

# Memories of Development: The Fantastic Non-Presence of Kolkata in Post-Liberalization Bangla Cinema

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When Marcel Carne, in an explicit tone of frustration, asked, 'When will the cinema go down into the street?'<sup>[1]</sup>, he wanted something real as opposed to the artificiality of the sets. This question, put forward in Paris way back in the 1930s, seems to have gained some relevance in present-day Kolkata. One could re-phrase the question as 'When will Bangla cinema get back into the streets of Kolkata?' This question springs from the fact that the visual geography of Bangla cinema, in post-liberalization phase, has mostly got rid of the spatial specificity of Kolkata, though one hardly fails to notice the distinct neo-urban turn which has manifested itself in the Bangla cinema of this period. Previously, the journey to the city, in all probabilities, used to be a journey to Kolkata (the then Calcutta). And once set within the spatial ambit of the city, films used to have ample references to the city, be it the bustling downtown or the serene locality in the suburbs.

## **The city that was: outdoor**

Earlier, while depicting the urban zone, Bangla films used to show spaces that had unmistakable references of Kolkata. Clichéd as they often were, those images nonetheless charted the route of the protagonists wandering about in the city. So, the Red Road, Brigade Parade Ground, Victoria Memorial or Howrah Bridge used to recur as locations, while the dingy by-lanes, with small, claustrophobic rooms of lower middle class households on both sides, also made their appearance. Lovers used to stroll in those lanes and streets, and the more fortunate ones, who could afford the luxury of a car, had cozy drives along the wider thoroughfares. City-streets served as spaces of dystopia (ruthless urbanscape, devoid of sympathy and fellow-feeling) and also a kind of utopia (site of liberty, where anonymity unsettles the crushing load of tradition). In the Suchitra-Uttam film *Shapmochan* (1955), Mahendra Kabiyal, an urban minstrel, sang a somber ballad that

bemoaned the cruel nature of the city: *Shono bandhu shono, pranhin ei saharer itikatha* (Listen, o friend, while I sing the saga of this heartless city).

At the same time, streets were spaces where the lovers could meet and get in touch with each other, exchange pleasantries and fall for each other, away from the prying eye of their guardians. Consider, for example, the car race sequence in another Uttam Kumar film *Deya Neyya* (1963), where he romances Tanuja. Uttam, son of an Allahabad-based business tycoon, moves to Calcutta after having a tussle with his father, and, to earn a living, takes up the job of the chauffeur of a rich man. One day the pretty - and haughty as well - niece of his employer was driving the car with the hero-as-chauffeur sitting idle by her side. She hardly takes him into count, considering him nothing more than an ordinary rustic. Her college-pals are in the backseat, constantly urging her to drive faster. Much to her chagrin, she cannot manage to overtake the car ahead. After several unsuccessful attempts, the chauffeur swings into action. Surreptitiously, he puts his foot on the girl's, pressing the accelerator. Within minutes, their car whizzes past the one they were chasing. The girl is thrilled, one may surmise, as much with the glory of winning the car race as in having her future lover touching her stealthily, keeping all her friends blissfully unaware of it. The promotion of a person from a small town-bred youth to a chivalrous hero, well-conversant with the urban rules of the game, occurs just within a single joyride in a Calcutta street. Be it the place of venting the urban agony, or that of secret sexual escapades, the street was filmed as a synecdoche, where part represented the whole *new* urban imaginary.

'(A)round the middle of the 1950s both realism (i.e. art film) and melodrama (i.e. popular film) arrived at their classic formulations in Indian cinema. The new melodrama responded to the modernizing impulse of the new nation more consistently.' writes Moinak Biswas, 'It celebrated the urban adventure, sought to figure the journey to citizenship by capturing the seduction of the city space: the new romance it formulated was in many ways a romance with modernity.'<sup>[2]</sup> The city was a site of modernity. Sometimes its reality became

unstable, as Biswas points out, while trying to figure the 'domain of the romantic couple in its autonomy from the familial domain'.<sup>[3]</sup> This point will be taken up later, but it might be said here that the visual geography of Bangla cinema of this period resembled in a sense the topography of Calcutta of the time. As Partha Chatterjee describes: 'A street-front lined by large mansions and elegant middle class houses would invariably hide crowded slums at the back where the service population would live.'<sup>[4]</sup> The visual economy of the city in the Bangla cinema of the 1950s and '60s consisted of these two kinds of spaces. Even when shot within the confines of sets, the representation of the urban space was something the audience was familiar with. It was the city they lived in or had seen other people living in. The filmic imaginary of the urban would regularly collapse onto the real. Cinematic production of spaces hardly unsettled the familiar spatial division of the city.

Even when the underclass was shown attempting a transgression of the border, or the line of control as it were, the people who belonged to the upper rung drove them back to the space they *must* remain within. *Chhadmabeshi* (1971), a comedy of errors, has one such spatial division. Uttam Kumar, posing as a driver, lands up in his sister-in-law's house where his newly married wife has come on vacation. Since his sister-in-law and her husband haven't seen him earlier, Uttam, conspiring with his wife, decides to play a bit of prank. However, finding the driver showing an undue amount of interest in a married *bhadramahila*, the sister-in-law and her husband get suspicious. One night, while Uttam Kumar is about to go upstairs to the room of his wife, his brother-in-law, who has always kept strict vigil on the driver, suddenly appears on the balcony and orders Uttam to get back to his own room on the ground floor. This brother-in-law, a thoroughly loveable disciplinarian, played with great élan by Bikash Roy, makes no bones about the fact that the driver, being a servant, wasn't permitted to go upstairs in the house.

And when the husband-as-driver stages a 'real' act of elopement with the lady (his wife in reality) taking the prank to an extreme, other servants of that household are overjoyed; they break forth into an impromptu song '*Are chho chho chho chho kya sharam ki baat / Bhaddar gharka ladki bhage deriver ka saath*' (Oh, what a shame! The daughter of an honourable man elopes with her driver). All these acts of discipline and punish and the jubilant celebration serve to mark the spatial division which the city in cinema had to conform to. The representation of city had a well-defined spatial arrangement.

### **The city that was: indoor**

The hero, if hailing from an impoverished background, would invariably graduate to an affluent status once his romance with the plebeians is over. In another version of the story, he would come from some awfully rich family, get in touch with the underclass. and there meet the girl of his life. Then, he would leave home to embrace the heroine and also this *other* side of life. However, all's well that ends well. He, along with his partner, would be reunited with his parent/s, who, by that time, had undergone a change of heart. And they all would finally be lodged in their large mansion.

So, the hero's romance with the plebeians, spurred as it was by Nehruvian socialism, necessitated a space for the under-privileged. The squalor of this space - marked with bare-bodied or loincloth or dhoti-clad men, and women clad in tattered, low-priced saris - was in sharp contrast with the huge palace-like houses, the dominant male inhabitants of which used to don pricey dressing gowns (at home) and suits (outside), not to mention the cigar/smoking pipe, which helped to articulate authority. Ladies in such spaces wore pricey saris and gold ornaments, and they were, like their male counterparts, well conversant in western etiquettes. Spatial arrangement had almost always been two-tiered. The high-society people were often seen loitering in the verandah on the first floor looking downwards, or coming downstairs, with the hero and/or heroine being strategically placed on the

ground floor. In typical long shots, camera on the ground level foregrounded the hero/heroine with guardians reprimanding them from the staircase/verandah deep in the background. This spatial segregation on vertical axis was somewhat routinely used to signify the difference in power between people.

On the other hand, the spatial arrangement of the plebeian world was horizontal. The skyline was something that the plebeians, being in closer contact with the soil, were not entitled to perceive. Only those who could move vertically, both in their houses and in the social ladder, could get an eyeful of the sky that was often punctuated with images of other large buildings. With the main protagonist/s in the foreground, camera often captured hand-painted backdrops showing contours of other houses, which served to establish the space as unmistakably urban. Naturally, these backdrops could only be seen when the characters were on the first floor or higher. As I said earlier, such a spatial organization served to show that these people belonged to the upper stratum of society. Otherwise, they couldn't have got at that vantage point. The more a person gained power the more s/he would move steadily from the ground level on the vertical axis. On the other hand, the service-population had to cling to the ground level - sometimes on the street, sometimes in slums that were virtually a spatial extension of the streets. The climax scenes would often have a spatial merger of these two with an emotional glorification of horizontality. But with the crisis in the lives of hero and/or heroine being over, the couple is comfortably put on the trajectory of an utopian mobility.

### **In search of reality - Bangla films in the '70s**

The camera took to the streets more enthusiastically - presumably in search of an enhanced realism - in the Bangla films of late sixties and seventies. With the swelling unrest during those years - climaxing in the violence of 1970-1971, and then leading to the infamous Emergency - Bangla films began to encounter a reality invading all fronts in the urban space. It was

time for Ray to make his Calcutta trilogy (*Pratidwandi*, 1970, *Seemabaddha*, 1971, and *Jana Aranya*, 1975). Mrinal Sen also made a famous series of films that expressed the angst born in the urban space. Filmmakers belonging to the zone of middle cinema like Tapan Sinha (*Apanjan*, 1968) and Parthapratim Chowdhury (*Jadubangsha*, 1974) made films that tried to bring a new kind of urban reality into the commercial screen. Bangla cinema stepped into a largely *real* Calcutta.

However, even in the troubled time of seventies and after, there was no real upsurge of what Madhav Prasad calls a 'view from below', of life in the metropolis seen through the eyes of the underclass: beggars, vagrants, thieves, alcoholics<sup>[5]</sup>. While Hindi films heralded the advent of the young and angry in *Deewar* (1975), surprisingly, Bangla cinema continued to be fascinated with the middle class. So, the Calcutta that appeared on the screen was a city of the middle class, filmed *by* the middle class, though, interestingly not made *for* the consumption of urban middle class only. Bangla cinema has always had a throbbing market in the rural areas, and today, the villages and the towns are where this cinema finds more takers than in the city. Nonetheless, the city became more real, as it were, in the seventies of the past century. More and more, it began to manifest 'a quality of being intensely present, located in the material world', where the 'protagonists (are) part of the city they inhabit, and they are therefore, typically ignored by it; the city consumes and neglects them'.<sup>[6]</sup>

So, here comes the citizen, who is no more a migrant from the village, but has been a city-dweller with enough exposure to the darker side of the space s/he inhabits. With little or no memory of the rural/pastoral, s/he has to manage the drama that unfolds in her/his life with her/his urban resources, and can only look toward the village as a place to escape to, albeit temporarily, with the constant and somewhat gnawing awareness that s/he is destined to return to the city. The neo-urban protagonist of the post-liberalization Bangla cinema is a descendant of this city-bred person in the sense that s/he belongs mostly to city and lacks the memory of village.

However, the city that s/he belongs to has undergone some significant change meanwhile, and so has the profile of the protagonist. And significantly enough, people were gradually coming to terms with the city-space that had hitherto been 'unkind' to the anonymous visitor. Ties have been normalized, as it were, with rural individuals gradually succumbing to the charms of the urban. City-space happens to be the sole repository of the new technology that has the magical ability to proliferate the *self*, and disseminate it all over through the omnipresent media. The 'desire for modernity' could find its fuller expression in the urban zone. The trajectory of a village boy singing his way to fame has been charted in two films from two different decades: *Shapmochan* and *Hansaraj* (1976). In the former, the hero had to overcome the burden of a supernatural curse to continue singing on the All India Radio (AIR). In *Hansaraj*, the singer-boy, also hailing from village, reaches the residence of an influential AIR official at the crack of dawn. Being unable to meet her at such an awkward time, he begins to sing on the street, trying to persuade her to let him sing on radio.

This village boy, struggling to get a toehold in the cultural map of the city, could successfully sell his *otherness* to the urban consumers in a musical soiree. He was interested in maintaining his rural self only as long as it could fetch him accolades from the urban connoisseurs. Now it is the duty of the urban to authenticate the rural as a cultural product, which they city-dwellers did in the film, turning the boy-performer into a kind of an exhibit, a hybrid site that put his ruralness under erasure, yet made it a thoroughly consumable commodity. His concluding song in the film, '*Shahartar ei golokdhandhay andhar holo mon*' ('My soul is darkened in the labyrinth of the city'), begins on a somewhat bitter note, but eventually goes on to admit that the city too is not devoid of true love. Little wonder then that the city would accommodate this boy and recognize his talent. Thus Hansaraj, the little hero of the film, becomes a village-in-itself, and he typifies the contemporary performer in Bangla film, who shuns the pastoral background

and opts for the risky charm of the mediatized city, realizing it well that this *is* the vertical road to fame.

### **City, not Calcutta**

Hansaraj set out for Calcutta, and was fortunate enough to have arrived there. In changed circumstances, people still embark on city-bound journeys but do not arrive at specific sites. With Kolkata getting more and more urbanized, keeping pace with the *developmentality* that set in during the last decade of the twentieth century, Bangla cinema started to show urban zones that looked more like any generic city than Kolkata *per se*. If that was the beginning of disappearance of Kolkata from the image-scape of the contemporary Bangla film, a bit more was in store. Just as the city was fast catching up with the global face of urbanity, Bangla cinema took another flight. Leaving even those generic urban zones behind, frames of fantasy - which earlier had regularly been stuffed with images of urban space - began to be shot in spectacular locations of 'film cities' located mainly in the southern part of India. As said above, it was time for another Kolkata to emerge. Shunning the resistance that once earned her the stigma of a 'dying city', this eastern metropolis was undergoing what the analysts would call early phases of post-liberalization development. In its refurbished mould, Kolkata steadily began to look like the global urban space, with its multiplexes, shopping malls, high-rises in gated communities, theme parks or flyovers increasingly resembling their western counterparts.

This neo-urban turn had its presence felt on Bangla films of this period. At another level, one must note that this decade is marked with a remarkable increase in the inflow of money into Bangla film production. So, the binding need to restrict the film to a few shabby, hastily-made sets was less than it was earlier. Films of the concluding years of the 1990s began to have more and more urban images, mounted in costly décor, yet with little or no spatial reference to Kolkata. The capital of West Bengal began to be blurred out from the spatial imaginary of the Bangla films. Not only were the spaces

portrayed in the film looked less like Kolkata, but significantly, the characters too make less and less mention of this city. They live in a city, move within it, often make journeys beyond and get back into its fold, but they hardly name the city, which, one might remember, they used to do earlier. One obvious reason may be thought of here. Since only in the last years of the nineties the southern film cities became available to the Bangla film industry, there has been an overwhelming presence of such constructed urbanity in Bangla films of this period, with no particular spatial reference. Each of these spaces is a unique self-referential site, a city-in-itself, promising a gaudy urban fantasy, laced with huge, bizarrely-lit fountains, foreign cars and duplex bungalows.

Another reason that is often put forward sounds commonsensical at best. It argues that Bangla films began to make a beeline for the film cities down south only to avert the hazards of getting a film shot on the real location. In film cities, the entire space remains under control. The producers prefer to shoot in such made-to-order locations in order to save both time and money.

In retrospect, one may find that a lot of mainstream Bangla films in the 1950s and '60s did shy away from using real urban locations, and instead depended more on sets. The reason, too, is basically logistical. Shooting indoors had its usual set of benefits, procedural and financial. The gadgets were not very conducive to filming on streets and there was dearth of personnel equipped to shoot in crowded urban locations. Nevertheless, the urban space represented was, by default, taken as Calcutta unless the film specifically mentioned otherwise. Now the city-on-screen in most films neither resembles Kolkata, nor is it mentioned as Kolkata. It is interesting to note that Bangla films have managed to dissociate an urban space from its default metropolis. The city has become more of an empty signifier, a non-place as it were; in effect, a container of different commodity signs. Once the signs are there, one is supposed to consider the space as an urban one—as one finds in the film *Shakti*, (2002) in which Jeet, the new hero in Tollygunge, dances on a footpath, being surrounded by co-dancers,

onlookers and some famous brand signs, like Sony, Philips and Coca Cola. That the makers of the film do not bother about the identity of the city goes on to prove that, at least for Bangla cinema, all that the making of a city-space needs is a set of signifiers people are familiar with.

However, as one compares the scene with Mumbai cinema, the disappearance of Kolkata does not seem so obvious. The film industry in Mumbai has been using contrived locations in film-cities, on much larger scale, for decades, and the hazards of shooting in the crowded public places in Mumbai can in no sense be less than it is in Kolkata. However, Bombay/Mumbai has always been able to retain its spatial entity as the site of action in Hindi films. As Madhava Prasad argues:

Paradoxically, the choice of Bombay as the default metropolis in popular Hindi cinema is indicative of, among other things, the *metaphorical* status that the city occupies within an imaginary that always, compulsively, invokes the city as part of the city-country dyad. Wherever this paradigm prevails, the term 'Bambai' serves to signify the generic metropolitan other, rather than the specific entity that the city of Mumbai is. The location of the film industry there also contributes to the consolidation of this association, as if reinforcing the metaphorical, symbolic dimension by a self-referential twist. ... Bombay is Bombay plus the city.<sup>[2]</sup>

The stature that Bombay/Mumbai enjoys in Hindi cinema is a lot similar to what Calcutta / Kolkata did in the case of Bangla films. The country/city dyad, the lone voyage of the hero to the city, his arrival in the urban space and confrontation with the utopia or dystopia there - all these have been common features of Bangla films even as late as in the 1980s. Calcutta/Kolkata has, almost always, been the site of action. So, the sudden disappearance of Kolkata from the image-scape, specially at a time when films are donning a neo-urban look, might just not be attributed to the sudden availability of various film cities in the south. The rural-urban binary

is still etched onto the conceptual geography of Bangla film, but the city has become more of an empty signifier.

### **Return of the native**

However, just as the new protagonists of Bangla cinema are seen roaming in a generic city, a kind of *any-space*, there is an unprecedented implosion of images of Kolkata in the visual field of the spectators both within and beyond the metropolis. Thanks to television, the household image machine, these images get continually disseminated through various satellite and local cable channels. Along with the news channels, the entertainment channels keep reproducing the city in millions of houses. Soaps and telefilms are essentially Kolkata-centric, the only exception being the occasional sea or hill-scapes that blissfully punctuate the regular urban settings.

This unprecedented concentration of images of Kolkata goes on to build up a new interface between the city and her people. As Stuart Hall says in his essay on the 'Techniques of the Medium', television has come up as the medium of exploring reality, and significantly of reproducing it, too.<sup>[8]</sup> With the intense proliferation of television channels, Kolkata has regularly been reproduced in millions of houses both in fiction and non-fiction format on a daily basis. And there are programs on news channels that claim to have what Madhava Prasad calls a kind of Borgesian coincidence of reality itself. The *channel function*,<sup>[9]</sup> designated by Hall as the purveyor of the 'neutrality-effect', is always there, providing viewers the news as it happens. And then there is the *medium function*<sup>[10]</sup> that encodes the news capsules unmistakably with the respective brand image of the channel. Either way, there has been a foregrounding of the city of Kolkata.

On the part of the spectator, this has been a never-before act of residing in the televisual space of the city called Kolkata. The viewer is invested with a spectatorial gaze that concentrates itself on the 'city-as-image' and 'by close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects,

by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera' this gaze opens up 'an immense and unexpected field of action'.<sup>[11]</sup> This gaze combines two different types of engagement with the *reality* that gets represented in the televisual space. One is the 'vertical, penetrating, controlling, organizing gaze of governance', while the other is a horizontal one that charts its course 'through a diversity of signs and activities'.<sup>[12]</sup>

What these two gazes of the televisual mode of address generate is an accented presence of the *local* beside the recent emergence of the *global*. Interestingly, while the Bangla televisual site continues to bank more on the local, traditional (and often, traditionalized) spaces of Kolkata, Bangla films of the same time-period are seen divesting themselves of the local space. The coincidence is significant. As was said earlier, the city in Bangla films justifies its urban character simply by accommodating different global consumer brand signs that serve as referents of neo-urban space. One can, again, say that Bangla films, in its recent, glossy avatar, can afford to shoot in offshore locations and Bangla serials/telefilms just cannot. Then, do the spectators - who get spatially anchored to Kolkata in their daily dose of tele-viewing - refuse to accept the city while taking their flights of fantasy in films? The lovelorn journey of a couple, with the usual twists and turns of fate, remains more or less the same, but their locations have very little in common in television and film.

Sudipta Kaviraj has observed that back in the 1950s, the representation of city in Bengali literature began to revolve around a binary split. It was a space of urban anomie, a space that 'produced hopelessness and despair', but simultaneously, 'it was also a space in which anonymity gave a sense of freedom...'<sup>[13]</sup> This is precisely what Calcutta was at that time, as far as Bangla films of that period are concerned. With such a dual-layered existence, Calcutta held out the promise of a forbidden spectacle. Among the persons who benefited most in such a city were the lovers. The couple got their spaces of freedom, of absolute autonomy amidst the faceless crowd in the city. As Moinak Biswas has shown, if the social imploded into the familial

in the basic organizational structure of melodrama, 'what the couple tries conditionally to negate is the family framework itself'. However, the journey from the familial to the conjugal space, from an older patriarchy to a bourgeois one, much celebrated in Hollywood films, has only remained unfulfilled in popular Indian cinema, triggering a 'desire for modernity' for the audience and for the characters as well.<sup>[14]</sup>

However, love in the time of liberalization in Bangla cinema hardly has any couple loitering around the streets of Kolkata. The absolute autonomy of the couple still comes, as it did in those days, in absolute anonymity, but the space that provides them with such a sense of freedom is *not* Kolkata, but a contrived landscape with its usual bouquet of garden, fountain and other accessories for song-and-dance, or any foreign locale, far away from this country. The *desire for modernity* is still there, at a different register nonetheless, with media hailing this displacement as the cherished effect of a much-vaunted globalization.

In the Bangla films of 1950s, the couple enjoyed the company of each other mainly in some bower-like places that were small, cozy, and often moonlit. Despite having only a tenuous link with the diegesis of the film, these places did not appear as extra-diegetic, since they were distinctly reminiscent of the place which the then Calcuttan would easily recognize as *Baganbari* or a penthouse. These mansions, located mostly on the fringes of the city, used to have bowers decked with Mughal and colonial architectures. As the couple got cozy in the typical moon-and-flower setting, they didn't seem to be getting out of the familiar topography of the city. This is not all, though. With the urban-scape containing regular patches of green at that time, the bower was something that fell in place with the urban imaginary. One may also venture to say here that these places of natural beauty, despite being constructed, struck up a consonance with an urban existence that was constantly haunted by the memory of village. Later, while the urban couple was provided a broader social field to move into and a wider spectrum of activities than just looking at each other passionately, they were given a

broader array of spaces ranging from the seafront (as in *Shankhabela*, 1966) to intimate spaces inside cars (they were roving spaces, circulating within and/or beyond the urbanscape, as in *Chowringhee*, 1968, or *Rater Rajanigandha*, 1973). These places were in sync with the spatial logic of the narrative. The famous sequence in *Saptapadi* (1961), in which Suchitra Sen was pillion-riding the motorbike with Uttam Kumar, is a case in point. The motorcycle that took the couple away from the bustle of the city was destined to take them back into its fold. There was no rupture in the urban horizon.

Love in the Bangla televisual forms has more or less maintained this type of representation. At times, the couple moves beyond but never do the lovers attempt to put the city under erasure. But Bangla films have been shooting the couple in set-up locations which are easy to accommodate as *extra-diegetic insertions* in the narrative. Picturesque scenes - *a la* Hindi films but mounted in a much shabbier (cheaper) manner - keep proliferating in this cinema. Madhava Prasad, commenting on the recent representation of the underside of Bombay/Mumbai in Hindi films, describes it as 'increasingly intense realist evocation(s) of urban spaces' that, as he argues, thrive on 'nothing less than the 'resistance of the real'. This is the *resistance*, he argues, that can be 'felt in the contemporary cinematic image of the city - threatening, seductive, disgusting, fascinating, elusive, engulfing'.<sup>[15]</sup> Each time the *concept* city seeks to hegemonize the screen space, the *living* city raises its head to unsettle the sweetened urban romance. Kolkata, it seems, can neither weave the urban fantasy nor show up its dark underbelly. The citizen's proverbial journey to the city still takes place, the lone voyager, against odds, does reach the city, but it is left consciously unclear if the journey ends in Kolkata.

'What is terrifying about the predicament of each of these three protagonists is a sense that *this is happening to us*; nothing, no privilege of view or position, separates the spectator from the actor'<sup>[16]</sup> -writes Supriya Chaudhuri about the central characters of Ray's Calcutta trilogy. In a wider

context, this has, for long, been true for Bengali cinema in general. One wonders why in the post-liberalization phase, when an invasion of reality has taken place in Bombay, and in mediatic representation at large, the characters are making hardly any attempt to make us feel *this is happening to us*.

Bengali 'mainstream' cinema has traditionally catered to the middle class audience, and has been founded on what Madhav Prasad calls 'the twin distinctions of primacy of narrative and the ordinariness and authenticity of the world represented.'<sup>[17]</sup> If the Bengali middle class found, with comfort, that the spectator was in no way separated from the on-screen figures, then all s/he shared with the screen-figures was the ordinariness that had authentically been narrativized and translated into cinematic language. The success of such films was in *re-familiarizing* the audience with the spatio-temporal narrative s/he was already accustomed to. If that is what brought the Bengali middle class cinema popular success, in its post-liberalization avatar Bengali cinema is trying hard to *de-familiarize* the content. As the audience gets constantly *re-familiarized* with the city of Kolkata, at times to an absurd extent, in the news-based and entertainment-based popular modes of television, Bengali cinema leaves Kolkata out of the screen-space, or represents the urban as an assemblage of a number of *any-spaces* rendering the city. Is all this part of a compensatory structure, or a reaction-formation?

Apart from these films, the representation of Kolkata in the recent television remakes of old Bengali films also shows the city beating a retreat. The new remakes of Uttam Kumar films on television build up an entirely novel means of embedding the past within the present. In the media-cultural site, the idea of negotiating the past by re-making old hits is different from what is attempted in televising old hits as part of some retrospective package. In this kind of making and unmaking of memory too, Kolkata is only seldom foregrounded, notwithstanding the fact that in the original films, the city had an iconic status as the default metropolis. If we concur with Biswas that

'(n)ostalgia is no longer a simple or experiential phenomenon in this situation, but a constitutive, productive element..., an essential part of dissemination, reception and even production'<sup>[18]</sup> these remakes build up a site where even that nostalgia for a city is contested, threatened and made to make way for some new interpretation of the story where, visibly, the presence of the city is feeble than what it had been in the original version. Old films made anew use nostalgia as a performative space, but refuse to foreground Kolkata as the site of that nostalgia. It is even stranger since these films bring back the same characters and situations.

What is interesting in this tragic exit of the city is the appearance of the monumental as part of the melodrama. I would like to suggest that this is what is happening to the contemporary Bangla popular film in terms of the spatial-melodramatic logic: the exit of the city has made possible a local production of the larger-than-life cinema - an entry of the monumental in the regional language industry.

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- <sup>7</sup> Prasad, M. Madhav. 'Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema', pp 86-87.

[8](#) Prasad, M. Madhav. 'The Subjects of News Television', *Journal of the Moving Image*, Number 4, 2005, p 67.

[9](#) Hall, Stuart. 'Technics of the Medium', extract from 'Television as a Medium and Its Relation to Culture', quoted in Prasad, 'The Subjects of News Television'.

[10](#) Ibid.

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[14](#) Biswas, Moinak. 'The Couple and their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now', in Ravi S. Vasudevan ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, Delhi, 2000, p 133

[15](#) Prasad, M. Madhav. 'Realism and Fantasy', p 98.

[16](#) Chaudhuri, Supriya. *op. cit*, p 258.

[17](#) Prasad, M Madhav. *The Ideology of Hindi Film, A Historical Construction*, Delhi, 1998, p 167.

[18](#) Biswas, Moinak. 'The Couple and their Spaces', p 124.