, of capturing a new media platform and leveraging on the star capital. *Aha* thus keeps the power network intact in the industry.

One important shift to be observed with the coming of the OTT platforms is the move from film to content. The standard commercial product which the Telugu film industry produces blurs into various kinds of film based 'content' i.e., instead of the standard two and half hour film with a few songs and fights, OTT has series films, short films, anthologies etc. with varying lengths and aesthetics. However, while the diversity of products increases, the control still remains in the hands of a select few who ran the traditional film

business. Prakash (Personal Communication, 2022), a small film director shared that the OTT is also preferred big star casts, what he termed as the thumbnail value i.e., the images on the thumbnails which would attract click through. Based on this parameter, the content with big star casts gets a better deal than what a small budget film would get. Another interesting aspect shared by Prakash was the role played by theatrical release as testing ground for OTT. The OTT platforms wanted exclusive deals for big star films, for others, they often wanted to see a theatre run and fix a deal based on the audience response. Thus, the dominance of the star-based capital continues even on the OTT platform.

The OTT platforms adopt the same star-based production model and hence the chief technicians or the artists can easily move to the OTT mode of production, whether it is in terms of the content or the production processes. However, the low-skilled workers do not migrate well. As seen in case of Hollywood, the labour is exploited by insufficient pay and long working hours. In case of the Telugu OTT, the labour conditions do not change with the OTT: they are still controlled by the big production houses.

The major conflict in the streaming wars of the Telugu film industry is the conflict between the cinemas and the OTT and the perception among the theatre management that the OTT was taking away the business of cinemas. This shift has to be seen in continuum with the long trajectory of the shift from the single screen cinemas to the multiplexes, as documented in detail by Adrian Athique and Hill (2009). The multiplexes had already turned watching cinema into a consumption activity, which was not accessible to the lower-caste/class public. Multiplexes constituted a sanitised upper class – upper caste public and kept the unwanted out. With the coming of the OTT, the existence of cinema's public itself has become questionable. Watching film on OTT is not a collective activity, the formation of the public and the constitution of shared space is suspended. The corporeality of film viewing, of going to the theatre, sharing space with diverse people, does not happen. The multiplexes turned film viewing into a segregated class-based activity. Single screen theatres always had separate classes. However, the multiplexes due to their exorbitant prices, made theatre exclusive class enclave that is., the entire theatre is only occupied by rich classes. OTT on the other hand, removes the shared space, and public-ness of cinema, film is watched at one's private space.

Smarak (Personal Communication, 2022), a young director, noted that the film business was changing, the audience were not coming to the cinemas and hence OTT was the inevitable choice for the producers to recover their costs quickly. It was also a choice with relatively less risk. He opined that very few producers had a choice between OTT and theatrical release; for many the publicity cost itself were too much to bear and hence OTT became an easy way out. He noted that there would be two kinds of films, one which would

need a cinematic experience and another which could be watched on OTT. The big budget films and star vehicles often called for cinematic release and everything else was now relegated to the OTT space.

Here we actually see an interesting spiral, the big budget films, their huge costs of production and the associated increase in ticket prices are thought to be one of the reasons for the crisis in Telugu cinema. Interestingly, the same big budget films are seen as the solution to the crisis i.e., that there should be big budget star films which would get audience to the cinemas. This big budget, expensive films, however, move cinema further away from the lower classes. Due to their high-ticket price it is not accessible to lower classes. Another aspect to the star film is the culture of star worship in the cinema space. Smarak opined that except for a few films, this culture is set to change. Due to a decline in the audience, this fan activity might also see a slowly decline. Thus, OTT holds the possibility of changing the sociology of film viewing in the Telugu film industry.

While the single screen theatres which do not have any bargaining power disappear easily, the call for regulating the OTT business through windows of theatrical release is to be seen as an effort of the big exhibitors and multiplexes, who have sufficient influence to safeguard their own business against the impending replacement. Mr. Kapoor (Personal Communication, 2022), the head of a large multiplex chain in South India, hoped that after the pandemic, the audience would return to the cinemas and the enforcement of the theatrical windows would help in this process. He noted that the positive aspect of the OTT popularity is that the audience are now used to a large variety of content which they are watching with subtitles. However, he noted that the lack of censorship meant that OTT films were not for family audience. Here, we can see an attempt to redefine the film audience with the coming of the OTT.

In Hollywood, where the theatrical audience has already taken a hit much before the coming of the OTT, due to high ticket prices, the discussion is not so much on the loss of business to the theatres but on the changing nature of cinema itself. In the Telugu film industry, the coming of multiplexes initiated a similar trend: however, the regulation of ticket prices by the state governments has stalled it for some period of time. Through the vehicle of the huge big budget films which are now being termed as pan-Indian films, cinema further becomes an elite affair. The pan-Indian film is a paradox in some ways, in the sense that its conception of the audience is the star-fan. These films are often described as mass films, to mean that it caters to the lower classes, who enjoy the larger-than-life portrayal of the star. However with the ticket prices being increased, the actual lower-class audience can never access the film. Further solely the pan-Indian film can never sustain the small theatres. The pan-Indian film is modelled on the franchise films such as the films of the Marvel

universe, which can only recover the costs through multiple channel deals and the worldwide release. Until now the big producers determine the theatrical release of small films in between their own big releases. This is possible because of their control over theatre networks, which I have discussed earlier. However, as the theatrical audience itself declines theatres become unviable.

Interestingly, in the early days of OTT, one of the claims was that of the democratization of film industry: a possibility that diverse content would be produced bypassing the star-capital. However, what is actually observed is that the OTT further solidifies the star-capital and cinemas become solely the space for large star films. Further more, the OTT platforms also are taken over by smaller productions of the star enterprises, thereby making the survival of small films and independent producers outside caste network sincreasingly difficult. Thus, while on the surface level there might be diversity in formats and content, the control of the content production is completely with the Kamma star capitalists. Therefore, the discourse set by cinema is also according to the whims of these caste capitalists.

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All names of the respondents have been anonymised

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## Disappearing Single Screen Theatres and the Exhibition of Adult Films in West Bengal

Sandip Chatterjee

The gradual disappearance of single-screen cinemas in West Bengal during the past few years is the primary subject of this research paper. The study also includes *video halls* as an offshoot of cinema halls considering that they have been the sole mode of entertainment for many villagers in rural Bengal, especially in remote locations. The exhibition of adult films in some of those single-screen theatres would provide me with a very crucial entry point to my proposed theme of research. Kolkata is outside the purview of my research. Kolkata, unfortunately, is the only proper city in the entire state of West Bengal or as we can phrase it “the city.” No other city in West Bengal comes even close to Kolkata when it comes to development in various sectors. People outside West Bengal might know about a few other places. Even Howrah, which is so enthusiastically associated with the cultural and economic history of Kolkata, is not really in the district of Kolkata. However, Kolkata has been thriving on the resources of its surrounding and far-off areas. To mention a few, the business transactions of Siliguri, the mineral resources of Asansol, and the industries of Durgapur have their significant contributions to the riches of Kolkata. Hence, Kolkata has remained a capital boasting cultural capital while feeding off the financial and commercial capital of other districts. By default, we will find many keen scholars who would engage with the city space. Sougata Bhattacharyya's short film

*Trash/Kolkataar Guptokatha* is an important source of research as far as the socio-historical scenario of the adult film shows in Kolkata is concerned. Madhuja Mukherjee has worked on single-screen theatres in Kolkata.

For my work, I have explored some remote areas of rural Bengal (Haripur, Sri Bachhipur, Ilashpur and some other villages in Bhangwanpur block, Purba Medinipur), the semi-urban space (Baruipur in South 24 Parganas, Kashipur in Purulia and Purulia town) and an industrial town (Asansol). Nevertheless, constant comparisons between the urban space (Kolkata) and other spaces that I have mentioned are inevitable. Again, probing into the operations of single-screen theatres alone would not be enough to understand the audiences. Video halls are also of immense importance especially because I am focusing on areas other than “the city” i.e., Kolkata. I am considering single-screen theatres and video halls in not only small towns, and sub-urban areas but also those belonging to rural hinterland.

Equally inevitable is the comparison between adult film shows and shows of other films. Exhibition of adult films alone cannot provide us with the scope to accommodate the nuances and shades of everyday life of the audience that I am taking into consideration. The 'non-city' audience is the primary motivating factor of this research. I attempt to locate my work within the arena of audience studies. Adult film or B grade film is a crucial entry point in the direction of understanding the functioning of single-screen theatres. Films of diverse content are equally required to understand the diversity of audiences in the theatre. Only adult film shows would leave out the female audience from the analysis as the viewership of pornographic films is usually predominantly male. Including other kinds of films will give us an insight into the female viewership as well.

#### *Sources and Texts*

Interviews are the mainstay of this research paper as I have been able to converse with people from diverse backgrounds. The diversity is not only in terms of their background in different aspects of viewing and showing films but also in terms of their socio-economic position. Secondary literature helps me to further my research and to pull together my thoughts. Research on the specific theme of single-screen theatres in West Bengal are not plenty. However, important research works on the distribution and exhibition aspects of the film have been done in recent times. They are of immense help to my research. On the other hand, a few works on “adult” films or B-grade films enrich my understanding of the proposed theme. However, in the context of Bengal, there is scope for more research. Films and documentaries broaden the horizon of my research. Newspaper reports delve deep into



the extinction of single-screen theatres in West Bengal. I have come across some magazine articles as well as government reports which are helpful for this article.

This research paper is not only about the distributing, exhibiting and finally viewing of adult or B-grade films in video halls and theatres. Going beyond the precinct of the cinema hall/video hall, the everyday life of the spectators, their socio-economic and cultural position and the changing scenario in circulation, exhibition and viewing of cinema form the crux of this research. The discussion is also not limited to the connection between the waning of adult film shows and the extinction of single-screen theatres. It also includes the process of extinction of those theatres in general along with a critique of the so called “urban cinema” and the limited scope that it offers. I will discuss that in detail in the relevant sections.

### *Methodology*

Trained in the traditional mode of historical research and having relied heavily on traditional archival sources and empirical approaches, this research allows me to consider oral evidence mainly in the form of interviews and conversations. An ethnographic approach would require substantial time but this work has opened up an unexplored avenue for me and it is a very important step towards the direction of ethnographic study. I have changed the names of the interviewees due to their requests for confidentiality. I have tried to approach films and the sites of film exhibitions as part of a larger socio-economic conversation from the vantage point of a researcher in history with substantial emphasis on oral evidence.

### *Single Screens and Video Halls in Rural Bengal: Short Case Studies*

The exact number of single screen theatres in West Bengal today is subject to debate. The Film Federation of India's website would have us believe that Bengal has 330 single screen theatres which are operational. However, the actual number is much less. The Hindustan Times quoted an official of EIMPA (Eastern India Motion Pictures Association) who claimed that in 2021, around “120 of the 250 single screen theatres are currently operational, the rest have closed shop, and some permanently.”

### *Field Visit to Purba Medinipur*

Almost all the video halls in rural Bengal have been closed down and most of the single screen theatres have closed shops. Video halls and single screens in the villages of Bhagabanpur block of Purba Medinipur (East Midnapore) had a similar fate. In this context, I interviewed

Tapan Maity (56), a former projectionist of the video hall in Haripur village (near Ilashpur bazar, Bhagabanpur block), Purba Medinipur. He shifted to Chennai after the video hall was closed down. The name of the hall was changed with the change of ownership. Once called *Shankar*, the name was changed to *Pushpanjali* when Maity started working as a projectionist in the video hall. Tapas reminisced that the video hall had a balcony, a feature that was not very common with the video halls in the surrounding areas and many districts in West Bengal. Although benches were provided both on the balcony as well as downstairs, the ones on the balcony were more comfortable as they had support in the back. The video hall in question had 100 seats on the balcony and approximately 250 seats downstairs. The ticket prices on the balcony used to vary between 5-6 rupees depending on the popularity of the exhibited films. Tickets downstairs cost around 3-4 rupees. Alope Das (59), one of the video hall owners stated that the same ticket prices shot up to 9-10 rupees when adult films were shown and the spectators did not mind spending a few extra bucks.



The closed down video hall (*Pushpanjali*) at Haripur, Bhagwanpur, Purba Medinipur nearby villages and therefore some unfamiliar faces. However, the same sellers and vendors returned to the *haat* on many occasions and they became familiar with the villagers as well as with the video hall owners and video hall workers. According to both the former projectionist of the video hall (Tapan Maity) and former video hall owners (Madhab Bera, 64 and Alope Das), a sizeable section of the audience was formed by the villagers and people from nearby villages.

The shows were held on Wednesday and Saturday as those days were meant for *haats/bazaars/markets* every week. Hence the adult film shows not only attracted audiences from that particular village and nearby villages but also sellers, vendors and owners of small businesses from nearby and far-off areas also enjoyed the shows after long days of work. The participation was predominantly male and a section of the audience was from the outside village or

I also interviewed the owner (Mr. Manindranath Maji, 67) of an erstwhile single screen theatre named *Geetashree*, located at Goyalapukur Bazar in Bhagwanpur (East Midnapore), roughly 8 kilometers away from Haripur. The ground floor of the theatre is now turned into a car repair garage and the owner is somehow managing to survive on the rent coming from the garage. He never ran adult films in his theatre mainly because it was in a residential area and had no interest in showing adult films. However, he displayed no animosity towards the video halls in the vicinity like the one at Haripur for showing adult films or other films for stealing his business. The major reason was that the video halls could show movies only after a few weeks of release and hence the competition between the single screen theatres and video halls was not stiff.



*Geetashree*, a closed down single screen theatre in Muhammadpur, Purba Medinipur (closed down in 2017)



Inside *Geetashree* (the photo was taken on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2022)

The scenario was different in Baruiipur (a small town in the South 24 Parganas district) and Dakkhin Barasat (a village in the South 24 Parganas). Apparent harmonious co-existence between single screen theatres and video halls, as was noticed in the villages of East Midnapore, was denied by the hall owner of *Milan*

(Baruiipur) and the hall owner of *Mahamaya Talkies* (Dakkhin Barasat, South 24 Parganas). Both of them perceived video halls like *Namita* as their fierce rivals who snatched their audiences for lesser ticket prices. The video hall in question managed to run newly released movies and thus affecting the business of the single screen theatres in the vicinity. The video hall was not known to run adult film shows which were bastions of *Krishna* and *Leela*. The owners of *Milan* and *Mahamaya Talkies* refused to talk about adult film show and claimed that their theatres never resorted to screening such movies as they never catered to their cinematic tastes.

#### *Field Visit to Kashipur, Purulia*

I visited a video hall at Kashipur, a small town in Purulia that is famous for its *Rajbari* and its descendants. *Maa Kamala Chitralaya* used to be a video hall catering not only to the residents

of Kashipur but also to a huge number of spectators from nearby regions, especially during weekly haats. The video hall was in a residential neighbourhood and showing adult films was no easy task. The owner, his son and his employee associated with the video hall in its heyday, outrightly denied exhibiting adult films in their video hall, although a couple of residents of the small town had other things to say. One of my contacts from Kashipur is a relation of the *Rajbari* (the royal place) and he claimed that the video hall in question did run a number of adult films but he and his family members refrained from going to such shows because of their reputation in the locality.



*Maa Kamala Chitralaya*, a closed down video hall in Kashipur, Purulia. It has been turned into a bookshop, an office of the tax consultant. A closer look at the image will allow us a glimpse at the illegible name of the erstwhile video hall *The Curious Case of “Ladki Jawan Ho Gayi”*

Mr. Manas Lohar (63), who used to work at the video hall and was also responsible for the nitty gritty of the hall, referred to a strange incident that would add a very significant dimension to this research. In the 1990s, the owners of *Maa Kamala Chitralaya* decided to show a film called *Ladki Jawan Ho Gayi*. Usually, video halls all over West Bengal were not legalised spaces but they did not require a license or registration as the local administration was aware of the business and they had secret liaisons with the video hall owners and distributors. However, the video halls scored big on entertaining the audiences residing in remote mofussil towns and villages. The local administration decided to turn a blind eye and many belonging to the administration were themselves part of the audience enjoying film shows on occasion.

The show of *Ladki Jawan Ho Gayi* at *Maa Kamala Chitralaya* almost created a rift between the owners and the local police administration. The rumour was that the popular video hall in the region was showing a full-fledged adult film while it was merely a B grade film full of action and romance. This rumour set an alarm not only for the audience but also

for the local administration and subsequently caused a pandemonium that was completely uncalled for. More importantly, merely the name of a film caused disturbance among a section of the audience as well as the police without having the slightest idea about the content of the film. The location of a single screen theatre or a video hall was of utmost importance, especially if it involved showing adult films. Running adult film shows in a residential neighbourhood was very problematic than in a bazaar area (marketplace). I discussed this case earlier in the context of East Midnapore. The location of a single screen theatre (showing adult films) away from a residential neighbourhood and in a railway, are played out interestingly in Asansol.

#### *Field Visit to Asansol*

I came to know about several single screen theatres in Asansol. (*Chitra*, one of those cinema halls in Asansol was shut down recently i.e., in 2017). The cinema hall that was known for running regular shows of adult films was Durand Institute. The history of the institute was interesting as this vintage building was constructed in 1878. It was called European Institute in 1915 and the name was changed to Durand Institute in 1925. In 1987, it was renamed and the Durand Institute came to be known as Vivekananda Institute. The starting point of the culture of an exhibition of films is often ascribed to the patrons of the Durand Institute. However, the institute granted access only to an exclusive group i.e., high ranking officials of the Eastern Indian Railway. The common perception is the Institute started to lose its exclusivity as well as social status after the large-scale migration of the Anglo-Indian diaspora in the 1960s. In the 1990s, the institute became famous (or infamous) for the exhibition of adult films and B grade films on a regular basis.

Mr. Fardin (64) was a ticket blacker at *Goduli* cinema and is now an auto rickshaw driver. When I interviewed him, he described the patrons of the adult film shows at the Durand Institute as rickshaw pullers, various casual workers associated with railway (the Durand Institute is very close to Asansol rail station) and labourers belonging to the formal sector. Mr. Aqib Ahmed (35), an Assistant Professor at a reputed college in Asansol and a long-time resident of Asansol called the same group of an audience “semi-illiterate” and people belonging to the “lower rung” of the socio-economic ladder. The average age group of most of the patrons was said to be between 25 and 35. However, the so-called middle class or those belonging to the middle-income group in Asansol cannot grasp the painful fact that in the past 20 years, the lower-income group suffered a great deal, the workers of the formal sector were losing their jobs and income thus crowding the informal sector which in turn has been undergoing an unprecedented competition. The competition was about earning a very basic livelihood.

Thus, going to the cinema was a luxury for the erstwhile patrons of adult films and over and above the patrons of any films in Asansol and most of the other regions in West Bengal. The shutdown of single screen theatres one after the other rendered the situation even more difficult for them. Efflorescence of multiplex cinemas not only isolated them economically but also the socio-cultural aspects of the multiplexes are no less discouraging for them. To put it bluntly, this is a question of affordability. Someone like Fardin cannot afford to go to the multiplexes alone, let alone with his family. For Farid and his family, gone are the days when the “third class” tickets cost 60 paise, “second class” cost 1 rupee and 95 paise while the price of a first-class ticket was 3 rupees. This is also a question of symbols which are associated with the experience at the multiplexes. According to Fardin, he or his family must dress well, behave in a certain way, and carry themselves as per the social standards usually associated with the multiplexes. A whole section of cine-goers is thus isolated economically, socially, and culturally. The only cinema hall in the entire Asansol city that he and his family could afford is *Manoj Talkies* and no one knows how long the hall can survive because even the multiplexes are now threatened by the burgeoning OTT platforms.

Timing of the adult shows was also important as it determined the age group of the patrons. A single screen theatre running adult film shows in the morning or noon slot would attract many schools as well as college students. Many of the school students used to flock to the shows in their school uniforms and they were allowed without any qualms. Income groups in the morning/noon shows and the nightshows differed, too. While the morning/noon shows witnessed the presence of people working in the informal colliery sector, fleeting spectators, the night shows attracted small businessmen, rickshaw-pullers, and small shop-owners among many others.

The situation in Asansol is comparable to the one in the city of Kolkata where departmental stores, supermarkets, restaurants, and cafes are in dimes and dozens and most of the workers are not from Kolkata and mofussil areas, suburban areas and from villages near and far. And many of them work in several multiplex chains. They are the ones who keep the economy of the city afloat but ask them about the options they have for their entertainment and going to the cinema would not make the list as it involves expenses that their meagre paychecks cannot cover. Similarly in Asansol, many people from the surrounding areas have been flocking to the city of Asansol in search of jobs and search of a better living than their native villages could offer. Several people from colliery villages have been coming to Asansol as many of the collieries are either shut down or declared dangerous. They are working in supermarkets, departmental stores, restaurants and cafes and they cannot afford the multiplexes. Asansol is thriving on their sweat but their native villages and areas in the vicinity or in far off areas are struggling to survive.





*Chitra*, a single screen theatre in Asansol, was shut down very recently i.e., in 2017

Disappearance of the single screen theatres has led to the extinction of adult film shows. It has isolated a huge section of patrons of not only adult films but also the audience of the regular “family” films. In particular, it has affected those belonging to the lower income groups, workers in both formal and informal sectors, their families and many others on the counts of “affordability” and lack of socio-cultural advancement or in the context of this article, lack of “urban” refinement that I will criticise and is a recurrent theme in this article.

#### *Situating My Work in a Theoretical Framework*

I would like to examine one pertinent theoretical approach in film studies that claim that the mode of watching any kind of film (not merely adult film) is voyeuristic. I have come across a short film on the exhibition of B grade films at Kolkata's single screen theatres. This documentary style short film speaks of voyeuristic gaze. This discourse is an offshoot of Laura Mulvey's “gaze” theory where “male gaze” is of central importance. “The pleasure of looking” or in Freudian terms “Scopophilia” turned into “visual pleasure” in Mulvey's work with her insistence on male gaze. This is closely related to the voyeuristic pleasure of cinema. An engagement with Mulvey's male gaze poses a few challenges.

First, watching an adult film or any film cannot be explained solely in terms of “Visual Pleasure.” The case studies of the villages in Purba Medinipur reveal a sense of getting together and public celebration of an intensely private kind of cinema i.e., adult films and B grade films. One might argue in favour of collective voyeurism but this loses its ground when watching “family friendly” films is taken into account. Collective voyeurism gives way to collective celebration. Second, Voyeurism has become synonymous with masculinity (Grosz

1992: 448) and “male gaze.” True that the audience of adult films in single screens and video halls was exclusively male but other films had admirers in women and even kids, too. Thus, applying the theory of male gaze and voyeurism would further constrict the scope of this article. Third, another problem with applying Mulvey's gaze theory is its focus on heterosexual “Visual Pleasure.” Some of these experiences - watching an adult film together - could also be a mode of further intensifying homosocial bonding amongst known groups. Finally, Mulvey claimed that all narrative cinema “develop[s] scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect.” It is difficult to accommodate this claim in the scope of this narrative. In the larger context, the application of gaze theory points to the necessity of psychoanalytic theory in Film Studies. However, it cannot be applied to my case studies. Because a socio-economic study of the audience in rural Bengal might pose serious challenges to the insistence on gaze theory.

Sougata Bhattacharyya has worked on the city space. Maybe this theory of voyeuristic gaze is pertinent to his research where he is dealing with adult film shows at cinema halls in Kolkata where familiar faces were few. But for a video hall in a remote village in East Medinipur, a similar strand of theory could not be applied. With a number of familiar faces around, the adult film shows in Haripur stopped being an overtly private and peeping Tom like voyeuristic pleasure. Rather, often it amounted to a silent celebration together and an unspoken approval of one another (the principle of *community watching*). Often, the seductive sound of the adult films could be heard outside the video hall and the hall owners and projectionists had to take care of that. Thus, the argument of a secretive and private mode of watching adult films or for that matter any film could be countered, especially in relation to viewership in video halls and single screen theatres in rural Bengal.

Community viewing of films including adult films and B grade films was a crucial phenomenon. Exchanges and interactions (both verbal and nonverbal) before, after and amidst the show were integral to the aspect of community viewing. Cheering, jeering, shouting, demonstrating disappointment, clapping, passing loud comments, and often falling silent while viewing exciting sex scenes are all part of the exchanges and interactions that made the community watching interesting to its audience. The audiences flocking to the single screen theatres and video halls were particularly known for their active participation in the experience of exhibition and viewing. I will elaborate on this point more in the segment on multiplex cinemas and singles screen theatres.

As stated earlier, the discourse of audience studies is at the forefront of the theoretical framework of my research. As far as the theoretical aspects of audience studies are concerned, until the 1970s and early 1980s, spectators were often treated as a homogeneous entity (Ang 1985; Morley 1980; Radway 1984). A pluralistic approach



towards studying the audience of cinema surfaced in the mid-1980s. Lotte Hoek's ethnographic work on cut-piece cinema in Bangladesh is a significant contribution to audience studies and is pertinent to my research. Let me borrow Hoek's words to substantiate my argument against the voyeuristic gaze involving cinema- "The visceral impact of the cut-piece generates intense concentration and an awareness of one's surroundings and fellow viewers. The affective response to viewing a cut-piece is not merely individual but radiates out into the collectivity of the audience and the space of the cinema. (Hoek, 2014: 219)" Watching an adult film together in a single screen theatre or especially in a video hall in a remote village often generated a sense of togetherness rather than a sense of clandestine pleasure of the private sphere in a very much public sphere. However, Hoek's work centres around a single film, i.e., *Mintu the Murderer* but goes on to take a bigger leap. My approach, on the other hand, is different and is more thematic than based on the journey of a single film like Hoek's or a film series (although depicted in a fictional mode) as shown in Sougata Bhattacharya's short film (*Kolkatar Guptokatha*, Bhattacharya, 2014).

While referring to the popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta, Sumanta Banerjee commented that it was a culture where the people involved actively participated and were not passive recipients (Banerjee, 1989: 10). Similarly, the audiences of video parlours and single screen theatres in the twentieth and early twenty first century enjoyed their active participation in the viewing experience as opposed to their counterparts at the multiplexes. It was the active participation of the audience in various aspects of exhibition and viewing of films at the single screen theatres and video halls that set them apart from the "decent crowd" of the multiplexes. Questions of civility and *bhadralok* norms are essential when it comes to defining the audience not only for different films but also for different exhibition sites. The audience of adult film shows in Haripur, for example, often took an active part in promotion of certain adult and B grade films. Tapan Maity reminisced about promotion of films for shows at *Pushpanjali*, the video hall in Haripur, East Midnapore. For the promotion of usual films, a poster was an option. For promoting those films, especially "family-friendly" films they used a rickshaw or bi-cycle or rickshaw van and promoted the film via microphone or occasionally by circulating pamphlets. In general, single screen theatres in the sub-urban areas and villages resorted to drawing more spectators by circulating titillating posters and often, the posters had nothing to do with the content of the film that was being exhibited. The video halls, on the other hand, could not resort to such measures as most of them were situated in or near residential areas. Although *Pushpanjali* was located in the bazaar area connecting Ilashpur and Sri Bachhipur, it was not far from residential areas, either. Hence, for the promotion of adult films, word-of-mouth publicity, albeit in a hush-hush manner, was the only option left for them. And the audience

came to their rescue on more than one occasion as for this kind of promotion, the video hall owners had to depend on the audience. According to both the former projectionist of the video hall (Mr. Maity) and previous hall owners (Ramesh Bera, 62 and Tilak Ghosh, 59), a sizeable section of the audience was formed by the villagers and people from nearby villages. Once a site of cinema was full of familiar faces, any show ended up involving active audience participation, especially passing of comments, banter, collective cheer, jeer and thus creating an ambience of community viewing.

### *Video Cassettes and Community Viewing*

Apart from single screen theatres and video halls, rural Bengal, especially the remote areas had another mode of watching cinema together and that mode amounted to community viewing. Screening of movies using video cassettes and VHS outside the indoor space of cinema and video halls. This mode of watching cinema was an extension of community viewing in single screen theatres and video halls and was not detrimental to the latter. While commenting on the advent of VHS and DVD, Madhuj Mukherjee observed that in the decade of the 1980s, the conventional mode of film exhibition saw damages from below as it witnessed "...video boom and the emergence of local clubs which hired VHS/DVD players and screened movies outside the theatres leading to the decline of audiences in cinema halls." (Mukherjee, 2014; 186) The video halls also played films via video cassettes and using three lens technology. I found the same line of argument when I interviewed Sahadev Banerjee, 66, the owner of *Milan*, a single screen theatre that is situated very close to Baruipur Station, South 24 Parganas. He was dead against community viewing of cinema in general as well as was vehemently opposed to the "culture" and the kind of audience associated with video halls. He complained that *Namita*, an erstwhile video hall in the vicinity of *Milan*, ate up his significant business by exhibiting popular movies at much cheaper rates. When I enquired at the local market, I found out that the video hall could show newly released movies only after a few weeks or even months after their release as the owners had to wait for the video copy. And this was the case with almost all the video halls in West Bengal. Hence, the claim of the video hall eating up the business of nearby single screens could not be justified. Nevertheless, Gurudas Banerjee, the proud owner of *Mahamaya* cinema hall in Dakshin Barasat, South 24 Parganas, was in complete support of Sahadev Banerjee's claim. I would argue that community viewing and video hall screenings were an extension of and not an alternative to single screen theatres.

While in Madhuj Mukherjee's work, screening movies outside the space of cinema was limited to clubs, the scenario changed when one ventured out of the precinct of "the

city.” Screening films via VHS in open air, in a small field or *dalan* (corridor or lobby), *baranda* (veranda) or *uthon* (courtyard) of a household was a very common phenomenon in the suburban areas and the rural hinterland. It was in the form of community viewing and it had a prominent caste angle to it. The so called upper caste of the rural society, especially the *brahmins* usually stayed away from such community viewing. In our village i.e., South Garia (nothing to do with Garia, which is Kolkata's southernmost part: our village is 16 kilometres away from Garia), in the district of South 24 Parganas, community viewing of films via VHS was usually limited to the Dalit sections of the rural society and the middle class *bhadraloks* of our family not only stayed away from such community viewing, they also discouraged other family members including this author from joining these gatherings, despite my unbound curiosity. The “elite” and the “enlightened” middle class of rural society had major reservations against the types of films which were shown at such screenings.

In a field or open air space, the film screenings usually started in the evening with a Bengali film, directed by Anjan Chowdhury or his successors or Swapan Saha. It was followed by a potboiler Hindi film at night. It could be an action film or a romantic film. The late night show was often meant for titillating films but not necessarily adult films. However, in a *bhadralok* middle class household such films were considered as obscene/ 'oshhili'/ low brow. It was another reason that the *bhadralok* section of the rural society was averse to participating in these screenings. Adult female members could stay back and attend the screening of those films. Nevertheless, those with kids had to rush back to their homes. In a house screening or on a veranda, the timing of screening could be different. The first show could start in the afternoon and the last film was wrapped up before 10 PM. The screening of films with probable adult content was avoided in house screenings. The elders of the house often acted as the censors as they would fast forward a film, especially a Hindi film to check whether there were any erotic scenes. They prepared themselves to fast forward a scene which they considered erotic, during a community screening. The scornful attitude of the middle class *bhadralok* to informal public screenings in rural Bengal resonates with the statement of the owners of *Milan* and *Malampaya* (both belonging to *brahmin* families) on the “low culture” of video hall and informal public screenings. Secondly, the middle class *bhadralok* in rural Bengal is by no means equal to the middle class *bhadralok* in Kolkata, especially in terms of cultural capital, spatial superiority and access to resources. I will explore this in the section pertaining to spatial politics.

#### *Bhadralok and Oshhilita*

Both Sahadeb Banerjee and Gurudas Banerjee blatantly refused to screen any adult film or B

grade film at their theatres. During my school days, I visited Baruipur quite often and caught a few shows in *Milan* with my family members and friends. I often saw posters of B grade films and adult films pasted on the wall of *Milan* and in the surrounding areas (slotted either in the noon show or night show). Many of my mates in school resided in that area and they clearly remember catching adult film shows at *Milan*. Sahadev Banerjee went a step ahead and criticized the owners of *Krishna* and *Leela* for running 'oshlil' (obscene) adult films and B grade films. In Bengal, *oshlil* (obscene) and *oshlilota* (obscenity) is often associated with the *chhotolok*. In sociological and cultural context, *chhotolok* indicates people from the lower rung of the society denoting their class character, caste position and their lack of access to cultural capital. The term was and is meant for insulting the "other." Many admirers of film festivals time and again proven their exclusive interest in the adult content or nudity on screen. The film festival circuit in Kolkata and most parts of West Bengal has always thrived on the conflicting nature of the audience. The so-called audience of the highbrow cinema (majorly the *bhadralok* section of the audience) is pitted against the audience of the lowbrow cinema (majorly the *chhotolok* section of the audience). While explicit nudity is celebrated by the *bhadralok* in the garb of high culture like film festivals. Decorated words like "*bojhar achhe*" (to understand and unearth deeper meaning of certain films which are usually exhibited during film festivals) often turned the *oshlilota* of the *chhotolok* into 'high art' of the *bhadralok*. I interviewed a film and theatre personality in Purulia town. He has acted and also worked in the production of a major filmmaker. Questions to him were pertaining to the history of all the single screen theatres and video halls in Purulia and they are all closed down now. Nevertheless, he preferred to keep on talking about the film society movement and how it has influenced the audience of a town like Purulia. He had no comments to make about the exhibition of *oshlil* adult and B grade cinema in Purulia.

In the field of literature, poets and novelists drew the ire of the authority and fellow writers on the ground of *oshlilota*. For example, Samaresh Basu's novel *Prajapati* (published in 1967) was banned in 1972. The "Hungry Generation Poets" came under the radar of the law. In 1974, Ashim Chakraborty's play *Barbadhu* was stopped on the grounds of obscenity and indecency despite running houseful for several days. However, single screen theatres and video halls were still untouched by the flak from *bhadralok* society for screening adult films as it was taken for granted the *chhotolok* should be allowed their share of indulgence. In the 1970s and the 1980s, barring a few renowned and well-respected directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, the film was still untouched as compared to novels and theatre and thus outside the domain of the Bengali middle class *bhadralok* section of the society. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the stupendous success of Anjan Chowdhury and Swapan Saha and many other directors in the mainstream circuit. These directors were known to

make low budget films with lower production value. Melodrama involving family dynamics were the mainstay of these films. Unexpected success of this genre of films left the *bhadralok* of urban space as well as a section of *bhadralok* in mofussil and rural Bengal flabbergasted with shock and fear.

The pertinent question here is why do we lack adult films or films with cut pieces made in West Bengal? In Bangladesh, we come across a body of cut piece films or films with explicit sex scenes thrown in between scenes of films passed by the censor. One explanation could be the availability of cut piece films in different languages e.g., Hindi, Malayalam and not to forget in English. In case of Bangladesh, we find references to films like *Mintu the Murderer* (released in 2005), where bits and cut pieces were used. However, cut piece films shown in the single screen theatres or video parlours across West Bengal are hardly in Bengali language. Hence, analysing adult films in Bengal's context from the perspective of production is difficult. Hence my focus is more on the circulation, exhibition and viewership of these films in West Bengal.

The audiences of adult films or for that matter any films in West Bengal have a strange kind of outlook when it comes to actors or actresses working in an adult or pornographic films or in a film which have explicit sex scenes and nudity. A familiar face, a popular actor or actress would have a tough time in mass media and become the centre of discussion in every household, offices, *para* (locality), *chaa er dokan* (local tea shop) in case footages of their nudity onscreen are somehow leaked and reach the public domain. Actress Paoli Dam's nude scene from the film "*Chhatrak*," went viral. Audiences all around West Bengal and even audiences of Bangla films living abroad created huge uproar without watching the full film. Anirban Bhattacharya, an actor and director, acted in an underground film called "*Ghya Chang Fou*." However, this film was later exhibited in 2020 on an online video streaming platform. Again, screenshots and recorded video clips of Bhattacharya's nude scenes were leaked online. They went viral and led to abusive and offensive trolling as well as, unnecessary controversy. And again, most of the people went ahead with their comments without even watching the entire film.

The case was different with Anubrata Basu and Rii Sen. When *Gandu* was released, the explicit sex scenes in the movie did not cause them any trouble as far as the moral censure of the Bengali audiences was concerned. One major reason was neither Anubrata Basu nor Rii Sen was as popular as Paoli Dam or Anirban Bhattacharya. Anubrata Basu acted in *Chhatrak*. However, his nudity on screen did not land him in trouble. Sen went on to star in a few more underground movies where she had nude scenes and the clips were leaked online but we did not come across any public uproar about them. This can explain the Bengali audiences' fetish for adult and pornographic films in Malayalam, Hindi, Bhojpuri and

English. However, it is difficult to read an audience whose response to nudity changes depending on the situation and the people involved. The reading is even more complicated when the so called *oshlil* audience reacts with charges of *oshlilota*. The *bhadralok* charge the *chhotok* with obscenity but this whole discourse of *oshlilota* gets complicated when the so-called *chhotok* revert with the same charge. The garb of decency of *bhadralok* is put to test and more importantly a dire need to identify the obscener within the *chhotok* section of the audience comes to the fore.

This discourse on *oshlilota* (obscenity) has its roots in the nineteenth century colonial Bengal. I agree with Hoek when she comments on Sumanta Banerjee's work on the nineteenth century Bengal (Hoek, 2014: 11), “In the course of the nineteenth century, alongside the development of a middle class in colonial Bengal, the meaning of *oshlilota* (obscenity) shifted from indicating lack of respectability and prosperity to including new notions of indecency (Banerjee 1987). Banerjee shows how reform movements within colonial bourgeois society led exuberant sexuality, passionate religiosity, and popular humour to be rejected as *oshlil* (Banerjee 1987) and gave rise to new domains of public cultural production considered obscene.” The “elite” middle class *bhadralok* in nineteenth century Calcutta associated indecency and obscenity with the “popular culture.” In the nineteenth century, the middle class *babus* and their literary forms, and art forms could not fathom the heterogeneity or complexity of a 'working class culture' (Banerjee, 1989: 9). In the same vein, heterogeneity of the rural population, their varied ways of receiving cinema cannot reach the top tier of the urban populace in today's Bengal. In the next segment, I discuss the peculiar “urban cinema,” faulty urban gaze that considers 'the rural' a homogeneous entity.

#### *Urbanism, “Urban Cinema” and Homogeneous Rural*

Harisur Rahman, in his work on the impact of Bollywood cinema on Bangladeshi audiences, commented (Harisur Rahman, 2020: 280), “Middle-class audiences distinguish themselves from the *nimnabitta* or “lower-class” audiences in terms of their cultural capital, such as education and the knowledge to decipher or decode meanings in films, among other factors.” However, accepting and using the categories middle-class or lower-class without proper scrutiny might be deeply problematic. Mere class analysis cannot help us understand indiscriminate and deprivation based on spatial politics. The middle-class from Kolkata and the middle class from a *mofussil* or a village area are in reality not on the same footing at all.

The cultural capital of the urban middle class is significantly different from that belonging to the *mofussil* and rural middle class. And in that sense, the urban middle class

distinguish themselves not only from the lower orders of society but also from their counterparts in the mofussil and rural areas. The question of caste is also of immense importance. The cultural response of the upper caste *nimnabitta* (lower income group) in rural and mofussil areas is quite different from the Dalit *nimnabitta* residing in the same space. This was evident from the community viewing culture in rural areas. Cultural capital alone would not be enough to analyse the inherent arrogance and “Wiser than thou” attitude of the urban middle class. We have to find another dimension to analyse the same and herein lies the importance of the urban-rural divide in terms of development as well as in terms of high and low culture.

These modes of analysis explaining the viewership of adult films in a city space do not necessarily explain the same in a rural space, especially if it concerns remote areas in rural Bengal. The urban gaze of the rural is alarmingly homogeneous. This gaze is filled with ruthless indifference and cultivated ignorance. The way a first world nation e.g., Germany would look down upon a third world nation like ours, just the way the coloniser looked down upon the colonised, the urban sphere often adopts a similar gaze while pretending to understand its neglected other, the rural sphere, especially the remote rural. The gaze that is even more problematic is the urban gaze that considers the rural as a homogeneous entity; an entity devoid of any possible variations and differences; an entity where audiences in different villages, in different districts and different corners of West Bengal perceived and engaged with the adult films shown in video and cinema halls in a similar fashion. Often the urban gaze is thrust upon and imposed on the rural gaze. This strand of opinion still exists and it is rather vindicated despite the advancement of technology, the data revolution and multifarious use of multiple and state of the art devices. Technological advancement does not necessarily entail social advancement factors which are often ascribed to exhibition of “adult” films, extinction of video halls and gradual disappearance of single screen theatres.

Considering rural audience as a homogeneous entity involves multiple limitations and is essentially faulty at its base. First, it disapproves and excludes a large section of audience and their experience without properly taking into account their side of the story and build up on an imagined entity from the precinct of the urban. Second, this approach points to a larger discussion around incomplete urbanization, uneven urbanization and the neglected rural. And this neglect is not only in terms of exhibition of films, its viewership and dwindling number of single screen theatres and theatre like entity i.e., video halls. It also concerns the lack of effective communication, lack of access to resources, political turmoil which is often outside the media gaze and the well-known but accepted fact that the rural is not going to change much.

Nevertheless, the viewership of adult films in a video hall in a remote village of East



Midnapore and the hall-going experience of its audience had to be different from the experience of the audience at a video hall in Jhalda. While the video hall and its owners and audience in East Midnapore had to grapple with floods every single monsoon, the audience in Jhalda had different issues to deal with, especially heat waves and unbearable weather during summer. The video hall at Haripur, East Midnapur, had to be closed down whenever heavy rains and floods caused trouble. In case the video hall was not submerged in water in a particular monsoon, it lacked the audience who used to come from surrounding areas. Often, the nearby areas were waterlogged in every monsoon and the hall had to be kept shut due to a dearth of patrons.

Another problematic urban gaze entails the tendency to equate everything slick, good and presentable with the word “urban.” I interviewed a friend of mine for the purpose of this research article. She is 44, an Associate Professor, a film enthusiast and works at a public university in West Bengal. In the course of our conversation pertaining to this article, when I was admiring an actor who happened to hail from Midnapore town (West Midnapore), my friend agreed with the actor's acting finesse but at the same time, she opined that the actor did not look “urban” enough. She went ahead and named a few actors like Jisshu Sengupta and Abir Chatterjee who looked “urban.” It is beyond my comprehension how a look could be urban or rural. Maybe it is a euphemistic expression for something ugly. Hence, the “urban” is slick and beautiful while its insignificant other is by default ugly and unrepresentable. The “urban” knows how to be nice and ruthless at the same time. Now, one might raise the question: who/what is this insignificant other? I will come to that in a short while.

This incessant search for the “urban” is not limited to looks or presentability. It is equally discernible in the choice of films as well. While doing interviews, many of my friends, acquaintances and interviewees from Kolkata repeatedly used the term “urban cinema” which they hailed as superior form of cinema made in West Bengal. It is not difficult to discern some of the very common and repetitive features in so called urban centric films one major feature and flaw is the locations of these films most of the films are shot indoors. The outdoors would be limited to Kolkata (mostly the southern part of Kolkata and sometimes parts of “extended” Kolkata like Rajarhat, New Town), Santiniketan and Darjeeling. A few filmmakers like Raj Chakrabarty successfully explored Malda (in *Bojhe Na Se Bojhena*), Purulia (in *Proloy*), Siliguri (in *Chirodini Tumi Je Amar*), Medinipur (in *Dui Prithibi*) and many other locations even though they are criticised for helming remakes of Tamil and Telugu movies. And the majority of his critics were the so-called “urbanites.” Chakrabarty has also turned to “urban cinema.”

The most painful yet integral part of this kind of cinema is its language. The characters struggle to speak any one language as they relentlessly switch between Bangla,



English and sometimes Hindi. And the Bangla they speak is also a distorted version of the standardised Bangla we are taught in Schools, Colleges and Universities. Bangla has so many variations and so many dialects but they do not find their way into our mainstream cinema. Some You Tubers and video content creators from districts like Bankura and many other places are doing a better job in terms of linguistic skills and many other respects in their limited scope. Herein the discourse of homogeneity of the rural could again be countered. The way Bangla is spoken in Bankura (Bankri Bangla) is vastly different from South 24 Parganas and East Medinipur. In many of the villages of East Medinipur e.g., Shibachhipur, Mohammadpur, Haripur, Ilashpur, Dardighi and many other villages where I visited, residents speak a kind of Bangla that is heavily influenced by Oriya. Hence, the heterogeneity of language needs to be celebrated in a popular medium like cinema. The irony is this is not a case of ignorance but a sheer matter of negligence and unwillingness to learn and embrace. As long as these dialects or accents are not properly represented in mainstream Bangla cinema, the content and business of Bangla cinema will remain as dismal as it is today and it might even get worse.

#### *The City and its Insignificant Other*

Let me now explain who/what is the insignificant other of the “urban”? Is it “rural”? Is it “mofussil” or both? The answer is both but the degree of otherness and the degree of neglect varies. While my focus is on rural Bengal and to a large extent in their historical context, the *mofussil* is within the purview of my research as well. Even Lotte Hoek defined *mofussil* as rural hinterland in the context of Bangladesh (Hoek, 2012: 28). However, the terms “rural” and “mofussil” are not interchangeable. I got to spend some time in Germany and while mentioning my home address I used to mention South 24 Parganas, a district from West Bengal that is not far from the district of Kolkata. However, my friends and acquaintances from different countries found it difficult to follow, let alone remember. All they knew about West Bengal was Kolkata, Howrah railway station, Darjeeling and a little bit about Shantiniketan. My friends from Kolkata came to their rescue and declared South 24 Parganas as “extended Kolkata.” I used to be as enraged as someone from the neighbouring areas of Paris who were often identified as Parisians not only for the convenience of the unversed but also for the sake of their fellow countrymen and in this case Parisians, who were at ease with their cultivated ignorance like the many “urbanites” from Kolkata. Ours<sup>1</sup> is a *gram panchayat* and the so called extended and expanded precincts of the city start 10 kilometres away from our place (and the “mofussil” area is 5 kilometres from our village). Yes, it sounds very close by in terms of physical distance, but we are light years behind our beloved city in every

possible respect; communication, lack of access to resources, lack of job opportunities, considerable distance to the places of job. Agricultural sector was still surviving in our locality until 2006-2007 when land grab was forcing its way into the sector and thus significantly crippling it. Afterwards and even to this day, illegal construction and continued land grab are rendering many people attached to agriculture jobless. Environmental concern is another issue but unfortunately, I would not be able to explore the same in this research. My point is our village and for that matter villages in West Bengal are not “extended Kolkata,” even if they are not far from the city.

So far as “Urbanism” is concerned, the classic models or the modernist take on urbanism might not help us grasp the contemporary avatar of the expanding urban space and post-colonial city structure. I would like to refer to Ravi Sundaram (Ravi Sundaram, 2010: 68) who argues that “postcolonial urban life has imploded, the new expansion of the cities has made classic urban management models irrelevant or simply inoperative. Proliferation, endless proliferation, marks the new postcolonial urban.” Through the story of disappearing single screen theatres, we can see uneven and unjust expansion of a city or in my case “the city” (Kolkata). The so called “extended Kolkata” has extended its areas deep into the surrounding districts but the extension has remained on the surface level. Remote areas like Bakhrahat now have Kolkata pin codes sans the comfort, convenience or access to resources. Extension of the urban space sounds rather lucrative. However, the new urban is hardly the urban as it is deprived of many of the privileges that the actual urban enjoys and has always enjoyed. This story of neglected rural and failure of the urban in the form of uneven extension of Kolkata points us to the direction of utter failure of so-called “Development” of Kolkata. The case of Bengal has been rather strange as there has been suburbanisation but mainly on paper. Yes, extended Kolkata is still extending and expanding her limits, facilities and amenities have not reached there yet. Fleeting stories of the development of Rajarhat, New Town or Baruipur are more exceptions than rules.

#### *The Multiplex and its Insignificant Other*

This story of unjust and uneven development is more evident when I consider spatial politics relating to the advent and rise of multiplex cinema vis a vis the waning of single screen theatres and video halls. The idea of oshlilota (obscenity) is very class specific in the urban space. The interplay of caste and class pertaining to obscenity is visible in the mofussil and rural sphere. With the advent of the multiplex the idea of indecency and obscenity pertaining to cinema was redefined. Indecency and obscenity were no anymore limited to the content of films. They were now associated with the sites of cinema and are not limited to certain

types of films but also with the space where those films were shown and eventually with the people who watched those films in those sites. Spatial politics pertaining to cinema added and contributed to the discourse on obscenity and indecency.

The major concern of the multiplexes is to have a “decent crowd”(Hill and Athique 2013, 601) who would buy their alarmingly priced popcorn and soft drinks and smoothly sail through the screening. The sites of cinema are more like overpriced designer clothes. No one knows why they are so expensive but they end up buying them anyway. And the rise and rise of these sites of film exhibition means the exclusion of a large section of the audience. Plus, the multiplexes are hardly interested in catering to larger audience but their interest lies in making a sizeable profit from a smaller number of viewers. Many of the video halls used to substitute far off single screen theatres. Residents of a remote village could not afford the time and money to go to the nearest single screen theatre which was miles away (commuting 5-6 miles in Kolkata and commuting the same distance in a sub-division like Bhagwanpur is not the same. The latter is much more difficult). Local video halls provided them with the alternative site for watching films. But the multiplexes are asking for an impossible task involving a long journey just to grab a film show. This is a difficult task not only for the people in the lower economic tier, but it is also equally difficult for persons belonging to the middle income group in the sub-urban or rural areas to take up such a task at a substantially high cost. As Gita Vishwanath has pointed out (Gita Vishwanath, 2007: 3293), “The arrival of multiplexes mainly within the mall space in the Indian exhibition scenario has created new leisure infrastructure chiefly for the middle and upper middle classes.”

Adrian Athique observed (Athique, 2012: 155), “To be part of this ‘decent crowd’ was seen by multiplex patrons as a marker of both affluence and good manners, and it allowed them to put themselves at a distance from the general movie-going public.” But this discussion started well before the advent of multiplex cinemas. Within the purview of single screen theatres, some were characterised as dignified spaces and some others were said to be full of indecent crowds. In Asansol, *Chitra* was considered a dignified space but Manoj was not a comfortable space for Bengali middle class bhadralok and bhadramahila. Noon shows and night shows which were often reserved for adult films, often led the audience to resort to such branding and a judgemental approach. Even in a remote village like Haripur, Ilashhpur and surrounding areas the dos and don'ts of female members, especially bhadro ghorer meyera (bhadramahila or womenfolk belonging to the lower and upper middle-class household) had been an age old discussion. That included the kinds of cinema they could watch. And the idea of safety was associated with the kind of film and not with the spatial sphere.

While going to adult film shows was completely out of the question for a female

audience, they gave the same treatment to Hindi film shows. Rama Maity (47) and Sharmila Bera (29), both homemakers, avoided Hindi films in video halls as well as in single screen theatres as the films exhibited in those areas were mostly action-oriented. They both felt that Hindi films had several intimate scenes and they would feel uncomfortable watching those with a hall full of audience, especially male audience. She added that bhadro ghorer meyera (women belonging to “decent” households) would avoid Hindi film shows. Tribhuban Bera (39), Sharmila Bera's husband and a teacher at a government sponsored school, seemed pretty comfortable with the point of view presented by her wife. Tribhuban insisted that the view was subscribed to by the entire villagers and also residents of the surrounding villages. Tribhuban and many of his peers who I interviewed, claimed to have stayed away from attending screenings of adult films and B grade films. They were the flag bearers of “decency” in the remote areas of rural Bengal. However, Kailas Maity (55), Rama Maity's husband, did not mind watch adult films with his friends and colleagues in the local video hall. Her husband was the owner of a local clothing shop.

I would like to refer to Sumanta Banerjee's critique of the Eurocentric view of the nineteenth century which claimed that “all the existing forms of culture in the colonies were to be evaluated in terms of their similarity or dissimilarity to the culture of Europe.”(Banerjee, 1989:3). As always, the cultural mores of “the city” are considered the yardsticks and they are ceaselessly applied to its sub-urban and rural counterparts and thus setting the clock backward in the process. In today's context and especially in the context of Bengal, viewing cinema has become an integral part of the cultural of Kolkata. The result is a marginalisation of community viewing and peripheralization of sites of cinema which enjoyed their unprecedented popularity even a few years back.

Sadly, the future is bleak and the days are not far when we would get multiplex for separate housing societies/ gated communities. The cinema is already turning out to be an exclusive affair and, in the days, to come, watching on the big screen would be part of a larger luxurious experience commensurate with luxurious and expensive living. The rise of multiplexes and exclusive spaces for watching ate up the space of single screen theatres and video halls. The rural space is now completely ignored when it comes to circulating, exhibiting and viewing films. One could grasp the deteriorating condition of the single screen theatres in West Bengal as only 120 of those are in operation while in early 2020, almost 250 theatres were operational. Many filmmakers have started hosting premieres of their films in their attempts to stand by the single screen theatres. The efforts, again, are limited to Kolkata and the single screen theatres of mofussil and rural Bengal have nothing to gain from such efforts. On the other hand, the prices of tickets at multiplexes are skyrocketing. Almost all the major multiplex players are not from the film business that

Athique called 'disorganised sector'; needless to say, their priority has never been to showcase films, or connect with the audience or the 'exhibition' of cinema. This discourse runs contrary to the owners of single screen theatres who were known for their passion; they kept running their theatres despite incurring losses for a long time; and their priority was an exhibition of cinema. It was not that they were not concerned with the business but their primary concern was the exhibition of cinema. And in most cases, it was their primary source of income. The owners of multiplexes can hardly be called exhibitors - priority wise; selling popcorns is their priority. With the closing down of single screen theatres, the passionate hordes of exhibitors are becoming extinct.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I cannot help but quote Sumanta Banerjee's pertinent words regarding the state of culture in the nineteenth century Calcutta, "While elite culture survived to develop further and attain maturity in the twentieth century in the hands of Rabindranath Tagore... Calcutta's popular culture became increasingly marginalized and faced virtual extinction by the turn of the twentieth century." (Banerjee 1989; 202). Years, decades and centuries have gone by and yet this habit of silencing the others has not changed a bit. The forms and modes of silencing have changed for sure. This is pretty evident in the way circulation, and exhibition of cinema in West Bengal has evolved in the past decades. And closely related to this is the viewing and viewership of cinema which has been the most affected by this (Banerjee 1989: 203) "culture of silence" (Banerjee 1989; 203) or in the context viewership of cinema in West Bengal, the culture of silencing the "other."

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## Notes :

*Trash* (কলকাতার গুপ্তকথা), a short film on B grade film and adult film and the single screen theatres which exhibited those movies in Kolkata. Released in 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ8Y4p-YhOM&ab\\_channel=films%40Sougata](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ8Y4p-YhOM&ab_channel=films%40Sougata)

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*Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. Blackwell. pp. 447--50.  
Mulvey 1975: 9

*Leela* is a kilometre away from *Milan* and it is still in operation while the owners of *Milan* are renovating it. The former was known for running adult film shows, especially in their noon slot. However, the owner agreed to a telephonic interview as he runs a jewellery store in Baruiipur market and a very busy man. He was very sweet to give me his number but not so sweet while picking up my phone calls.

The owner of *Krishna* was pretty regular in running adult films and B grade films and occasionally pornographic films. The cinema hall has long been closed down and the last passed away last year. I was not fortunate to get first and details of this cinema hall.

Basu's book titled *Prajapati* (published in 1967) was banned in 1972 on the ground of obscenity.

On September 2, 1964, eleven Hungry generation poets were arrested. The charges against them were on the grounds of obscenity in literature and also subversive conspiracy against the state.

*Awdoyo Sesh Rajani*, a 2016 theatre production, is based on the events leading to the ban on *Barbadhu* and the ban's after-effects.

The film was directed by Vimukthi Jayasundara was released in 2011. It did not have a formal release in India but went to several film festivals.

The film was directed by Joyraj Bhattacharya was released in 2017. However, the film could not have a public release due to its content involving nudity.

Again, the makers could not go ahead with a public release in India. This 2010 movie directed by Q got rave reviews in Berlin Film Festival and went on to travel the festival circuit.

Sen acted in another movie named *Cosmic Sex*, directed by Amitabh Chakraborty and released in 2015. The nude scenes involving her did not cause uproar, unlike in other cases.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/movies/news/tollywood-filmmakers-rally-around-single-screen-theatres/articleshow/91749793.cms>

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# Filmmaking Pedagogy : Evolution and Changes

Sharmistha Jha

*Introduction to film education*

Film education encompasses the exploration of various aspects of cinema, including film genres, movements, theory, history, and the critical analysis and assessment of films. This educational discipline not only imparts foundational knowledge about the art of filmmaking but also introduces students to the nuanced philosophical dimensions of the medium. Film education empowers young individuals to decipher the ways in which films and moving images communicate messages, inspiring them to engage in in-depth film studies and fostering their creative drive to produce their own cinematic works.

Peters (1961) talks about the purpose of film education. According to him, “Film teaching is part of general art education” (p.20). Film is an autonomous art and the youth will confront this art more than the older arts. Only achieving technical excellence will not be enough to produce a work of art. “The work must also correspond to the laws of aesthetic form; it must strike us as agreeable and beautiful. But even that is still not enough: a work of art has to 'tell' us something, it has to make sense” (p.36).

Experts on film education in Britain wanted film appreciation to be part of the school curriculum and not just be reserved for film societies alone. In the USA, in 1950, many English teachers had lessons about film appreciation in their curriculum (Peters,



1961). Furthermore, the history of cinema itself can be explored through the use of films known for their "classical" significance, offering valuable insights into the evolution of the medium (Peters, 1961).

By the conclusion of the 1930s, the notion of integrating film appreciation into educational curricula had been put into practice in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Prior to introducing film instruction in schools, there were initiatives to incorporate film and cinema studies into higher education. In the United States, an early example was the course "Photoplay Composition," initiated in 1915 at Columbia University, marking the initial steps toward this educational endeavour. However, it wasn't until the 1950's that the concept of a modern, distinct academic discipline emerged, complete with its own body of knowledge and intellectual significance.

In France during the late 1940s, the filmologie movement advocated for a rigorous and scholarly examination of cinema, while the 1950s witnessed various attempts to christen this field of study. One proposed term was "cinematology." Nevertheless, by the 1970s, "film studies" had become the prevailing and widely accepted label for this academic discipline (Kuhn, 2019).

Film stands as one of the most influential artistic expressions in our contemporary era. Film education plays a pivotal role in fostering enhanced social interaction skills and promoting cultural understanding. Within a film institute, students delve into fundamental aspects such as story telling structure, aesthetics, the rich tapestry of film history, and the diverse array of influential directors. Additionally, students are exposed to innovative concepts and cutting-edge techniques, and they receive practical, hands-on training using the latest equipment and software. This comprehensive education equips individuals with the tools to both appreciate and contribute to the dynamic world of cinema.

### *Film Institutes in the World*

In the initial days of cinema, those interested in learning the technical art of film making were often self-taught technicians or still photographers who wanted to experiment with modern film technology. Anyone who wanted to learn the technical skills of film making had to start at the bottom of a hierarchical structure and learned the craft as a pupil under a more experienced individual. Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean, among others, learned the trade in the same way. The All-Russian State University of Cinematography in Moscow established in 1919 is the oldest film school in the world. Named after S. A. Gerasimov, it came to be known as the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography. Early film theorists were more concerned with the theoretical part of the subject rather than instructing students in a

classroom. Famous filmmakers like Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Vsevolod Pudovkin have taught at the institute. Some of the other illustrious alumni include filmmakers such as Sergei Parajanov and Andrei Tarkovsky (“Film school”, 2021).

Film-teaching is typically part of the 'Fine Arts Department' at American colleges and universities. For instance, the University of California, Los Angeles offers a Department of Theatre Arts that teaches film technique and history, and New York University has a Department of Film, Radio, and Television (Peters,1961). The University of Southern California's Institution of Cinematic Arts is a private media school in Los Angeles, California. They offer many undergraduate and graduate programs which cover various aspects of filmmaking like film production, screen writing, animation and digital arts. The USC School of Cinematic Arts was founded in 1929 and The University of Southern California was the first university in the USA to offer a Bachelor of Arts degree in film. It is the oldest and largest film school in the United States. It was established as a joint venture with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (“Film School”, 2021).

The Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, FAMU, was founded in 1946. FAMU is the world's fifth-oldest film academy. Many prominent filmmakers and scriptwriters have graduated from it, many of whom are well-known internationally as Oscar winners or winners of international film festivals(<https://www.famu.cz/en/>).With the film industry adopting digital technology, most film institutes have incorporated digital media in their curriculum. Even though a few film institutes still use celluloid in their productions, most have shifted to digital media.

In 1947, Sri Jaya Chamara Jendra Polytechnic in Mysore, India, began teaching cinematography as part of its course and with it the initiation of film education in India started. Film education in India as an academic discipline started as a Post Graduate course with the setting up of the Film and Television Institute (FTII) in Pune in 1960. The goal of establishing a film institute was to regulate film education while simultaneously establishing a global environment for filmmaking and cinema theory. As a result of the formation of FTII, a number of film institutes, both government-sponsored and privately funded, began to spring up across the world (Nathan, 2016).

### *Need for formal education in filmmaking*

A perpetual discussion persists between those who advocate for a structured film education system and those who contend that film, as an art form, cannot be effectively instructed. Within the film industry, experienced individuals who have acquired their skills through practical experience frequently question the value of a formal film degree in comparison to

gaining employment and achieving success through hands-on work. On the other side of the argument, proponents of film institute education assert that a comprehensive education is indispensable for gaining a deeper grasp of film making methods, emphasizing that film institutes offer greater opportunities to learn from industry professionals who are currently active or have a rich history in the field. Further more, students have ample opportunities to establish connections with film makers, technicians, and producers, often gaining valuable experience as observers or interns alongside them. Additionally, numerous film institutes host festivals to showcase student films on a global stage. Some film makers and technicians emphasize the significance of mastering the technical facets of film making for aspiring film makers. Although creativity is challenging to teach, it is not the only quality that a film maker must possess. Additionally, they need to understand technique, which film school is great at teaching. Conversely, there is a substantial contingent of individuals who question the need for formal film school education. They argue that, instead of investing in often costly education, it might be wiser to allocate those funds toward actually producing a film, which would offer more practical, hands-on learning experiences. They hold the view that a more comprehensive education can be acquired through aiding and observing industry professionals in action. The rise in independent film making, made more accessible by the fact that anyone with a digital camera can now produce a film, has intensified the discussion surrounding this issue.

There are You Tube channels which provide film making education and similar to how most film educators are, the majority of the authors of these channels have their own academic education and/or professional experience in the industry. You Tube film school is for everyone who is even remotely interested in learning about the processes involved in making films. It is portrayed as a very accessible and worthwhile alternative to conventional education (Pierce, 2017).

The formalising of film education was aimed at changing the scenario to a large extent by giving an opportunity to everyone to learn and hone their skills (Nathan, 2016). The film industry is brimming with technicians who graduate from film institutes. According to Shyam Benegal, “I credit the film schools for the positive changes that we are seeing today. These film makers are well educated in the art and craft of cinema.” Benegal has been the chairman of FTII and also taught at the institute. He feels that the film audience nowadays is far more film literate than earlier. They are much more selective of the audio-visual material that they want to watch. Since the film makers are also more cinema literate today, this has an impact on the quality of films which are being made (Ghosh, 2019). Benegal asserted that “The course in film language should find place in the school curriculum at the primary or secondary level alongside the study of all other languages. It is

an expressive and comprehensive language with its own vocabulary of idioms. Cinema has grammar of its own that gets enlarged with changes in technology” (India Today Online, 2012).

Dibakar Banerjee (filmmaker), believes that the proliferation of graduates from film schools, especially those from FTII and SRFTI, is proportional with the industry's needs. In fact, according to him without the entry of film school students into the industry, the state of Indian cinema would be a very mediocre scenario. Their immersion in the intricacies of filmmaking serves to enrich the existing landscape dominated by commercial cinema within the industry. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that many figures in the film industry, including the speaker himself, are self-taught. However, this fact doesn't diminish the significance of film education within the industry. Even though there has been a steady entry of graduates from film institutes into the industry, there is also a constant shortage of skilled technicians in the industry (Nathan, 2016).

There are quite a few state aided and private film institutes in India, but there are only two national film institutes under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, namely, Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI), Kolkata.

### *Filmmaking education*

Filmmaking teaching-learning is a practice based pedagogy taught in film institutes across the world. It provides comprehensive knowledge in filmmaking along with practical training. Over the years, the process of film making has gone through many changes with evolution in technology and equipment. The primary goal of filmmaking education, now, should be to effectively integrate new media and technological platforms, as well as to expand students' practical notions and expose them to the latest technology and cinema concepts. Furthermore, it is crucial to closely monitor the ongoing developments and shifts within the film and television industry. This approach helps in cultivating the skills that are essential for the industry, promoting the adaptation of teaching methods in accordance with industrial demands, and ensuring that film and television education remains aligned with the current needs of the market(Gu, 2019).

Teaching filmmaking in the digital age requires an eagerness from the students and the faculty members to adapt to new technologies. The teacher has to have the desire to share with the students an excitement of viewing classic films vis-a-vis an understanding of how students perceive contemporary films. The moving image will continue to evolve throughout our lives and provide new challenges and opportunities for educators. Students can access

vital primary texts, photographs, and films while sitting at home or on the way to work, because of the advent of vast digital sources (Dixon and Forster, 2012).

As film becomes more widely available via the internet and smart phones, the issue in the future will most likely be students studying New media instead of film. Cinema as a form is sometimes mistaken with medium, as we've seen in 'old' linear media. With the introduction of 'new' nonlinear media, we might risk having cinema as a form mistaken with some kind of formless new media material. All educational programs related to moving images, including cinema, can derive pedagogical benefits from the integration of digital technology. However, it is essential to be cautious and ensure that this convergence does not pose a threat to the integrity of cinema as an art form and industry (Kiwitt, 2012). Technology is increasingly being used in every aspect of digital storytelling, but the teaching of the technology is often reduced to button pushing and template orientation. In a world characterized by rapidly evolving technologies, educators must bridge the gap between traditional and modern teaching methods to foster genuine understanding and progress.

Stewens (2017) noted that the present media landscape exhibits unprecedented diversity, making it challenging to predict its future trajectory. This diversity is expected to usher in novel employment opportunities and fresh approaches to media education, driven by the advent of new media. Professionals in the industry are increasingly impacted by digital workflows, leading to the specialization of job roles. The rapid progress in digital technology has made filmmaking more compact and cost-effective, democratizing access to film production tools and support worldwide. Films have permeated various aspects of society. Given the evolving landscape, many educators and experts in film schools are now pondering what these institutions should provide to their students in these complex times. In 2015, a decision was taken to consolidate the three separate BA study programs, of The Cologne film school, into a single program, which they named BA Film. This strategic move was significantly influenced by the demands and requirements brought about by digital workflows, and the recognition that in the era of digital filmmaking, there was a growing necessity for students to have an interdisciplinary understanding and engage in more intensive collaboration.

### *Challenges of teaching film in a digital age*

Adapting to new methods of teaching film in the digital age requires recognizing film as a distinct medium situated within the broader context of New Media, heavily reliant on the internet. Film exists alongside the emergence and obsolescence of various technologies, no longer confined to movie theatres or living rooms but viewed on screens of all sizes and

settings. The creation, editing, and distribution of films have undergone significant transformations, with the latest trend being distribution via streaming platforms. The term digital convergence now encompasses the interplay between film, radio, television, and the internet. Today, educators and students encounter a wealth of techniques and technologies that present both new opportunities for teaching and a fresh set of practical and theoretical challenges when studying cinema (Friedberg, 2012).

Film is no longer an autonomous medium in today's media landscape. Various production processes, changing display technologies and delivery platforms have changed the predigital and digital equations. Along with these changes, the classroom formats and instructional technologies for teaching of film have changed dramatically. The earlier method of 16mm projection has been replaced by streaming platforms. The teacher can project web pages and stream archival materials related to moving images in the classroom (Friedberg, 2012). Although theorists and academics discuss the distinctions between film and video images, most students and administrators have accepted other forms of projection as the new norm of our visual culture. Digital projection systems provide a great deal of versatility in terms of subtitles, languages, and screen formats. Students now can have more access to classic films, as well as international and experimental films, than at any other point in history. They no longer have to travel to archives to see classics and lesser-known films. Students can conveniently and affordably subscribe to OTT platforms so that they can have immediate access to the films discussed in class. Students of this generation will almost certainly seek information online first, with written texts serving as a last resort (Dixon and Forster, 2012).

The whole perception of what cinema is, has been drastically changed by the culture and language of internet. Film (in celluloid) as was known in earlier times, has disappeared and become an obsolete format in an all-digital world.

The presence of the Over-the-top (OTT) platforms have had a significant impact on filmmaking pedagogy in recent years. These platforms, which deliver content directly to viewers via the internet, have changed the traditional distribution models and created new opportunities and challenges for filmmakers. OTT platforms provide a platform for independent filmmakers to showcase their work without the need for traditional studio backing. This could lead to changes in filmmaking pedagogy, with a greater emphasis on independent filmmaking and entrepreneurship in addition to traditional film related studies and practical skills. The viewing habits of OTT audiences can also influence the evolution of cinematic language. Filmmaking education may include discussions on episodic storytelling, pacing, and the art of keeping viewers engaged over multiple episodes. Filmmaking pedagogy now prepares students to navigate the opportunities and challenges presented in the OTT era.

Many inquiries regarding filmmaking pedagogy arise when considering the curriculum for the next generation of students. Whether the history of film editing and cinematography should still be part of film school education, given their role in traditional celluloid filmmaking, or is teaching an introduction to contemporary digital filmmaking enough. Whether there should be a shift towards prioritizing independent filmmaking now and whether YouTube film release or an OTT platform is as significant as a theatre release, are some of the pressing questions that many filmmaking institutes are grappling with today. Answers to these questions are not readily available, and in fact, the landscape of filmmaking education in the age of new media may generate even more queries. Perhaps a whole new approach to teaching filmmaking will emerge as seek solutions to these challenges are sought.

In the meantime, cinema may have evolved in terms of its format and presentation, but it remains a vibrant and enduring art form. Filmmaking education will continue to adapt, incorporating both traditional and innovative approaches to meet the demands of this ever-evolving industry.

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## Social Realism in Post Emergency Odia Cinema

Sanjoy Patnaik

The 1970s announced its arrival with a host of remarkable developments both in Indian politics and cinema. Even with reforms and war victory, the Indian economy was in shambles with resounding popular disillusionment and crisis all around. The fast growing second generation Indians were gradually detaching from its umbilical cord carrying the values and philosophy of the freedom struggle and the Nehruvian conservatism. During the early years of the decade, Indian cinema comprising of the Bombay and all the regional language film industries witnessed three key growth drivers; capacity enhancement, financial investment and infrastructure development. Trained makers and actors from formal film and drama institutes had started to flow in to establish a strong foundation for a new genre of films that created an alternative by transitioning from song, dance and romance to realism. This was the decade when the language film industries were making definite and determined strides towards prosperity while the mainstream Bombay cinema was in its zenith with the emergence of the country's biggest euphoria, the 'angry young man'.

*Odia cinema of the 1970s*

Post independent Odia cinema like other language cinema was heavy on mythology and



Puranic stories that slowly graduated to social themes. Consistent with emerging trends across the country, Odia cinema skilfully used the respectability of literature to gather the middle class acceptability of the new technology that was looked down upon as a debase and degenerated art form. As it moved into the 70s, there was slow but significant departure from literature. What appears to be a potent reason for such separation is the diminishing thematic relevance for the second generation viewers that apparently emerged from differing socio-political and cultural objectives and unifying factors. Literature being a product of its time, novels written during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century whose cinematic adaptations were done post independence largely depicted first generation conflicts like agrarian crisis, caste issues, land fragmentation, disintegration of joint family, rural-urban divide that were relevant and contemporary then.

Two impressive developments took place in Odia cinema during this decade; the growth of two genres of cinema at the same time. They were; the FTII trained new wave makers and the 'middle of the road' makers both striving to achieve the revered goals of social realism. By being less melodramatic and close to reality the makers cleverly focused on challenges and disillusionments that the post independent India threw up. The cine audience of the 70s and post Emergency found issues like; dishonest local self-governance as a post-colonial wrong (*Sansar*, 1971), village politics and the resultant community divides (*Sita Rati*, 1976/82), privatisation of common resources – private vs community rights (*Chilika Tirey*, 1977), disoriented and disillusioned youth (*Ulka*, 1981), disintegration of urban joint family (*Maya Miriga*, 1984), tribal displacement and questions of assimilation (*Hakim Babu*, 1984) more relevant and gripping. Therefore, the two generations sourced and located the conflict, the villain or the enemy in two different socio-political systems and structures that followed independence. If one located it in the colonial past that literature depicted to culturally unify a newly independent and politically unified nation; the other placed it in the modern state's interface with citizens and profit contributing to varying ethical and moral standards.

#### *Heralding in an era of social realism in Odia cinema*

Manmohan Mahapatra, an FTII graduate of the mid 70s, can be credited for being the torch bearer of new wave cinema in Odisha along with Ghanashyam Mohapatra (*Kanaklata*, 1974), Sagir Ahmed (*Dhare Alua*, *A Ray of Light*, 1984) and Nirad Mahapatra (*Maya Miriga*, *The Mirage*, 1984). Manmohan, with his classical approach of back to the roots, focused on rural life and power dynamics. Manmohan was particularly fascinated by the ill effects of petty party politics polluting the serene country side in Odisha that he narrated in his debut film

*Sita Rati* (Winter Night, 1976/82). He developed a unique skill of critiquing the contemporary socio-economic fabric of Odisha. In his next venture, *Niraba Jhada* (The Silent Storm, 1984), he portrayed the story of rural peasantry in a more realistic environment where they have accepted their lot stoically for centuries. Manmohan went on to make a series of classics like *Klanta Aparanha* (Tired Afternoon, 1985), *Majhi Pahacha* (The Middle Step, 1987), *Bhinna Samay* (Different Times, 1992), *Bhija Matira Swarga* (Wet Heaven, 2022) and so on. He was a master at depicting rural complexities around social values, modes of production and rural-urban divide. The trend of using mainstream actors in the new wave space also influenced film makers in Odisha, with Manmohan and others choosing to include skilled mainstream actors and experiment with creative blends with entertainment.

With the onset of 80s, there was an increase in the inflow of the number of Odia graduates coming from FTII. There was a growing realisation within young Odia filmmakers like ace cinematographer-director Raj Gopal Mishra that while a film with a fresh and alternative thinking is the need of the hour, its commercial viability is critical to the sustenance of filmmaking. The thinking was echoed by his FTII contemporaries. His debut film *Ulka* (The Asteroid, 1981) was indeed a creative delight but failed to navigate the juggernaut of commerce. Though his intention to capitalise on learning from Bombay cinema was commendable, the genre couldn't be a success in the regional language space.

During this time, Nirad Mahapatra, a 1971 graduate from FTII, a teacher in FTII then, directed a cinematic masterpiece called *Maya Miriga* (The Mirage, 1984), a story of a disintegrating urban joint family with varying and differing aspirations of the siblings and other family members presented realistically and in the most uneventful manner. Nirad was particularly influenced by Japanese filmmaker Ozu and his post war social approaches. *Maya Miriga* was a high point in the film history of Odisha for the deep impact it made both in India and overseas. Within months of its release in 1984, it was making headlines in almost all prestigious film festivals and circles across the world. *Maya Miriga* was well received within the urban middle class not only because it bagged the Rajat Kamal (Silver Lotus) in the national film awards but for being the first film to have placed Odia cinema in the cinematic map of the country.

#### *The new genre and makers of Odia cinema*

Odia cinema continued its experiments with social realism with the beginning of the 1990s. The growing national and international recognition of Manmohan and Nirad as reputed new wave filmmakers motivated a good group of young aspiring filmmakers to enter

FTII in the mid and late 80s. The trend caused a sizeable influx of young talents into Odia cinema dominated by FTII graduates ready to get started on their debut ventures. The first and probably a very conspicuous name in the list of makers of the 90s is Susant Mishra, a 1989 FTII graduate, who came up with his first directorial venture with *Indradhanura Chhai* (Shadow of the Rainbow, 1994). Susant, a crafty filmmaker, succinctly dealt with the complicated existential predicaments of three women of three different generations in an old part of the state capital. *Indradhanura Chhai* was instantly noticed in India and overseas with a number of awards and accolades in reputed film festivals, including Cannes in 1995. Besides, FTII graduates like Chakradhar Sahu (*Nila Masterani*, 1996), Himansu Sekhar Khatua's *Shunya Swaroopa* 'Contours of the Void' participated in many international festivals including Rotterdam and bagged National Award as the Odia film and Malay Ray (*Moksha*, Salvation, 1995) went on to flood the realist cinema space with their maiden ventures.

As Odia cinema heralded into the new millennium, it experimented with a new genre of films that focused on key development challenges that Odisha started to face post liberalisation of the early 1990s and the mining boom post 2004. The issue-based film making grew up as a direct result of the impact of economic liberalisation in Odisha as it was in other parts of the country. Socio-economic and environmental fallouts due to the free play of market forces during the 1990s and afterwards gave birth to realistic narratives that depicted the troubled human existence, lives and relationships, rich-poor and rural-urban divide. Development brought in its wake a set of inevitable, disparity-induced conflicts – both socio-economic and political. While the basic characteristic of cinema as an entertainment medium didn't change, issue-based films introduced a set of social reformist narratives using similar cinematic idiom.

Biplab Roy Choudhury's *Nirbachan* (The Election, 1994), could be credited as a path breaking narrative which had a strong politico-environmental flavour in and around the ecologically fragile urban sprawls – a film that exposed the high and hidden ecological premium of modernisation. Super Cyclone of 1999 in Odisha was brought to celluloid space for the first time in 2007 by Himansu Khatua's national award winning creation *Kathantara* (Another Story). It was a gripping human story of a young widow fighting to survive with dignity post cyclone. *Kathantara* was probably one of the first films to be filming human miseries and predicament post tsunami.

During the last one decade, a host of Odia films focused primarily on the complexities of development issues impacting the lives of the marginalised, especially women. In this regard, Himansu Khatua's *Krantidhara* (Coup de Grace, 2014) based on the story of Iti Sananta stands out as an excellent presentation of gender relations, community power structure and rural patriarchy - based on a popular subject across India called

'Sarpanch Pati'. The hidden patriarchy in rural politics and sustained male domination to ensure political control with the planting of a woman as Sarpanch that had emerged as a key issue after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional amendment in 1992 giving more powers to panchayats.

Mining was brought into cinematic discourse with a brave exposition of uncontrolled mining and the associated socio-institutional corruption with Sanjoy Patnaik's film *Shuka Asuchi* (2014). What made the film particularly interesting was its docu-feature style of presentation and a dig at the contemporary model of growth. The film was a skilled depiction of the pangs of displacement and the predicament of the rural youth who have lost interest in farming and have preferred to survive through petty power brokerage in the rich mining belts of Odisha. The most recent to have joined the issue-based film club has been *Kalira Atita* (Yesterday's Past, 2020), directed by Nila Madhab Panda. The film has made a sincere effort to educate the audience about the invisible and often overlooked challenges of climate change, especially in an eco-fragile area like coastal Odisha. The intermittent nature of cyclones in Odisha and the damages to human lives and livelihoods have been competently crafted.

#### *Post Covid Odia Cinema*

Filmmakers in Odisha post Covid like in any other state encountered the most formidable task of bringing cine goes back to the halls. With the OTT (Over The Top) capturing a significant market share during Covid and thereafter, the key challenge for the maker was how to tell the story differently and most importantly what content have to be picked up to woo the audience, especially the urban. What eventually came as a pleasant surprise in Odisha is the coming together and emergence of a group of new generation filmmakers aspiring to be the rainbow of change. They are new generation because of being young, innovative, tech-savvy and courageous with risk taking abilities. These filmmakers appear to be having the conceptual daring to cross geographical and linguistic barriers to place their products for scrutiny at the national level.

This new generation of makers devised an innovative format that primarily had three key features. The narratives were deliberately designed to be told in shoestring budgets. New and fresh faces were used to create an old and new balance for box office returns and bringing the much needed freshness to screen. Moreover, to reduce the extent of predictability in storytelling, contents were carefully chosen that are realistic and made a clear departure from the run of the mill methods of the past. What is striking about these films is their ability to woo the urban middle class and bring them back to the theatres who had long disassociated themselves from Odia cinema. With these less melodramatic and

content rich films, Odia cinema is gradually acquiring a significant space in Odia drawing room conversations. Some of the most successful films of recent times that placed Odia cinema on the national cinematic map are; Debiprasad Lenka directed *DAMaN* (2022), Anupam Patnaik's *Pratiksha* (2022), Sisir-Peenaki directed *Phalguna Chaitra* (2023), Subhransu Das directed *Pushkara* (2023), Rajesh Touchriver directed *Mind Game* (2023) and Sisir-Peenaki directed *My Sweet Housewife* (2023).

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In the 70s and 80s, Odia cinema was not entirely divorced from literature as cinematic adaptations of successful plays and novels like *Ghara Bahuda* (1972), *Shesha Sravana* (1976), *Kaveri* (1984), *Tunda Baida* (1986) and *Badhu Nirupama* (1987) were runaway hits.

Vasudev, Aruna, 'The New Indian Cinema', Macmillan India Limited, New Delhi, 1986, pp.118

Manmohan Mahapatra was bestowed with the prestigious Padmashree posthumously in January 2020.

In Japanese films of the 1930s and 1940s, the incomplete family was a convention, which Ozu turned to his advantage in presenting the aftermath of Meiji promises. In his post-war work, the shrinking Japanese family finds its representation in families lacking a parent or in vast extended families that break up. It is likely that Ozu was aware of this side of his work. Of *Tokyo Story*, he remarked: 'through the growth of parents and children, I described how the Japanese family system began to disintegrate, 'Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema', David Bordwell, University of Michigan, Ana Arbor, 2007.

Patnaik, Sanjoy, '*Of Reels, Romance and Retakes: Social Narratives of Cinema in Odisha*', Routledge (UK), New Delhi, 2023, pp. 64.

*Sarpanch Pati* (Husband of woman Sarpanch) is a term used for the husband of the woman who is elected as the Sarpanch or the head of the village council. These husbands (even male relatives) effectively run the office and business of the panchayat and enjoy the real power of the Sarpanch while their wives are just heads of the village council on paper. This trend was experienced all across the country after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment (1992) to the Constitution of India that gave more powers to women in the local self governance.

Patnaik, Sanjoy, '*Of Reels, Romance and Retakes: Social Narratives of Cinema in Odisha*', Routledge (UK), New Delhi, 2023, pp. 67.

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## The cinematic configuration of gendered space in New Iranian Cinema

Apeksha Priyadarshini

*Spatialization of the conflicts of modernity and emergence of a cinematic language:  
The secret of our success is that we have not severed our connection with this land and the people who live in it. (Panahi qtd. in Rahbaran, 2012: 5)*

The city of Tehran and its encounter with modernity cannot be looked at through the same lens which one uses to look at Western cities. In Marshall Berman's words,

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises success, adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air" (1982).

While agreeing that the experience of modernity cuts across boundaries of all kinds, one cannot say that the impact of modernity on environments- physical, social and cultural, is uniform across nations, and determine the extent to which the qualitative impact

of modernization on the same scale across the globe. Contextualizing my argument in the cultural archaeology of Tehran, the history of modernity is tumultuous as the social fabric of Iran underwent constant change with different regimes coming to power and passing decrees that constantly transformed the idea of urbanity in the country, especially in cities like Tehran. As Dabashi notes, “After almost 200 years of Iranian exposure to the project of modernity, the historical experiment ultimately failed for a number of crucial reasons, among them the colonial prevention of the formation of a self-conscious national bourgeoisie and the catastrophic consequences of the economic placement of Iran in a disadvantageous position in the productive logic of global capitalism.”(2001: 12)

This paper engages with a Non-Western city's topography to explore whether the concepts developed around the cinematic city, which are primarily associated with the project of modernity in Western cities, can be seen as adequate to understand the morphology of space in a non-Western, third world city like Tehran, which is gripped in the throes of religious fundamentalism and the accompanying restrictions. Marefat points out that, “Embedded visibly and invisibly in Tehran's urban physiognomy is the uneasy hybrid city that by some definitions is global and by others not. If we excavate historical territory to expose architectural artifacts of urban existence at each historical moment in light of global forces that were differently configured, the result is a fragmented and fractured globalization” (2012:2).

The history of cinema in Iran has seen a parallel and contiguous growth alongside the project of modernity. It has held an important position in the arts, through its ability to transform the religious dictates of the State into creative works that opened the windows for the Iranians on to a world of imagination. “The visual possibility of seeing the historical person on the screen is arguably the single most important event allowing Iranians access to modernity” (Dabashi, 2001:15). This cinematic access to modernity is manifested most strongly in the representation of the locale in Iranian films, especially in the context of New Iranian Cinema. It became an important aspect of reflecting the cultural identity of the Iranian, something which Iranians not only in Iran but also worldwide could relate to, which created a specific modern subjectivity. For those citizens who had left the country during the Iran-Iraq war, cinema became a medium through which they could revisit their memories of a homeland that they found difficult to return to otherwise. “For the filmmaker, the choice of location is a cultural and at times a political statement, which consciously or unconsciously reveals aspects of the filmmaker's personal identity as well as his or her attitude toward the dominant culture” (Saeed-Vafa, 2002:202). Thus, the political outlook of both the audience of Iranian films as well as the filmmaker is reflected in the imagination and projection of space in cinema. In an interview, Panahi explains, “The camera's point of view inevitably

shows my Iranian historical and cultural background and the influence it has on the image I convey. The angle from which your camera looks at the world and gives an image of the world immediately reveals your background” (qtd. in *Rahbaran*, 2012: 9). I'd like to extend his argument by saying that it is not just the way the camera chooses to look at the world that is revelatory of the filmmaker's cultural background but also the cartographic imagination that maps the event that it captures.

It is also important to understand how location comes about as a crucial point of reflection for Iranian filmmakers. Most of the New Iranian films, often described through the concept of “Iranian neo realism<sup>1</sup>”, are shot in real locations with relatively small film crews because of low production budget. This reduction in budget encourages the filmmakers to evolve a new cinematic language to negotiate their spatial politics with minimum intervention and tell their stories. “Access to the psychology of the characters is possible mainly through an examination of their exterior environments” (Saeed-Vafa, 2002: 202). Thus, the physical space represented in Iranian cinema becomes a crucible for a new language to develop.

Henceforth, I will talk about the ways in which cultural, specifically gender identities are brought to the forefront by the New Iranian filmmakers in their analysis of the cartographies of cities like Tehran and how they use a unique cinematic language to circumvent the inhibitions imposed on Tehranian women to make available a cinematic space which can effectively navigate through the psychologies of the female characters in film through their relation to the geography of the city.

#### *Cinematic realization of the Tehranian woman's access to space*

I would now like to reflect up on how women negotiate with the gendered spatial hierarchy within the fundamentalist topography of Tehran through the cinematic space of films like *Dayereh* (*The Circle*, 2000) by Jafar Panahi, *Dah* (*Ten*, 2002) by Abbas Kiarostami and *Offside* (2006) by Jafar Panahi.

The encounter of the Iranian woman with modernity in the space of Tehran is paradoxical in nature. This is because though the Islamist revolution saw an increase in the number of women getting educated and their entry into the labour market, these changes stood at odds with the traditional mind set that saw women as mere house makers whose domain of access should be restricted to the private realm of the home. The city of Tehran underwent a sea of changes in terms of changing cultures under different regimes, and the effect of these changes was most significantly manifested in terms of the kind of access women were allowed into the city's space. In Mare fat's words, “Just as Reza Shah once



systematically secularized the nation and Tehran was his showcase, the Islamic Republic superimposed Islamic statutes upon the nation and Tehran became the hallmark... Women who, a generation earlier, had been forcefully unveiled by Reza Shah were now forced to wear veils again by Ayatollah Khomeini; a kind of gender-apartheid became the law of the land; entry to public buildings became gender- separate” (2012:14).

In this context, a film like *The Circle* becomes extremely relevant. It is a film that is concerned with a cartography of affect that the modern woman must encounter when she is traversing a space that is hostile to her existence. Sennett argues that, “. . .the modern city is constructed around a 'fear of exposure' of the individual or of the inner life of communities because 'exposure more connotes the likelihood of being hurt than being stimulated'. This produces 'a militarized conception of every day experience', warfare as the preferred trope of every day life” (qtd. in Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009: 10). *The Circle* brings out the perpetual insecurity that Iranian women experience when they are unaccompanied by a male companion in the city. “Despite women's formal equality and democratic rights, the un commented, uninhibited and unobserved presence of a female person in the streets is in no way acknowledged as a self evident right”(Gleber,1997:74).Whether it is the movies or the bus depot, a hotel or even the street, a woman must constantly carry a proof of her identity to ascribe her existence as being a 'part of' some sort of an ideological apparatus: she is either the student of, or a wife of, never herself alone. Even in the hospital, the character Pari is forced to wear a chador to enter the premises. The only kind of woman who walks the streets without this kind of documentary proof can be a prostitute, whose existence is extra-legal and for which she constantly runs into trouble with the law. The film poignantly present show the woman can neither access the homes or the city with any ease if she is on her own. The first two female characters, Narges and Arezou, recently released from prison, are constantly shown running around the city, without any secure place to go, looking for a way out of their predicament. Gleber, in her essay, describes this predicament by quoting Jules Michelet: “How many irritations for the single woman! She can hardly ever go out in the evening; she would be taken for a prostitute. There are a thousand places where only men are to be seen and if she needs to go there on business, the men are amazed and laugh like fools” (Gleber, 1997: 71). Though Gleber talks about the condition of women and flânerie in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, her ideas are relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Iran. In fact, flânerie is an act that Iranian women can never indulge in, considering the kind of restrictions that are imposed on their movement. The only few sequences where the female characters are seen to indulge in any sort of gaze that might resemble flânerie, is when Narges spends her waiting time looking at a shop window, and when she goes to buy a shirt at a shop. In Gleber's words, “Limited excursions of shopping in a prescribed ghetto of consumption amount to little

more than second-hand distraction, never approximating the flaneur's wide-reaching mode of perception, unimpeded by aims, purposes and schedules. The conflation of shopping and strolling noted by Friedberg necessarily relativizes what initially appears as a first instance of the empowered gaze of the flaneuse" (1997:71).

*The Circle* also engages beautifully with the longing of an idyllic home away from the urban chaos of the city, which the characters are unable to return to. In a particular sequence, Narges naively shows Arezou a painting of Van Gogh, describing it as a representation of her village, Raziliq, a place that she ultimately is unable to go back to. As Hansen says, "Although it is difficult to imagine people talking to the city, people may actually talk about their city as an organism they love, sympathize with or are having a row with. Cities are often gendered" (Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009: 13). In this sense, the uneasy, prowling city of Tehran becomes masculinized in relation to the more feminine imagination of the space of Raziliq that Narges talks about.

Through gestures, the film artfully maps the yearning of freedom of the various female characters onto spaces in the city through daily practices such as smoking. The women try to light a smoke at different places in various situations but are always stopped by the virtue of fact that they are women. Only in the end when one of them is finally in the company of some men is she able to light a cigarette. Thus, smoking becomes a metaphor for their urge to set themselves free from this cultural, gendered oppression. *The Circle's* Tehran is a city of persecution, a city where the birth of a girl child is met with gloom, where a pregnant woman cannot find the safe means to abort her child, where a woman must abandon her girl child in the hope for a better life for her off spring. The texture of the filmic space is designed such that one begins to resonate with the claustrophobia and the sense of entrapment that the female characters undergo. In Hansen's words, "That sensation may have something to do with the way urban spaces leave their traces on human bodies, that is, make a mark in the memory or unconscious of human beings through repeated sensory stimuli" (Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009: 13). It is this stimulus that presides over the sense of space within the film.

In *Offside*, the name of the film itself becomes a metaphor for the restriction on women of access to the space of the football stadium. Anke Gleber describes the craving of the young women in the film precisely, by saying, "Rather than celebrate their indulgence in multiple scopic possibilities, women have long wished for admission to the coveted realms of the spectacle, a right-of-way into the new spaces of flânerie and to an experience of the images of modernity"(1997:70).

In this film, disguise becomes the tool of the young women to navigate spaces that are restricted for them, like the football stadium. Though the disguise is unsuccessful in concealing their womanhood and they are caught, the negotiations that come forth through

the interactions of the incriminated girls with the soldiers reveal the cultural configuration of a space wrought by gender disparity. There are sequences in the film, where the young women try to argue with the soldiers about why they cannot be allowed to watch the game if it is not a crime. The unconvincing explanation they are given is that men and women cannot sit together. Moreover, the aural space of the stadium is filled with slangs, which should not be heard by the women. “Confronted with social environs in which they cannot be present as invisible or undisturbed observers, even as they themselves are made the “natural” objects of observation, women are at once excluded from both public presence and spectat or ship.

This constellation lets the absence of female *flânerie* appear not as any individual lack or incapacitation but as a crucial blind spot of society that converges to illuminate the limitations that conventions impose on women's lives” (Gleber, 1997: 74). Thus, the space of the football stadium becomes an environment which Tehranian women cannot access by the virtue of the fact that it is a space inhabited largely by men. This is manifest in a brilliant sequence where one of the female characters wishes to use the toilet and is asked by the soldier to cover her eyes, because the walls of the bathroom are inscribed with writings that women must not tread.

What is interesting in the film is how this restriction of space is uniquely applied only to these women in disguise. When one of the characters tries to reason with the soldiers about why Japanese women were allowed to watch the Japan-Iran match, the soldier says that those women cannot understand the Persian language, because of which they would not comprehend the slangs uttered by Iranian men. The important question the character then raises is whether the reason they are denied the space is because they were born in Tehran. Also, a group of women with white headscarves are allowed to watch the game through a glass enclosure because they stood near the Bahrainian bus while trying to enter the stadium. The reason they are allowed is that the officials do not want to make a spectacle of the situation in front of the international press. This instance brings out the paradoxical nature of Tehran's modernity where they wish to portray a different picture to the international world of the kind of space that they inhabit which is otherwise inscribed with all sorts of limitations for Iranian women. In the film, the play with crowd becomes a crucial defining element of access. “...the crowd transforms humans into a different categorical order, both animalistic and redemptive at the same time...in the crowd the individual feels that (s)he is transcending the limits of his (her) own person” (Hansen and Verkaik, 2009: 17). When part of the crowd, the woman disguised as a man is allowed to slip into the stadium if she is not recognized by the officials. She can afford to get lost and not be discovered, making the same crowd that is supposed to make her uncomfortable because of her gender, a boon for her disguise. Also, towards the end of the film, it is the crowded streets, transformed into a

spectacle of nationalism because of the victory of the Iranian team, that finally allow the women to escape their state of arrest and celebrate in the open, something which would otherwise be impossible for them to achieve.

To cinematically negotiate the space of the football stadium that restricts the visual access of the girls to the football match, Panahi creates a lively aural landscape that keeps the thrill of the women alive even when they are arrested. The entire football match is presented to the viewer as well as the young women via an aural imagination, sometimes through the commentary of the soldier, sometimes through the radio. Thus, the access to the very space that is restricted to these women because of its aural culture (of slangs and swearing) is opened up through the avenue of the sound scape for a spatial imagination of the football stadium.

Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* is a very significant film when it comes to talking about negotiating space cinematically to circumvent the cultural restrictions that are imposed on the Tehranian woman's access to space. The film is entirely shot in the interior of a car while the protagonist drives around in it, navigating the city and meeting various people. In this film, Grabar's concept of "city as palimpsest" (2013: 389) becomes important to understand the city scape as a site of conflict of modernity with traditional morality. Though one can see the modern landscape of Tehran with its high rise buildings, modern roads and shop windows playing out in the background of journey, one parallelly sees the projection of emotional spaces that are still ridden with medieval moralistic values in the discussions of the protagonist with other characters in the film. A modern Tehran thus become sapalimpsest, bearing signs of traditional values that it has been unable to get rid of.

The genre of the travel film becomes an important instrument of bringing out these conflicts in the forefront of the cinematic space. "The turn-of-the-century travel-film genre reveals how film began articulating its language by striving for a form of vedutismo, which became, a practice of "view tracking" and "view sensing"" (Bruno, 2002: 19). The affective realm of the problems faced by Tehranian women in the city is mapped onto the sights and sounds that one engages with while navigating the city in the car. "When the camera is placed at the very front of a moving vehicle...the camera becomes the vehicle: that is, it becomes, in a literal sense, a spectatorial means of transportation" (Bruno, 2002: 20). The space of the car comes to be not just a means of transport of the viewer to the senses of the city; it also becomes a site of freedom for the women in the film. The kinds of conversations that the film maker chooses to reflect upon in the film within the space of the car, are such that they cannot be held in any other kind of space, where the woman has to constantly be conscious of the perpetual male presence. In this sense, the architecture of the car becomes a site of release for the women. As David Parkinson mentions in his review of the film,

In an interview, Kiarostami said, 'Aper son sitting next to some one might note venpay attention to the other's presence. Each of them narrates his or her own inner world. So, the choice of setting is appropriate for addressing the psychological issues of the characters in the film'. The car is identified as one of the few spaces in the Islamic Republic where women (while still, admittedly, with their heads covered) are free to express themselves without fear of recrimination. Where else, for example, could a mother tell her 10 year-old son that she branded his father a drug addict in order to secure her divorce because 'the laws of this country give no rights to women'?(2013). In a sequence of the film, the protagonist picks up a stranger from a mosque in the city and they discuss their confusion and partial disillusionment with religion over a series of conversations through the film. While the city which, "...was and to some extent still is intentionally used as a didactic billboard to culturally indoctrinate the unruly flock" (Mare fat, 2012: 14), these kinds of conversations about disenchantment from religion become possible only in the space of the car.

In her dissertation, Lindsey Green-Simms makes a very important point about the car as a site of evasion of the repressive patriarchal values that flood the affective map of the city:

The female drivers use the automobile as a way to evade, even temporarily, the patriarchal systems that would seek to determine their movements...this transgression is less about winning the opportunity to consume as privileged men –although this is no doubt present and more about the ability to escape being consumed. In other words, it is about the struggle to escape the cycle of what Gayle Rubin calls “the traffic in women” – a social and economic situation in which women's value is directly related to their ability to gratify male needs, desires, and relationships (2009:217).

This idea becomes particularly relevant in the context of the protagonist's conversations with her son, where they debate what constitutes an ideal mother for him. Their journey in the car becomes metaphorical of the opposition in their ideas about women. “The journey, which bridges the countryside to industrial vistas and urban scene, parallels the distance the couple (in this case, mother and son) itself is trying to bridge, which separates them from the ir turf and from each other” (Bruno, 2002:27).

Thus, the car becomes agency for the female protagonist in the film to navigate a space which otherwise remains largely problematic in terms of access for Tehranian women. “Kiarostami recognised that while the car might occupy a public space in which it would be

surrounded by other vehicles (the majority of which would be driven by men), the exchanges that took place within it would be entirely private, as in a consulting room or a confessional” (Parkinson, 2013). Hence, through the space of the car, not only does the modern woman gain freedom to experience the space of the city, but the cinematic space itself also gives the female spectator the ability to traverse the city scape while engaging with ideas about the social impediments on women's freedom on her own terms.

*Conclusion:* Cinematic space as a site of emancipation for the modern Tehranian woman

I'd like to conclude my arguments by reiterating that to understand the fragmented modernity of a city scape like that of Tehran, one only needs to look at the conflicted relationship of the Tehranian woman with the cartography of the city. Though a lot of debates around the modern cinematic city may become culturally irrelevant when one tries to articulate them from the vantage point of a third world city like Tehran, certain debates such as those on female flânerie and the female spectator's relationship to cinematic space do help us analyze how the modern Tehranian woman relates to her city. It is this conflicted and uneasy relationship that she holds to space that materializes in films like *The Circle* and *Offside*.

However, what is important in both these films and specifically in *Ten* is how cinema negotiates with the restrictions on the Tehranian woman's access to space, establishing itself as a site of redemption, even if short-lived, where women, (and by women here I mean the female spectators), can finally navigate the city scape with lesser inhibition and more ease. As Dabashi wrote about early Iranian films, “The very idea that women could appear in motion pictures...was a very positive step toward their release from patriarchally-mandated seclusion. But even more important, the few women in the audiences could see women without veils and appearing in public. This had an indelible mark on the history of Iranian modernity.”(2001:21). Not only do these films reflect upon how women deal with restrictions on their movement around the city spaces, such cinema offers a meaningful revelation of spaces to female audiences as well; spaces, that are rendered culturally inaccessible to women and which can be engaged with only through cinematic interventions. “By way of the cinema, new horizons opened up for female explorations. A relative of the railway passenger and the urban stroller, the female spectator- a flâneuse- travelled along sites” (Bruno, 2002:17). It is important to keep in mind that by grounding their films in the debates of city scape as a site of real conflicts in terms of access, film makers like Panahi and Kiarostami have not only effectively brought out the modern predicament of Tehranian women, but have also provided a whole new set of cinematic terms on which women could foray into the cartographic imagination of the city. This politics becomes prominent in the

light of the beliefs of such film makers that, “the 'broad' and 'egalitarian' nature of cinema should only make a film maker aware that, unlike, say, a poet, the creation of their art is a collective project existing within the reality in which they operate” (Rahbaran, 2012: 6). Through their renditions of both geographical and cinematic space, and their innovative techniques of representing how spaces such as the car or crowded street became activated as sites of release for women, filmmakers have been able to successfully circumvent cultural impositions of restriction on access. To close on a reflective note by Dabashi, “No amount of forced veiling, no violent banning of young women from soccer stadiums, no systematic campaign of terror and intimidation or gender apartheid in schools, hospitals, and other public domains could compromise what these filmmakers achieved. Women could be juridically barred from having their bodies exposed to the public gaze (and thus by extension preventing them from accumulating bodily memories), but through the lens soft film makers they could already see and imagine themselves their way” (2001:386).

## Notes :

<sup>1</sup> In his book, Hamid Dabashi raises an objection to the usage of the term “Iranian neo realism”. He observes that “Just because one of the most important events in the history of cinema has been the phenomenon of Italian Neorealism, it does not mean that Iranians ought to have a local brand of neorealism as well... People ought to be allowed to learn and borrow from a variety of cultures and conditions and yet produce their own take on reality.” See Dabashi, 2007: 372.

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## Walking Around: Women Navigating Agnès Varda's Cinematic Spaces

Sanghamitra Deb

While this paper concerns itself with the phenomenon of female *flânerie* in a very specific kind of French cinema, it is necessary to first have a clear picture of what meaning the 'original' performer of *flânerie* – the *flâneur* really carries. He is to be differentiated from another French character called the '*badaud*'. The *badaud* is a person who is so taken by the spectacle in front of him that he becomes oblivious to his own self. In opposition to the *badaud* losing himself, the *flâneur* is someone who finds himself going through the ebb and flow of the crowd. The poetic placement of the *flâneur* in the last statement is apt and in line with his own way of looking at and interpreting the crowd around him. Therefore, it can also safely be said that he belongs from a background of enough privilege that enables him to not only be aware that he is performing the looking and interpreting but also, and more importantly, that he is entitled to do so. Before the *flâneuse* got famous in the feminist discourse, another word for the woman walking through the crowds did exist in the French vocabulary. She is known as the '*passante*'. She is the woman who, from the perspective of the *flâneur*, quite literally passes by. An elusive creature that, according to *flâneur* Marcel Proust, just passes him by, ignoring his obsessive/possessive and conscious viewing of them. In this tug-of-war of spectatorship, feminist intervention gave us the *flâneuse*. This paper will focus on a few *flâneuse* uses observed

in French cinema: those made by one of the most prolific practicing (if maybe not always conscious) flâneuses – Agnès Varda.

### *The Gaze of Flânerie*

Gaze is the tool used in flânerie to give it legitimacy. It is under the gaze of the flâneur that the world around him is subjected to observation, comprehension, and interpretation. This gaze is the adult's right to perform the Freudian scopophilia which is an active performance of curiosity observed in children. When the flâneur is restricted from finding out indiscriminately the sex that a person carries, he does so in the way that is still open to him – by epistemologically reshaping the society around him to the extent of being granted legitimate access. Laura Mulvey talks about this reshaping of the world on the basis of the visual order in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 2009, p. 60). In demystifying the blinding aura of the Hollywood narrative cinema, she delves into a study of the gaze. The flâneur, in his knowledge of the possession of a certain cultural capital, harbors a narcissism based on the duality of the heterosexual world that he has interpreted into existence. By duality I mean the necessary lack in opposition to all that he possesses. This of course means the woman of the no-penis. He is, functionally, a voyeur, as he considers himself to be invisible while visibilizing others. But, for the sake of this paper, I wish to focus on the unawareness of the gaze that he is subjected to. It is at this point we can look at Mona, one of the most iconic flâneuses that cinema has ever produced. She is the protagonist (if one can call her that, keeping in mind the shortcomings of the phallogocentric language) of Agnès Varda's 1985 film *Sans Toit Ni Loi* (the English name for which is *Vagabond*, but does not live up to the original French title). If a protagonist is understood as someone who influences the narrative and is in turn affected by it, then Mona does not conform to that. In fact, she does not conform to anything as the French name of the film truly suggests- *Sans Toit Ni Loi* meaning literally 'Without roof or law'. What it means for her as a flâneuse is that, she is impossible to interpret. She might be 'without roof' but not without possession. She carries with herself an enormous rucksack but she always wears the same clothes and her tent is outside the bag. She is 'without law' but not without a direction; she is going towards freedom. She simultaneously does not have an idea about where she is going and has a very clear one – away. Gaze for Mona means something quite different than for her flâneur counterparts. This is best demonstrated in the scene where she works as a car washer for money. There are two men working alongside her- the owner and the assistant. The assistant and Mona gaze at each other with youthful desire while the owner's gaze is almost not recorded by Varda. But the owner is later seen to be exiting Mona's tent, in a post-coital state

of undress, by the assistant. Whether or not money exchanged hands for this is unclear and possibly unimportant. It is important to note here, however, that the owner was classifying Mona as a woman of questionable morals “as woman campers generally are”.

Mona, a solo traveler for quite a while, has lived with the man's gaze on her since her birth. She was also aware of the owner's gaze while she was exchanging flirtatious looks with his assistant. Here, the flâneuse gaze departs dramatically from the flâneur gaze. The body of knowledge Mona taps into is not one of patriarchal entitlement, and surely not of cultural capital (she is seen to neither have culture nor capital). Her knowledge base is that of her experiences; she carries it on her very skin. Unlike the flâneur, therefore, who is unaware of the gaze aimed at him, she is not only aware of the gaze on herself, she is actively gazing at the object of her desire, under surveillance of the omnipresent gaze. This departure and redirection of where one is to look makes her looking into a subversive performance. This flâne use does not make the dominating action of interpretation into the point of her nomadic existence. Rather, she uses the knowledge of male interpretation into a compass with which to navigate her freedom.

### *The Purpose of Flânerie*

One of the most hotly-debated aspects of the characteristic of the flâneur, long before the term flâneuse even came into being, is the purpose he has of being on the streets. Some have said that to be a flâneur is to not have a purpose at all, while some others have opined that his walking through and reading of the city is what gives shape to it. The city, in the second instance, just remains as a collection of objects holding mean, waiting for the flâneur to make sense of it. These objects also, of course, include 'les passantes' who walk by him, their sexual meaning finally given legitimacy. Mulvey also talks about the intense fetishizing of the female bodies in order to layer over the castration threat and protect the primary male identity against it. The purpose of the flâneur is to claim the public space in the name of this male identity. It is not simply to designate it with meaning, and certainly not without aim. The aim is to demarcate the territory against the inanimate, fetishized, female anti-identities. Varda's disregard of this phenomenon is noticeable in the way she documents the world around her.

Agnès Varda's filmmaking was rarely fully fictional, with her preferring to shoot on location with zero intervention to manage the crowds, in some instances. This is in direct opposition to the purpose of the Hollywood narrative filmmaking, obsessively controlling, in all aspects of its creation. This obsession is due to the fear of losing the self. Varda, on the other hand, starts from the point of this loss, this lack. In her 2000 masterpiece, *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse (Gleaners and I)*, she mentions her fascination with documenting trash and

garbage – the abandoned and the rejected. If the penis entitles the man to form the entire world, including language, in its likeness, the penis-less woman chooses to navigate the world with a penis surrogate in tow. In the world of Freud, that would have been her son. In the world of Varda, it is her camera. Camera in hand, she penetrates the world of gleaning with abandon and goes beyond just the boundaries of the city to take her *flânerie* to the suburbs and the villages of France. She never tries to claim the male world for her own, but goes on another tangent altogether – of kindness and empathy towards herself and the subjects of her film. This documentary becomes as much about the gleaners of food as about gleaner of ideas, of memories, of images. She frequently jumps from one way of life to the other. She is a woman trying to preserve herself before she is obliterated from existence, as she is reminded of throughout the journey of making the film – from combing her graying hair to finding a clock with no hands. The clock is a pause from being reminded that her own hands are becoming unrecognizable and resembling a beast. Her aging hands finds wonder in her in the same way as does an image of a painting of Rembrandt, both self-portraits. Her *flânerie* is not performed simply through time and space but through those two elements separately.

The gendered words for gleaners are phonetically similar to that of performers of *flânerie*, except in this instance, the women (*glaneuses*) came before the men (*glaneurs*). This adds a dimension of poetry to this particular instance of Varda's *flânerie*.

#### *The Expectations in Flânerie*

*Flânerie*, finally, becomes a quest, like anything, for a life that the *flâneuse* is not currently living. This is understood best when what one is looking for is not necessarily that which is apparent. In one of her most iconic filmic ventures, *Cléo de 5 à 7 h* (1962), we watch a young woman moving around the streets of Paris in an attempt to move away from what she suspects is a diagnosis of cancer. Throughout the film, she is recognized as someone frightfully aware of her physical beauty, even more so as she is now faced with death. In a way, her beauty is synonymous to her life. She is extremely aware of her body being looked at, to the extent that she seizes the male gaze and turns it upon herself, much like the female viewers of Mulvey's movie theaters. This illusion is broken when Cléo, arguably the most chic woman in the café, is almost completely ignored by the patrons even as she plays her own music to gauge her acceptance. It is broken further – or is reconstituted – when she gets out into the streets and mostly old people (other than her acquaintances) observe her with great interest. She is also trying to do anything to get away from the deadly diagnosis but nothing or no one she goes to makes her feel at ease. Here, then, is a *flâneuse* whose obsessive gaze is

removed twice over, and whose purpose for roaming the streets is constantly fleeing, much to her chagrin. Her preoccupation with her mortality becomes the fuel for her to shed her selfhood, which she does on multiple occasions, she opens the belt of her dress in public view, she disrobes with help from her companion, she angrily takes off her wig, she gives away her prized hat to her friend. Cléo says on one occasion that trying things on is intoxicating for her and, on another, that she feels nudity is immodest. Unlike Mona, who eventually dies, and Agnès, who finishes making her film, Cléo finds the end to her flânerie in the form of a random stranger who shows her sincere care and concern. Unlike the other people in her life, who shower her with empty attention, Antoine almost immediately, unquestioningly, promises to become her companion for the time she finds out about her disease. She finally discloses her true identity – Florence – to him. For the lonely Florence, her duality was taken care of with the meeting with Antoine, as he naturally assumes the role of the other conversationalist, in place of her mind. In other words, she managed to find herself as a result of an ordeal she was going through, expecting to vanish without a trace.

To conclude, female flânerie is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, women in situations of compromised privilege, for instance the glaneuses from Agnès' film, have always been seen in public holding space, claiming livelihood. But the name being a relatively new one, this has not been discussed in abundance. This paper is a fraction of the study that is imperative to navigate the movement of women. Many areas of this occurrence such as private space, interpersonal politics, pathology, etc. within or without cinematic intervention need to be examined closely. Agnès' life itself has been a massive performance of flânerie, given her history with *Nouvelle Vague*, her professional and personal life choices, among other things. To trace and go beyond that should be the job of another more ambitious paper.

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## Gendered Perspectives in New American Horror- An analysis of *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019)

Soumik Hazra

Abhinaba Bhattacharjee

In his brief but significant career as an American horror film director, Ari Aster has produced two distinct texts which unfold primarily through female protagonists. Both these films, *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), revolve around a female protagonist, Annie and Dani respectively, who fit into the notion of the contemporary independent and empowered women but are shaped by insurmountable trauma through loss of family/loved ones, which through the course of their subsequent narratives gets shaped into an ultimate expression of the horrific. This paper will be an attempt to analyze the new feminine perspective that emerges in both these films and how that perspective differs significantly from the mainstream American horror films in general- through the discussion of pleasure and gaze in horror films and with the representational politics of the female characters in the genre.

*The Monstrous Feminine, abject and the new world order*

Coming back to the films, both the central characters can be read as maternal figures. One being Annie Graham- who is the matriarch of the Graham family, firmly rooted in the symbolic order, and the other being Dani, who through the course of the film, gets

transformed into the maternal figure of the pagan Harga cult in Halsingland. In this regard it will be crucial to put into contention the concept of the monstrous feminine which, as will be seen, is a central plot point in American horror narratives. In her seminal essay on monstrous femininity, Barbara Creed analyses the role of woman in horror films as the one who challenges the patriarchal view and inevitably puts the woman/mother in a victim position. By Creed's contention then, the independent maternal figure can largely be regarded as a monstrous entity because she is primitive, impure, all-engulfing and always struggling to produce boundaries and new form of identities in the patriarchal order. This looms as a threat for the symbolic. Furthermore, Creed points out that the 'monstrous feminine' is based on the difference of female sexuality which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator and is constructed within/by a phallo-centric and patriarchal ideology. For instance, in *The Exorcist* (1973), the single mother is shown to be an independent working woman who is the active bearer of the look in the film at the beginning. But her active stance i.e. possession of the gaze is punished throughout the course of the narrative as her daughter gets possessed by the demonic entity and she is forced to strip off her identity as an independent woman and is relegated to a nurturing mother stereotype as advocated by the symbolic order. In a way then, as explicitly suggested in the source novel, this whole possession narrative can be read as a punishment for abandoning the husband and threatening the patriarchal order to pursue her acting career which was frowned upon as per Christian beliefs at that point of time in American society. Therefore, by situating the monstrosity in their female counterparts in the horror genre and their eventual restoration into normalcy through a male savior trope as is seen in almost all the horror films in the American mainstream in various iterations, the symbolic order gets restored by relegating the female characters into the realms of the symbolic. However, Aster's films in this regard, can be read as a critique of this prevalent horror trope. In both his films, the central characters lead mostly independent/private lives with their male counterparts being relegated to a passive presence or the proverbial 'other', who are viciously burned down and killed by the end of the films as a result of their doubt and disloyalty towards the feminine perspective. In a way then, Aster's films reverse the genre codes and attempt to produce new meanings for the feminine 'other' by producing new dimension of identities for the female protagonists. In this regard, the concept of abjection becomes a crucial constituent.

In the same essay, Creed uses Kristeva's notion of 'abject' to further locate the maternal position in American horror films like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Alien* (1979). According to Kristeva, abjection does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' and it disturbs the existing notions of identity, system, order (Kristeva 1982). To produce subject-hood, argues Kristeva, it is essential to negate the abject. For instance, Kristeva uses the phenomena

of food loathing where the skin on the top of the milk—the sign she did not want—thereby separating her world from her parent's world (Judaism) where dietary prohibition is a central and fundamental element. Thereby, as per Kristeva, the distinctive taste of hers creates a particular identity for her and separates her from the established symbolic order. In a way then, abjection becomes crucial in the formation of identity. In the context of *Hereditary*, Charlie's nut allergy can be read as abject which liberates the satanic god of mischief Paimon from its female body (Charlie) in search of a more perfect male body. Therefore an object only becomes an abject if it signifies a border between two distinct entities or territories. Likewise, the mother becomes an abject when the child excludes her for the law of the father, representing the symbolic order. In popular horror films, the monstrosity becomes abject as it functions as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully-constituted subject from the partially-formed subject, by threatening to erupt in the border of the symbolic order. Kristeva also noted that the abjection changes its position from the time of pagan rituals to the Judaic to the culmination of Christianity. Through the process of ritual, especially in the Christian order, societies both reconsider their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Abject is rooted both “historically (the history of religion) and subjectively (the construction of subjective identity) in the operation of maternal function” (Creed 1986, 44-54). However, in Aster's films, the Christian order gets defiled and the abject, instead, gets celebrated.

According to Carol J. Clover, the occult film is the most “female” of horror genres, as it is unfolded mostly around female body. Clover further noted that the occult/possession film narrative functions as “dual focus” in which the possession of the woman and the story of male crisis unfolds simultaneously. It is the “gendered division of narrative labor” (Clover 1987, 70). It is the “white science” (the rationale) and “Black Magic” (the spiritual) which indicate masculinity and femininity respectively in possession films. The occult films mainly refer to the ‘internal space’ (Clover 1987, 112) of woman in which the narrative unfolds. Since the possessed female body in the symbolic/religious economy is considered as the source of abjection/the abject, the un-seeable spaces are therefore non-existent and the object of satanic possession. In *The Exorcist*, the mother decides to find the cure for her daughter by choosing the rational process which is the clinical, but, later she chooses exorcism for the cure as time proves the scientific treatment as failure. They have to rely on black magic to save Regan. Both Father Murrain and Karass are the agents of the spiritual/supernatural solution. It becomes evident that the acceptance of the spiritual is the elementary structure of possession film narrative. For instance, Regan's body in the film constitutes the centrality of the narrative where the masculine possession of the body takes



place. Thus, the possession/occult films are structured upon feminine. In both of Aster's films, which can be read as a variation in the occult and possession sub-genre, the masculinity is marked as passive (the father) and outsider (the boyfriend) and considered as non-feminine. The rational man/ man of science is no longer required because both of their existence is an obstacle for the identity of Paimon (*Hereditary*) and May queen (*Midsommar*). Unlike other possession films, here the destiny of the central character get reversed by the process of the disavowal of the anthropological, scientific methods and accepting the possession as necessary element of subject formation. The reversal signifies Aster's deliberate attempt to constitute the refusal of the western/Christian mode of narrative completion.

Furthermore, Clover noted that the figure of the 'final girl' (as termed by Carol. J Clover) has been considered as transcendence of the assigned gender (feminine) in slasher films. The 'final girl' rescues itself by repositioning the feminine into the territory of the masculine. In order to survive, it has to adapt to the survival methods which are typically masculine. It is no longer the feminine, but the subversion into the masculine saves the 'Final Girl' –which is again the triumph of the masculine. But, in *Midsommar*, the execution of the 'final girl' remains problematic as Dani is chosen as 'May queen' by the pagan rituals which are typically not masculine and are more internal and concealed in terms of western traditional society. All of Dani's companions ended up with death (supernatural execution), as they failed to comply with the pagan rituals, thus the feminine space becomes monstrous for the masculine. In *Hereditary*, the father's death constitutes the necessary step in order to restore Paimon in its designated body. In both of Ari Aster's films, the Father and the boyfriend (Christian) are the agents of masculinity who are signified by their passive existence throughout the narrative. It is the masculinity that rejects the religious, symbolic of the pagan cult and therefore gets annihilated. The formation of the subject (Paimon and May queen) necessarily requires the extinction of the masculine figure. Here the masculinity becomes abject as it holds the border between the partially formed subject (Peter and Dani) and fully formed subject (Paimon and May Queen). Interestingly, both of these films end with the dominion of a triangular frame and the completion of pagan rituals. This triangular frame/symbol denotes purification and new beginning by abolishing the existing order and the establishment of the new one. According to the Wicca tradition, fire is the symbol of purification. Interestingly, the father (*Hereditary*) and the boyfriend (*Midsommar*) gets purified by fire. It is the religious system (pagan) which eliminates the abject elements through purification. As Julia Kristeva notes, abjection can be interpreted as 'a resurrection that has gone through the death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance' (Kristeva 1982, 15). Both these films focus on this notion of the

abject by unfolding the narrative from the feminine perspective.

In the case of *Hereditary*, which begins with the death of the matriarch who later is revealed to be the leader of a satanic cult engaged devotedly in devil worship, the traditional Hollywood notion (and in turn, the Christian notion) of a family is deconstructed. The Graham family, consisting of two children (Charlie, the girl and Peter, the boy) and the parents (Stephen and Annie), is never shown to be together apart from in rituals of mourning. The film opens with the funeral of Annie's mother which takes place in a church but is surrounded by unknown shadowy characters who challenge the notion of normalcy in the symbolic order. In the later parts, after the death of Charlie, the funeral scene is re-enacted but this time, in the cemetery and the foreground being focused on the empty grave of her grandmother, signaling the defilement of the Christian order, and the initiation of abjection. Abjection, which is signified traditionally in horror films, with images of bodily wastes and distorted bodies, here gets glorified instead with the film ending with the completion of the Pagan ritual and the destruction of the symbolic family. Interestingly, in the ritual celebrating the arrival of King Paimon in the body of Peter, the two entities who are in the front are Annie and her mother, both decapitated, bodily distorted with blood spilling all over the space, signifying the dominion of abject, and in turn the feminine subject, albeit in a twisted manner. The position of abject is the position where meaning collapses and dwells in the liminal space between life and death, which provides a threat to the self. Creed also noted corpses as the ultimate in abjection. In the Biblical context, the corpses signify the most basic form of waste which represents the opposite of the spiritual (the religious symbolic) and the corpse fanciers becomes the agents of inimical religions (Pagan). Kristeva also considers the practices of the defilement rituals as maternal act which threatens from within the identity (social, sexual), thus creating a conflict in the face of sexual difference. In a way then, both the films revel in depiction of the grotesque focusing on defilement and violence, as is seen in the various close-ups of the grotesque throughout the two films. Furthermore, the last sequence of the film, where Paimon is celebrated, plays out like a happy ending which unfolds from the gaze of Paimon's statue with uplifting music playing in the background, focusing on Peter, thereby further solidifying the notion of the abject.

In *Midsommar*, however, the abject is celebrated in all its glory in an ecstatic fashion with the depiction of the cult in Sweden, with glorious daylights and liberal usage of deep focus focusing on the functionalities of the pagan cult. This ecstatic and celebratory aspect of the cult becomes more apparent if contrasted with the opening visuals of the film, focusing on chilly, snow capped night shots of a ghost town, where Dani's parents lived. With the death of her family in the hands of her sister, Dani's state of mind can also be interpreted running in parallels with the chilly visuals which also gets distorted and modified as soon as the action

shifts to Halsingland. The Harga cult, consisting of a farming village, which celebrates the Midsommar festival to thank the nature for the crops and fertility, engages in ritualistic practices of sacrifices and pageantry. In the film, the cult revels in the abject through their ritual practices which celebrate monstrosity but since the practices unfold from the cult's perspective, like *Hereditary*, the rituals are normalized and thereby, the abject gets reinstated, in turn, as the normal. Furthermore, both the films end with the ascension of the demonic superior, here in the form of May Queen which solidifies the transformation of the abject into the forefront where the vile becomes the signifier of the sexual difference and the only source of liberation for the tormented protagonist. In a way then, the film can be read as the journey of Dani suffering from loss of the family to getting a sense of community in Halsingland, where the people share her sufferings and grief in a near perfect sequence towards the end. Therefore, the suppressed feminine, which is a threat to the (Christian) symbolic order, gets celebrated here and erupts in a full-fledged form in the climactic sequence of demolition and reconstruction. In a way then, the abject helps Dani to reinstate meaning in her life's proceedings and to get rid of her boyfriend (literally), reasserting her independent individual identity through the pagan ritual practices. In one sequence, when Dani gets selected as the May Queen and is being greeted by the community, she watches her mother suddenly passing her through, signifying the negation of the individual grief and the acceptance by a community. Here, the dominance of the grotesque becomes much more pertinent as the holy book that the Harga community follows is traditionally written by a person who is born exclusively from incestuous mating rituals and shown as grotesque. The traditional notion of masculine assertion in horror films also gets altered here, as Christian, Dani's boyfriend is drugged and used merely as an agent of reproduction, a sexual object who is left for sacrifice after his purpose is fulfilled.

This subversion of representation of sexual difference can be put into concurrence with the works of feminist scholars like Donna Haraway, Judith Butler etc. according to whom, sexuality or particularly, the notion of sexual difference is a modern socio-cultural construct. As noted by Thomas Laquer in his seminal work *Making Sex* (1990), before the eighteenth century (when medical science put forward the discourse on body) the one-sex model was the prevalent model of sexuality, where sexual difference was constructed as a variation on the dominant male nature and was tentative and apparent. In this regard, transgressive sexual identities like that of the hermaphrodites can be read as an extension of the one-sex model and posits a significant point of departure from the normative constructs of genders. The hermaphrodite, as per Carla Freccero, is regarded as monstrous hybrid, characterized by the deformation of the two genders. In a way then, the hermaphrodite exists in the realm of the abject and posits a threat to the existing symbolic order of male

superiority. Interestingly, to go back to Kristeva, abject is an 'impossible object' which is both the 'boundary and the limit' (Kristeva 1982,147). Thereby, the abject exists in a dual register- of defilement and ecstasy- as is seen in the pagan traditions that are being observed in both the films of Ari Aster. Furthermore, in both the films, the traditional notion of gender is deconstructed, where the feminine perspective becomes dominant and celebrates the hermaphroditic ritual practices i.e, the abject. The satanic god Paimon, whose reference is found in Aleister Crowley's *The Book of Goetia* (1903), is originally a male god and it needs a male agent for possession. But in *Hereditary*, the god is reinstated into Charlie, Annie's daughter and towards the end when Paimon takes over Peter's body he is referred to as 'she', thereby destabilizing all traditional norms of gender and sexual difference and instead celebrates the new world order where gender is just a construct. This nonchalant attitude towards sexual difference is also noticed in the film with depictions of naked bodies of the followers of the cult shot in acute darkness further pointing out the one sex model.

Similarly, in *Midsommar*, the pagan cult is replete with symbols of hermaphroditic existence and further solidifies the notion of the creation of the new world order, albeit in a different manner. This is first seen in the dress of the cult members, which consists of a white top and a skirt- which signifies, as pointed out by one member, the hermaphroditic qualities of nature, Throughout the course of the film, the rituals that are shown further emphasizes on the same. The bounds of male and female energy can also be seen in Baphomet, the hermaphroditic satanic god who is worshipped in many pagan cults, as is noted in a video essay on the film and symbolizes an equilibrium of opposites which will produce a new and perfect social order. In the film, the balance of male and female energy is depicted also in the first ritual of sacrifice of an elder couple, signifying the importance of balance of the gender to appease nature. Therefore, it can be argued that when the abject becomes the dominant perspective, the standard notion of gender gets altered and gets transgressed into a new form which is unique and revelatory- especially with regards to the horror genre. This alteration of the gender conventions as observed in the horror genre is also visible in the issue of gaze in the films.

#### *Trauma, Gaze and visual pleasure in Aster's films*

As noted by Robin Wood in his seminal study on Hollywood films of the '70s, the primary structure of the American horror film is a rather simplistic one which is the normality of the socially-conformed symbolic order (viz. family structure, group of friends, heterosexual couple etc.) getting threatened and disrupted by the monster or the abject (depending on the sub-genres, be it slasher, possession films or creature- feature) and the societal fears of

the particular era ( Wood,1986). The introductory portion of almost all the mainstream American horror films throughout the generations like *The Exorcist* (1973) , *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Scream* (1996), *The Ring* (2002), *The Conjuring* (2013), *Insidious* (2010), etc. depict a happy re-creation of normalcy among the protagonists which is almost inevitably transformed into a nightmarish spiral through villainous agents. For instance, when the audiences first encounter the MacNeil household in *The Exorcist*, there are sequences which establish the loving relationship between the mother and the daughter which then gets tested after Regan's possession by the demonic entity, thereby solidifying the identifying perspective for the audience with the family. The rest of the narrative therefore unfolds with the attempt to restore the status quo and normalcy of the MacNeil family through church ordained exorcisms by the priests and the complete negation of the demonic. However, in Aster's films, we observe a sly subversion of the said narrative structure. In both his feature length films, the female protagonists are embroiled in deeply problematic relationships with the symbolic order (the family in *Hereditary*, the toxic heterosexual relationship in *Midsommar*) which can be read as abnormal even without the interjection of the 'devil/supernatural other' of the traditional horror narratives. Therefore, in a way then the horror tropes that both the movies meddle with- one of the occult films and the other of the possession films - can be read as the 'normal' in the diegetic space of the films. Both the films open with death in the family which gets accentuated into an irredeemable trauma for both Annie and Dani. The source of horror therefore comes from an internal loss and grief which gets manifested into the external agents of satanic/pagan cults, further signifying the manifestation of doom for the characters as the narrative progresses. However, in terms of the genre, both the narratives unfold through the perspective of the female protagonists, which also brings into foreground a subversion of the dominant masculine gaze typically associated with narrative films and instead brings forth a distinctive feminine gaze.

Before moving into the particularities of the feminine gaze, it is necessary to talk about the position of woman and the question of her 'look' in mainstream horror films. As noted by Laura Mulvey in her now famous contention about American narrative films, borrowed from Lacanian psycho-analytical framework of the castration anxiety/ visual fetishism, in the traditionally patriarchal structure of narrative films, the male viewer can be read in a dual register as the active spectator/ bearer of the look where as the female viewer is resorted to a passive entity /object of the look (Mulvey1975). The dominant narrative structure of the Hollywood films also proved that fact as the hero becomes the identifier for the male viewer whereas the female characters in the films were used as objects of desire. This latter development, as Mulvey notes, occurs as the presence of the other sex produced a

tension between the ego needs and the libido of the male spectator, which gets resolved through the taming/ death of the female protagonists in the screen, thereby producing a sado- masochistic point of identification for the active male spectator with the male protagonist and deriving the pleasure of the narrative film. In horror films, as noted by Cynthia A. Freeland, taking a cue from the Mulveyan analysis, the female characters/ the object of desire are the ones who gets 'sacrificed to the narrative desire' to focus on the monster/apparition/ demonic entity (Freeland 1996). Thereby, the spectator is forced to look at the flesh/wounds of their objects of desire inflicted by the monster, further bringing into focus the threat of castration. However, the visual pleasure in these films is derived from the role of the male protagonist who plays an active role in saving the life of the female protagonist. In this regards, Freeland talks about *Psycho* (1960). However, as Linda Williams notes, in horror films, unlike other narrative films, the women are sometimes structured as the bearer of the look and an active spectator. But as Mary Ann Doane notes, the 'active investigating gaze' of the woman is punished through the victimization of the woman (Ann Doane 1987). As noted by Williams and later by Carol J. Clover, the monster/ demonic entity is aligned mostly with the female characters as there is a common sense of otherness that binds them- both are demarcated by a sense of sexual difference with regards to the male protagonist / spectator. However, the female protagonist also can sympathize with the monster as they share in common with the 'other' entity the male fear of 'freakishness' which is similar to her difference. Thereby, as Linda Williams further notes in her essay, there is a sense of recognition in the female characters regarding this equivalence with the monster which can be interpreted as the active gaze/sexuality of the feminine characters serving as a threat for the patriarchal society.

However, the notion of visual pleasure in horror films, which appeases primarily the male spectator, is multi-layered as illustrated by scholars like Noel Carroll, Andrew Tudor etc. The genre, which is visually replete with the depiction of the grotesque or the symbolically 'abject' as in blood, vomit, and graphical depiction of violence primarily, derives its pleasure, as per Carroll, from the 'disclosure of the existence of the horrific being and of its properties' (Carroll 1990, 158-95). The curiosity to deduce the unknowable throughout the course of the narrative and to get a comprehensive idea of the power of the supernatural being is a crucial part of the scopic pleasures of horror films. Carroll further notes that, after the revelation of the entity there lies the question of whether and how the creature is defeated by the human agencies. This narrative curiosity is seen as the ultimate reward for which the aforementioned instances of disgust can be read as compensation. The primary object of fascination for the viewer lies in the anomaly of the monster/ demonic entity which negates the dimension of the social norms and forces the spectator to be

continuously compelled by the repelling imageries of the horror films.

However, as Andrew Tudor puts it, Carroll's thesis cannot be taken in as the ultimate source of fascination for the genre, as the concept of monstrosity varies from generation to generation and the notion of fear is deeply coded in socio-historical contexts. Tudor talks about the 1950's sci-fi horror and how it reflected particular fears of the American society. In that regard then, Tudor notes, as supported by Cynthia A. Freeland, the pleasure of horror is cognitive and is enjoyed only from a safe distance, albeit through active participation, due to its disturbing imageries. However, as is seen in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, the attainment of any sort of pleasure is discarded in the films through the implementation of an active feminine gaze which is rendered distinct with their own sets of trauma, grief and coping mechanisms. The films unfold mostly through their perspectives as a manifestation of their psychological torment, although the look is deceptively appropriated towards the passive and almost redundant male counterparts. In both the films, the pleasure principle as implemented by Carroll with regards to the discovery of the monster/supernatural entity is subverted by the lengthy insights into the central character's psyche. In *Hereditary*, most of the run time concentrates on the aftermath of the tragedy that unfolds in the Graham household with the untimely death of the youngest child, Charlie and the resultant trauma of Annie which manifests into hysteria and her inability to reconcile with the tragedy. The camera movement of the film, which is centered mostly inside the Graham household, lingers therefore mostly in a distant fashion, signifying the growing discontent of the other members of the household with regards to Annie's denial. Furthermore, the camera movements in the film can also be regarded as a visual manifestation of the trauma and denial, where the camera sometimes pulls in closer to the particular character in focus, but then suddenly retreats back in a distance. As is seen in the two sequences, where Annie comes to terms with the tragedy of her life and confronts the public domain- one in the dinner table, in front of her son and husband which eventually ends with her sudden outburst and the other in the support group meeting where she lets the audience know for the first time the reason behind a distant relationship between her and her son Peter. Trauma, as noted by Cathy Caruth, can be defined as the wound which is inflicted not upon the body, but on the mind (Caruth 1996). The representation of trauma, in *Hereditary*, therefore relies mostly through the mobile camera movements reflecting the torments of Annie Graham and her attempts to save the already doomed family. Furthermore, trauma in its conception, is something which is disjointed, random and which, in its representation, suspends the category of true and false into a narrative of disbelief. As is seen in the film, her husband and her son, and in turn the audience, believe that Annie is responsible for believing in séances and she is the monstrous entity which is slowly destroying the family. In a way then, it seems,



Annie is being punished for assuming the active gaze and leading her independent/ private life. However, in the last 20 minutes of the film, Ari Aster subverts the spectatorial expectations and unfolds the supernatural presence that was controlling the narrative from the get-go and lets the abject take the centre stage with the demolition of the symbolic order and the birth of the satanic entity. The pleasure of discovering the true nature of the supernatural/evil entity and the ultimate destruction of it, which is crucial to the visual pleasure, is instead represented as a chaotic affirmation of the non-Christian order.

This affirmation of the non-Christian order is also found in *Midsommar*, which centres around Dani and her friends going to a trip in Sweden and getting embroiled in a death cult. Dani, who is recovering from the trauma of the loss of her whole family by a suicidal act of her sister, has become increasingly reliant upon his passive boy friend Christian and is unable to let go of the toxic relationship. The film unfolds as a slasher film, as slowly their friends are all sacrificed by the cult, with the last two surviving members being Christian and Dani. Like *Hereditary*, this film also unfolds through the traumatic perspective of Dani, but the visual representation of her grief is inter cut with the audience's gradual discovery of the nature of the cult. In a way then, the cult can be interpreted as therapeutic for Dani, at the end of which she gets accepted by the Swedish community, albeit through a drug-filled haze. Like Annie, she is also shown in the beginning as passive but through the help of the community and the acceptance of the abject she finds her identity. Furthermore, in the first half of the film, the camera movements are akin to *Hereditary*'s traumatic movements but towards the end the camera becomes much more static, signifying the stability of Dani. Although, most of the film unfolds through an ominous gaze and through the passive gaze of Christian in the sequence of the sacrifice, the violence is committed on-screen and in a matter of fact way, the perspective is of Dani's which brings back her trauma of the loss of her family, after experiencing which she goes on in a shock. As is seen in most mainstream horror films, where the violence is shown in a glorified way, with accentuated usage of sound effects and blood/gore viz. *The Conjuring* (2013), *IT* (2017), *Saw* (2004) etc., to provide pleasure for the spectator, since the violence here is shrouded in a traumatic gaze and unfolds through the feminine gaze, it occurs without the ornamentations. Furthermore, talking about gaze, towards the end of the film, when Christian finally discovers the bloody fate of his friends, with his eyes gazing around the corpse of Simon in the ritualized position of the blood eagle, he is attacked by the cult members and they forcibly closes his eyes, rendering the screen black. With the literal shutting down of the male gaze, the climactic sequence unfolds mostly through Dani's perspective as she becomes the active bearer of the look and watches her boyfriend die, who thereby becomes the disoriented object of the look, thereby Dani gets her subject-hood and reasserts her identity in the narrative by letting go of



her trauma, smiling into oblivion.

Although, among the two films, *Hereditary* is more closely attuned to the supernatural genre, Aster seldom uses the commercial tropes of jump scares, eerie sound effects and manipulative interplay of light/ shadows to represent the horrific. The jump scare is a technique which is used to invoke a sense of dread in the spectator by a brief encounter of the supernatural entity which is complemented by an equally intense soundtrack. A staple of most of the commercial horror films, the jump scares takes advantage of the interplay of light and shadows to sometimes falsely manipulate the spectator into being active and take attention in an otherwise predictable narrative. In a way then the technique of jump scares intensifies the pleasures of the audience, to take Carroll's contention, through evoking their curiosity towards the discovery of the monstrous entity. In Aster's films, however, the jump scares are replaced by erratic camera movements and close-ups of the grotesque and the horrific from time to time coupled with contemplative and monotonous music which brings out the disgust in the spectator, thereby negating any sense of pleasure that is to be had from the narratives. For instance, in *Hereditary*, the close-up of Charlie's severed head being devoured by ants or Peter's face being infested by ants can be read as the accentuation of the horrific. Similarly, in *Midsommar*, the death of Dani's family is shown in a slowly paced single take where the spectator becomes aware that they are about to encounter something horrific. This can be read as Aster's critique of the cheap aesthetic deployments of the standard horror film narratives. By negating any sense of pleasure/ comfort to be had from the visuals as well as the generic norms in the narrative on his films and instead forcing the spectator to encounter the trauma of the female protagonists, Aster further solidifies the traumatic gaze in his films.

Furthermore, in mainstream horror films, the abundance of shadow/darkness/light plays an important role to further intensify the spectator's fascination with the unknown. Darkness, across cultures, is associated with the presence of the supernatural. In filmic representations, cinematographers and directors codify their interplay of darkness and light as signifiers of the spectator's unconscious, which lays bare the possibility of any forms of horrific for the spectator by focusing on the presence/absence interplay. In *Hereditary*, Ari Aster uses similar darkness to codify certain entities but which lurks silently within the interior of the Graham household, for example, naked cult members, possessed mother, hidden symbols of the cult etc. but never focuses on them with interplay of light, thereby creating a sense of uncanny. Furthermore, in *Midsommar*, Aster uses bright light and deep focus lens to signify the spatio-temporal anomaly of Halsingl and as well as the cult, where the atrocities of the cult lie exposed but at the same time unexposed, operating on the dual register of presence/ absence, albeit in a different way. The sense of horrific is very much

present as the profane becomes much more visible and the identifying factor with respect to standard generic conventions for the spectator is lost and the gaze of the abject/other is exposed into the generic conventions primarily dominated by the masculine gaze. In this regards then, in *Midsommar*, it can be argued that the traumatic gaze exists in a contradictory relationship with the extreme visibility, as something as personal as trauma for Dani gets exposed in the wild greens of Halsingland and ultimately produces a sense of community for her, through losing her toxic other.

This paper, albeit briefly, has attempted to trace the new perspectives of gender in American horror films, also observed in films like *It Follows* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *The Babadook* (2014) and *Halloween* (2018) among others, the analysis of which will surely point towards interesting diversions in the genre and shatter the preconceived notions associated with American horror films in general.

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*Ray Memorial Lecture 02 May, 2023*







## The Cinema of Satyajit Ray and the Realities of The Times (on the occasion of 102nd birth anniversary of Satyajit Ray)

N Manu Chakravarthy

It's my privilege to pay my deep respects to one of the great masters of world cinema because I keep reinventing my own ideas of culture, society, and politics every time I go back to Satyajit Ray's films. In fact I will try to evolve my perspectives on Ray's cinema.

It is important for me to make two kinds of distinctions. First, it's absolutely unprofitable, to apply Western film theory to our context. The rich complexities of a socio-cultural, political life cannot be fully revealed through these theorists. They work within a certain trajectory. So the danger of making a Canon of theory is that it reduces the very dynamic, complex processes of different cultures, different societies, what we could perhaps call civilisations. As much as I can deal with theory, I am going to discard theory, semiotics or psychological theories or such things, because quite often, especially in academia, theory is used on texts, imposed on text, as if texts are instrumental.

So this instrumentalist approach to creative text is something that I think most of us who respect the creative processes should avoid. Because there is always the desire of theory and it becomes an imperative to build theory on theory ultimately the text becomes similar to text.

So it is this meta theory that I am very suspicious of. The other point is that if we approach creative works very seriously, looking into their inner dynamics, I think there is no

creative text that does produce its own epistemological practice. Creativity is not the opposite of epistemology. In fact, a very careful relationship and a very intensive relationship with the creative text, will produce an epistemology from out of the center, out of the layers of the creative text. Quite often you can challenge mainstream theory through these epistemological projects.

So I shall avoid all constructed epistemology, and therefore I will try to make a very personal, subjective, intense and imaginative engagement with the creative texts of Satyajit Ray. It is actually a practice of film appreciation that we believe that there is enough material in non-western, non-Eurocentric creative text to unearth to help emerge new kinds of epistemological positions.

In this particular lecture I attempt to show how far I will be successful. There is a very organic, a very dynamic relationship between the cinematic texts of Ray and the realities of the times.

So it is a very sophisticated and subtle correlation between the thematic concerns of Satyajit Ray's films when you move from film to film, beginning from *Pather Panchali*, a very organic, subtle correlation between his themes, the thematic structures of his films, and the conflicts, tensions, paradoxes and dualities of the periods the films deal with. Now these concerns help us understand a very important Socialist Liberal Democratic. So it is not the liberalism of individualism. Now, this is a very important liberal position that comes from and is embedded in socialist democratic practices.

And if we are able to look at these creative processes, I personally believe we should be able to create a very distinct epistemological pattern and a certain kind of ideological position. But when I use the word ideological position, I do not use it in a reductionist, simplistic manner.

So an ideological position, ideology in the sense that I use it, would mean a certain kind of way of looking at life, of situations, of context, of characters, of the inner dynamics, the metaphysics of characters. The ideology, the ideological position is used to mean a very large liberal way of looking at life in general. So the use of the word ideology in this context is very different from the use of the word ideology in general.

So I will divide my talk into several parts. And when I talk of the ideological vision, the liberal position of Satyajit Ray, I also wish to place some emphasis on the fact that the thematic structures, the aesthetic patterns I can't go into all these things in detail, but I will just state it in passing that the aesthetics, that the thematic patterns really project foreground the existential predicament of the individuals. The experiential, existential predicament out of which we have to make constructing meaning. The emphasis for me personally is that it is through these existential, experiential locations that we need to uncover, that we need to



truly come to terms with the major preoccupations of Ray's films.

And the totality of his vision spreads itself out; it's staggered, it's not singular. There is a plurality of visions in recent works. So for me the evidence comes from within the structures of the text. Therefore I do not carry theoretical positions.

I do not throw theoretical positions into the text I am going to analyze. So through these existential experiential dimensions of characters do I approach the texts of such a jittery as I mentioned earlier, I make my presentation under diverse schemes, different headings, and choosing films that I believe fully pare out the validity of each of my multiple arguments.

And it is for this reason that principles of chronology, linearity do not really matter to me that I have to move from 1956 to 1991 when he made *Agantuk*. I don't believe in that kind of chronology or linearity. And it is also not possible in an hour that each film is taken up for specific analysis. So I make use of a cluster of films, I group them under different conceptual headings and after all in an hour one cannot make a very exhaustive study of all the works.

This is the premise on which I begin my analysis of Satyajit Ray's works. The first one I call the turmoil of the age, and that is the dilemmas and struggles of the middle class. I believe that if today one should turn to the 60s and move through the 80s, India did experience enormous upheavals as a society and as a political state, as a nation state. Many of the registers that we see today, if we go back now, you can see the tremors, the ripples, and those ripples were produced in the 1960s, became more prominent during the mid 70s, especially the Emergency of Mrs. Gandhi. And also this was the phase where the equilibrium, the complacency, the balance of the middle class were disturbed.

So, many changes, social and political, were gradually making their way in an unobtrusive manner, very certain manner. They were large extent imperceptible. But they did bring considerable changes in the consciousness of Indians. Many new forces came into play, altering the nature of the ruling state which today is very repressive. And this was happening both at the center and in the states. And of course, if I should be a little specific, this was the period.

This was the phase when we witnessed in Bengal, Kerala, the emergence of the Naxal Bari, the Naxalite movement and the state found it necessary to use the police and the paramilitary forces. I strongly believe that, if one should pay some specific attention to these details and even reading Mahashweta Devi, would make it very clear that the Indian civil society itself experienced several ruptures and therefore was compelled to alter its rather complacent attitudes and comfortable positions.

So these momentous changes were taking place and it is also very important. It is an imperative to recognise that the Nehruvian vision of socialism was gradually beginning to

fade away to disintegrate. It is, I notice, a raise.

Very incisive understanding of this turbulent state of the middle class becomes very abundantly clear if we turn to these films. And these film in my opinion workout the history of the times.

So it is not an overarching totalizing history that these films capture, but through specificities, through particularities. And these specificities and particularities are deeply and integrally related to the predicament of the protagonists.

So through these struggles of the individuals, through their experiences, now this is one of the most important dimensions of great creative works. Satyajit Ray's works bring us face to face with this, that through the destinies, the choices, the mistakes of individuals, we try to capture the spirit of the whole age.

So a creative text reveals the spirit of the age, the multiple realities of the times, through these destinies of the characters, the protagonists that they deal with and it is this deep experiential dimension that is built into the narratives, the cinematic narratives. And so it is true. When we look at these individuals, we also look at the trajectories of those times, at the spirit of those times, the CHILD GUISE the spirit of the age as we would call it.

So this is where we look at individuals in relation to their communities, in relation to their pockets and the vision of the work is to integrate. So they are in a very subtle, sophisticated manner, integrated to bring us to foreground the reality of the times. What I am trying to suggest is through these concrete instances, concrete experiences and not through amorphous social categories or political categories Ray creates characters, situations, context and through them the spirit of the age.

The extension of this point for me is that it is up to us through our intense engagement with these texts. It is up to us to extrapolate this ideational content. So it's not revealed, it's not stated, it's not openly articulated, but these are suggested to us in a very subtle and sophisticated manner. So our engagement with these texts should extrapolate, and it is through this extrapolation that we come to understand the complexities of characters, their destinies, their choices, and of course through all these, we integrate them with the whole turbulence of the age. This is what I mean by the need, the essential need to construct epistemology out of Ray's cinema.

Now, this historical sense does not emerge as a massive lump of an intellectual position and as part of a political discourse. So if we expect a certain kind of an abstract statement, a solidified statement, it is not going to be there in Ray and therefore in Ray's films. As I have been mentioning earlier, we see individuals establishing their negotiations, creating their negotiations. They are negotiating with their new realities and these are encounters. We should be careful when we use these terms. These are encounters with new

kinds of modernity. The use of the word modernism would be a bit problematic because when did modernism begin? A critic like Raymond Williams would say, when was modernism, does modernism begin at all?

So, we should be very careful. But I will not go into all these details, but new kinds of modernity, new kinds of ripples, features do appear.

And this is where Ray integrates the destinies of individuals with the altering realities of the times. So if we look at the dilemmas of, let us say, Shyamal in *Seemabaddha* or Somnath in *Jana Aranya*, Siddhartha in *Pratidwandi*, Subrata and Aarti in *Mahanagar*, Now these are representative of the altered destinies and all of them do not share the same destiny.

They have altering destinies but what is common is all these characters in *Mahanagar*, *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha*, *Jana Aranya*, they are all part of a society in transition in communities that are forced to undergo transformation without any choice. What I would strongly advocate here in this presentation, is that we need to acknowledge the fact that the new dimensions of history, politics, and several other kinds of metamorphosis that a society experiences are part of the creative dimensions.

So to look at individuals, to look at protagonists, to look at the destinies of individuals and to call it with the spirit of the times is a kind of vision, a kind of craftsmanship that only creative masters are able to achieve and certainly Ray is one of them. We do not recognize this dimension quite often, for we are content with the plot, the emotional content, stereotypes of climax, anti-climax, the conventional registers we employ, especially while watching film.

But when we truly turn to the Indian masters, Ray, for instance, we begin to see what a profound correlation there is between the protagonists of the films and the period, the specific reality of that particular age. There is such a fine correlation. And this correlation, as I have been mentioning earlier, to repeat, it comes through existential experiential locations because generally we do not do it. When we talk of a film, in particular how it captures the spirit of the age, the politics of it, we tend to believe that it is all reserved for the Great Western European masters. We talk about German expressionism or Italian neorealism or French new wave, when we turn to our writers, film makers, as if they are not capable of capturing the spirit of the age, as if we are only content with creating plots, with melodrama, with sentimental offerings.

Now it is this myth that we can do away with when we turn to somebody like a master, like Satyajit Ray. So my whole struggle has been to see the kind of integration that was possible for Ray and many other films, especially in our Indian languages, individual film makers in almost all the Indian languages. And I am fairly conversant with most of them, trying to do what we would call the independent young Indian cinema. So a new tradition is growing up, and I would say that it is a continuation of this tradition inaugurated by

somebody like Satyajit Ray.

So let me turn to two or three characters by way of illustrating my argument. The choices that Somenath and Shyamal make, for example, now relate to their own nature, what I would call the metaphysics, the metaphysical position of human nature. It only means that, like any creative work, the inner world of human beings. And this is very important because several Western theorists tend to believe that we Indians lack a metaphysical core. An Indian text is regarded as a national allegory that we are only capable of writing public texts, producing public texts that we seem to be in the Third World. It is enough, for example, surprising that even a leftist critic, Marxist critic like Frederick Jameson, makes the statement that people of the Third World are creative writers.

*So are we just producing as native informants?*

But I think the time has come to resist this and to show that these creative processes are also about metaphysics, the metaphysical dimensions, the contradictions, the struggles, the dualities, paradoxes of individuals through their existential experiences. So I talked about Shyamal and they collapsed.

The most important point is that these people located in the middle class, collapse, and they are not villains. They collapse not because they are people of no integrity. Such a black and white representation is not something that we will come across in a great writer artist like Satyajit Ray. They collapse because they cannot match the pressures.

They succumb to the pressures of the corporate world, of this globalizing world, of these multinational companies. So there is a certain tragic dimension. Otherwise we could have converted them into cheap villains, who break trade union movements. Now this dark, sinister, negative black and white representation does not exist.

They are also very ambitious. There are also opportunists. So it is this balance between weakness, a certain kind of tragic weakness, and also this is the complexity of human nature and also the opportunism of the middle class that you begin to see that personal integrity.

To fight for personal integrity would mean being a loser in this competitive, aggressively competitive world. But is this all that we deal with in these films? For me, what is very interesting is that there is juxtaposition and that there is a counterpoint. When I talk of the major films *Mahanagar*, *Seemabhadha*, *Jana Aranya*, *Pratidwandi*, the very interesting counterpoint comes to us through Aarti in *Mahanagar* and a woman.

What is interesting is that it is this woman, a domesticated woman, who steps into the modern world for the first time because the family needs her to take up a job, but who

refuses to succumb to it. And this is not the case of individual heroism. This is not the case of personal heroism. But here is a very interesting counter positional trajectory, a contradistinction through Aarti.

What is fascinating is that this woman bound to the domestic order steps into the outside world and it is she who is able to. So this kind of a transcendence itself through a woman is very interesting, very fascinating, and she is the one who goes beyond crippling racial prejudices and shows her transcendental self. She is the one who fills her husband. Husband who is full of trepidation, anxiety to step into the modern world, to say that it is indeed possible for human beings.

Now this is the positive affirmation of the fact that human integrity, human personality, has the strength, the resilience to step into the modern world without undergoing an ethical collapse, and that happens through a woman, is very interesting, very fascinating for me. I state this quite emphatically because the 2nd component that I wish to discuss is an alternative reality.

The other reality comes to us through women. The women in Ray's films are an integral part, the diverse, divergent spaces that women occupy in the realities that Ray projects for us.

Let us turn to *Devi* and *Charulata*, two women. To begin with, in *Devi* and *Charulata*, the figures of Doyamoyee and Charulata lead us into a world. No feminist theory is necessary. But look at the positions that these films help us to workout. The woman embedded within the patriarchal order. These films, *Devi*, *Charulata*, deal with the substantiality of the physical reality of women, the corporeal reality. Look at the fact that the body does not exist in a mythical religious sense for Doyamoyee, because she is the Devi, the goddess, the transcendental, ethereal spirit and in *Charulata*, of course being ignored. Through their experiences, these women recognise the truth of physicality, the substantiality of their being, and notice that it is being eroded, ignored, and overlooked.

Now, that is the loss of the self, the self of a woman and therefore these films deal with the recognition of the fact that in a patriarchal society, for different reasons, it becomes necessary for the woman to assert her existence through her physical self. Look at the complex manner in which the women's stories are told by Satyajit Ray. The denial, the refusal to acknowledge the truth of the physical self, is part of a very brutal order.

It is a kind of brutality, a kind of violence, not physical, but which causes enormous psychological anguish to the women. And therefore you will see it in different ways from *Devi* to *Charulata*. If we go back to *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar*, Ray worked out in a very subtle and sophisticated manner and of course when you turn to what he made in 1984, *Ghare Baire*, you will see it at a very different level through Bimala.

Nikhil, Sandeep, Bimala combination is very different and *Ghare Baire* drawn from Tagore. But you will begin to see if you place them together. So from 1960 to 64 through 1984, the centrality of the woman in Ray's films is a different kind of a reality which is juxtaposition, a counterpoint to the dominant social narrative that reviews. So Ray's sense of history in my opinion is inclusive enough to equally acknowledge the fundamental realities of the women and contrasted correlated with the miserable story of the young girl forced into prostitution and it's a friend's sister. The male protagonist realized that he is been pimping with his own close friend's sister.

Now this particular point is very important for me because he asks her to go back on realizing that she is his friend's sister. But the woman says I'm not willing to compromise.

This kind of honor is paradoxical for me, and very difficult to understand. I will go through with my commitment. I've made a commitment to give my body away and I shall not go back and receive any money. So what kind of an interesting subversion is this of standard notions of value, of morality? Now I think it is these paradoxical statements, these paradoxical positions that make the presence of women very important in the world of Ray.

But there is another kind of juxtaposition in Ray. If these are stories of one kind of a submission, one kind of domination being practiced on women within the world of women, so women do not constitute the same kind of homogeneous reality. We have a contrast, one contrast between the male world and the female world, but an inner contrast between two kinds of eminent registers and we see this in *Seemabaddha*, *Nayak* and *Kanchanjanga* taking us back to 1962.

I have already referred to the very daringly different approach of Aarti in *Mahanagar*, but look at women as an ethical counter link. That is, the unethical Shyamal Chatterjee in *Seemabaddha* disintegrates. He is annihilated within himself, liquidated channels, when he collapses before his sister-in-law, Tutu or Sudarshan. Because it is this woman who as a point of conscience, as a trajectory of conscience, sees through the man she admired, her brother-in-law, and therefore Shyamal notices that he is disintegrating before a woman, a very tender sophisticated woman. And it is the collapse, the disintegration of so-called ethical self, of the dominant man. So as does Somenath.

I refer to Somnath who sees himself as a bloody pimp and therefore these are instances where men recognise themselves, where men awaken their conscience in the presence of women who give them a contrasting ethical counterpoint. So, these are the images of women who bring knowledge, knowledge of an ethical collapse in the men, which I think is a very, very important aspect of Ray's works. For that matter Arindam, the huge big glorious star in *Nayak*, the super hero shrinks before this young journalist. Now as the confessional mode begins, look at all these narratives of Ray's films and you begin to see the

wondrous manner in which Ray creates a situations, context, characters and asks us the texted demand, make a demand on us to extrapolate larger meaning, philosophical mean. And when Aditi starts talking, you begin to see that this hero begins to recognise that his inner world is one of darkness, dark shades, and that there is nothing but emptiness, barrenness, and that he has nothing but existential anxiety with him. So making the journey, the metaphor of the journey, in the train he turns inwards from pomp, from celebration, the *Mahanayak*, the hero it is, it is a journey into himself, of darkness, of emptiness, of hollowness. So it is these areas of self-journeying, the journey that one makes into the inferiority of this self, that we begin to see, a very important counterpoint and this is the other kind of reality, if one kind of a reality.

The first part of my presentation was about the public reality, the reality of public life, public realm. These are realms that belong to this area called conscience, the inner self, the metaphysical being of individuals. And it's important to me that the narratives of Satyajit Ray move from one area of experience to another area of experience, ask us to construct one kind of a philosophical understanding, juxtapose it with another kind of philosophical understanding, making it possible for us to look at the multiple realities, multiple experiences of his craft.

But what is stunning for me is Ray's *Kanchenjunga* (1962). And this is where my understanding of Ray's leads me to correlate him to place him alongside other very important creative philosophical trajectories.

In 62 you notice a very strong, quiet, strong, defined woman in the form of this young Monisha who goes beyond distinctions. 62, *Kanchenjunga* and the daughter of a very successful businessman who still believes that the British have liberated, that colonialism has liberated and colonial modernity has liberated India, which was steeped in backwardness oriented despotism. But Monisha defies, Monisha defies the father. Not just the father, but for me what is interesting is her mother.

Mother who tells her brother, let her make her choice. So there is a kind of a subversion of the patriarchal order through the father who has nothing but contempt for those who still talk of India, Indian traditions, Indian cultures because we are all rooted in ages of darkness. And these women for me are very, very exciting creations because they are challenged. And when I use the word challenge, there is nothing really very revolutionary about it. But the word challenge is to mean the construction of a different kind of reality within oneself. And when a human being, a man or woman constructs a different reality, evolves a different perspective of oneself that constitutes an internal and inner revolution.

So Ray's cinematic world for me is very interesting and complex because when I look at one kind of juxtaposition, that one juxtaposition finds another juxtaposition. So it is even

that those juxtapositions, the counter points, are not of a singular category. And therefore I only say that to talk of Ray would only mean coming to terms with alternative realities, that there are several alternative realities. If one finds an alternative reality through the second one, the second finds it through the 3<sup>rd</sup>, through the 4th. And where do I go when I watch Ray, when I watch all his films? How do I try to?

This is very important for me. How do I try to locate, or where do I try to locate the origins of such an expansive imagination, of an expansive creative power in a master like Ray. And this is where I believe that Ray is part of a very, very great tradition. And therefore his narratives, I personally argue, are also narratives of great indebtedness to many great traditions. So to understand Ray, for me, is also to understand. Apart from the analysis I make of each film, it is also important for me to understand the great traditions to which Ray is indebted. And therefore I see them as Ray's films that have very, very profound narratives of great creative indebtedness.

I turn to the last part. What's the other kind of alternative that Ray was trying to come to terms with? Now this, I would submit, is an alternative that takes back to being a very different kind of civilisation, a civilisational vision of turning to primeval modes of consciousness, the archetypal modes of consciousness, the collective consciousness in *Aagantuk*, *Kanchenjunga*. And if you turn to these films, it is the struggle for us in a world of modernity, of rationality, science, logic, to possibly intuitively turn to what we call the aboriginal consciousness. There is a certain kind of a, not to say that he borrowed from that, but there is a certain kind of a pattern which I would correlate with, with the Jungian. Carl Jungian search for a collective kind of unconscious, which means a different civilisational category, a different civilisational experience is what Ray, part of the Brahma Samaj, part of the Bengali Bhadrakol, was still trying to evolve out of these characters.

Kanchenjunga, is a mountain, but it is a metaphor, a metaphor for something which is rooted, impeded, which does not alter. So there is a certain attempt on Ray's part and we cannot discuss it through strict scientific rational categories. I am trying to suggest that Ray was also trying to move towards in these films, trying to move towards some kind of a position where the intuitive call it the mystical. If you want understanding the non-rational modes of understanding, the 'self' became very important, a certain kind of timeless quality. So if modernity provides one kind of an answer, women get another kind of an answer at a very deeply philosophical level, I would only say that this is only a philosophical inquiry. What does it mean to locate? What does it mean to awaken, to experience a primordial, prime, evil, autochthonous consciousness in oneself? Is it possible at all? And this is what *Aagantuk* does.

So in spite of this modernity, modernism, modernisation, I believe there is something



very valuable in Ray and that is to see if there can be a recovery of a primeval consciousness of a primeval self and it is therefore an alternative that comes through. The spirit of the place can't change it for being such a metaphor, a wonderful metaphor. And to look at *Kanchenjunga*, to listen to the birds, the song of the birds is perhaps to listen to many deep, profound resonances. Voices within the human self and all voices that we listen to are not necessarily rational, logical and scientific.

So my argument is, without mystifying it or without making it very philosophical, in an amorphous sense, it is interesting that a man like Ray was turning towards these unknown unconscious centers of human consciousness, the unconscious within. This is in a world which was modernizing, and was becoming more and more rational, technocratic and utilitarian. That is a very interesting counterpoint and that is another kind of alternative reality for me in these works of Ray. I wish to end by dealing with two questions and these questions are questions relating to what does justice mean?

What does equality mean when we turn to the modern world? When will we turn to modern India? Are we in a position to recreate civilisational values not through empty, barren, hollow philosophical categories? Not through empty vacuous spiritual categories but to principles of justice and equality, which I think is very central for my understanding of Satyajit Ray. And in this, the great tradition of indebtedness continues that came to Ray through his knowledge, experience, and understanding of three people in particular; Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi.

What do I mean? Let me try to explain it. That 1907-1908 Gandhi produced Hind Swaraj, Tagore had produced nationalism and Tagore had written a very important essay, *The Cult of the Charkha*. His disagreement, total disagreement with a man he loved and respected Gandhi. The cult of the Charkha is an address, a questioning and interrogation of Gandhi's celebration of Khadi. And of course the other is an essay referring to a crisis, the crisis in civilization, which Tagore wrote a year before he passed. What are the films that deal with these questions? And for me, the most important thing in today's world, today's India, is that the principles of justice, equality, and particularly in relation to communalism become very important. And that's why remains the supreme master of what I would call an ethical understanding of politics. Where does it come from?

I turn to just about three or four films. The 1st is *Pratidwandi* (1970). Well, you can remember the interview when Siddhartha is asked what the greatest achievement is. Now these are the ethical, political dimensions of a master. Like, when Siddhartha is asked at the interview what is the greatest achievement of human kind in the 20th century, he says not the landing on the moon, but he says the struggle of the struggle of the Vietnamese people in fighting American aggression. If you look at, remember the My Lai massacre, the manner in

which the Americans slaughtered operations or inducing Napalm bombs killing young people, in My Lai massacre old people, sick people, children being massacred. It is very important for me if somebody should ask me what the ethical political consciousness is. What is the ethical political reality of Ray's Films turn to *Pratidwandi* when they look at this without major ideological statements that there is a value system that comes out in rave and Siddharth answers? It is the struggle, the heroic struggle of the ordinary common people, including young children, women that they fought American, a Christian. It is for this reason that Ray also the notion of public integrity that in 1989 Ray made *Ganashatru*, of course, borrowing from Ibsen's play, now the realities of five decades of Indian life, the collapse of Indian life ethically, morally, politically and these are very important ethical political principles. And when I use the word politics with reference to Ray, I also must make it very clear that I mean a very ethical sense of politics and ethical political vision. So the salient point for me is, as I talk of the politics, that rape became deeply conscious of the tensions of the Indian nation state, the tensions that the Indian nation state created.

So if *Pratidwandi* registers it at one level, two films register it at a very major level. The one is *Ghare Baire*. And I am not talking of *Ghare Baire* by drawing support from extraneous arguments, but what is embedded in *Ghare Baire*. Tagore's text that Ray makes use of? So if you look at the whole conflict between Nikhil, Sandeep, Bimala, let us leave Bimala out because that takes us to a very different argument. If you look at the plot of the text, the cinematic text, it does not come before us. But if you correlate it with the essay, this is through the character, through the central character, the zamindar, the landowner, the Maharaja, very liberal, very refined and much evolved. The Ray text, the cinematic text, is also creating a philosophical debate with what do we do with something like Khadi? What do we do with something like imported clothes? What do we do with the plight of the working classes of those who have been marginalized, of those who have been oppressed, who have nothing to do? Especially particular reference is to communalism, the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. So if we look at justice, the plot of the cinematic text, these philosophical registers do not come before us.

But if you make an inter-textual statement, you begin to see that they carry very important philosophical political resonances. And these are resonances that belong to the times. They are not part of the mere plot of the text. Therefore it is vital. My argument is, it is vital for our own moral center today as we witnessed the power of this Indian nation state or the power of states all over the world. To recognise now the story of Nikhil, Sandeep and Bimala also ties up with the question of emerging communalism.

And therefore it is not surprising for me that *Ghare Baire* becomes very central in terms of the political ethical question. It creates for us and the cyclical relationship with

society, with women, with questions of communism are not merely designs of the plot of the text. They are also very important ethical, philosophical, and political registers.

I wish to end by making a reference to *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, in my considered opinion it is a very monumental text and more so for our times. Why do I say that? Because *Shatranj ke Khiladi* spreads before us a very different and unique vision of the Indian consciousness of history and our notions of power, authority and notions of the ruling state. Whether it's a so-called democratic state or it's a monarchy, as it happens in *Shatranj ke Khiladi* where we are dealing with Nawab Wajid Alisha of Awadh, it also subverts. So one *Shatranj ke Khiladi* challenges our notions of rule, political rule, the ruling state, the issues of what do we do? How do we handle questions of power and authority? Second crucial is all our conventional Eurocentric notions of communalism, especially in relation to Muslim rulers. What we in Karnataka are witnessing about the Tipu Sultan. Was he a murderer or a monster? The whole land grew up seeing Tipu as the tiger of Mysore. Mysore, Holi as we used to say, not just Muslims but for everybody, including folklore, he was a hero and if he killed Hindus so did he kill Muslims who were pro-British. So for him it was a question of who was pro-British and who was anti British. These are the western constructs and we do know that this whole divide between Hindu India, Mughal India, Muslim India, Delhi Sultanate were all creations after James Mill. Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* is going by my viewing, my reading, my understanding is an attempt to fight all these notions, Eurocentric western notions of history constructed by the West about nonwestern societies especially in relation to the Muslim rulers of India.

I will just give two instances. When Outram talks to the Queen Mother, look at the great dimensions in that conversation between the Queen Mother and Outram. Here is a man, the British at the region talking of power, transfer of power. But the Queen Mother looks at the traditional language that comes out of the ethics of a religious center. And these are the nonwestern experiences, the nonwestern, non-Eurocentric notions of history. We want nothing other than in self-justice. We are all interested in justice, insaaf and we are children of God. We obey Allah, that's the truth. We are not slaves of your Queen of Victoria and the Queen Mother says I still believe that you are Queen Victoria. We will appeal to her that you British still have a sense of justice or have you lost it totally? We are not going to take, nor are we going to ask you to go away. But ask yourself whether there is something like justice, Adalat, Adul within yourself.

So for her what is important is registering the fact whether we were believers in or not. One may not believe in any kind of God, but it just does not mean that we cannot recognise the moral import of what we say, that there is God's will. And when we talk of God's will, it does not matter whether we happen to be believers or not. But we are talking of certain

ethical principle in relation to state, state power, morality and ethics in public life, political life, the insistence on justice. The insistence on justice is a faith in incontrovertible principles that humanity has to live by that, no state, no ruling state, whatever the kind of power it has. It has no right to flout the principles of justice and therefore dubious are the values of power and authority.

In Ray's *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, it is this indictment of colonial rule that a simple woman hidden behind this screen cannot even make a public experience where she invokes the ultimate value which is common to humanity, to the whole of humankind. Do you believe in justice, fair play or not? The other magnificent perspective comes to us through Wajid Ali Shah and it's very important when he hands over his crown to Outram who cannot make any sense of that for his logical power-ridden mind. What does it mean when Wajid Ali Shah hands over the crown? But most importantly he refuses to sign the document. It is very easy to describe Wajid Ali Shah as a dancer, a musician, a fool, ineffective and who is effeminate, who is more or less like a woman. But there is a certain protest, against a very powerful, brutal, repressive masculinity, the standing of human history and it becomes very clear when Wajid Ali Shah issues that my dignity as a king is not half as important as the peace that I must ensure for these citizens. It is a question of citizenship, because I have always regarded them as my children. So if there is no glory in handing over my crown, I should do it. But I shall not sign this document, which is an insult to humanity. You see the whole idea of heroism, of fighting for a nation, patriotism, of not being a deshdrohi, all these are certainly subverted in *Shatranj ke Khiladi* and if one should conceptualize, it only means a new rendering of a new version of history. What does it mean to create history?

Are we going to tell tales of violence, bloodshed, heroism or massacres or are we going to evolve, evolve whether it is going to work in actual reality or not? Are we at least going to evolve a certain kind of an anti-masculinity consciousness in relation to state power, in relation to power and authority? And that is why look at the estate that Wajid Ali Shah shows, dance, love of poetry. We do know that Outram's deputy who is with him says he is a much evolved human being. So Outram on one hand had British colonial rule, on the other hand had a small province like Awadh. And here is Wajid Ali Shah, who also invokes Lord Krishna. This is the kind of plurality, religious plurality, and oneness India celebrated much before the British, especially through James Mill, created this myth of Hindu versus Muslim, the origins of communalism. So my whole argument is, if you look at these realities, very complex realities, and these are realities of subversion, these are realities that would be called adversarial realities, those that challenge dominant, hegemonic, oppressive positions. And so to create new kinds of realities and these new kinds of realities built on very genuinely democratic socialist principles of liberals, of being truly liberal, of being truly emancipated.

So when we move back into history, when we move back into those registers of history, so from the period of Wajid Ali Shah down through the 60s to the 80s to *Agantuk* in 1991, what are the kinds of realities, alternative realities, counter points that the world of Ray, that the schematic world of Ray creates for us, cannot be homogenized, totalised. So we can only see them as multiple pluralities, the multiple and different trajectories in this wonderful cosmos which is heterogeneous, diverse, plural. And therefore it is absolutely necessary for us to remain deeply indebted to a master like Satyajit Ray.

**About the Author :** Prof. N Manu Chakravarthy is an eminent academician and an author. He has been the recipient of several prestigious awards including the Swarna Kamal at the National Film Awards, Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award & Sri V. M. Inamdar memorial award.

