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The Social Crisis of Cinema Halls

Indian cinema has long been a product of individual entrepreneurship. The integrated structure of the Hollywood studio system, which was central to studio operations, was absent in the case of Indian cinema.¹ As all highly paid studio executives in Hollywood started their work in the exhibition sector, a systematic control of the cinema halls was on top of the priority list for Hollywood Studios. The major studios in Hollywood had 94% of their funds invested in the exhibition sector. The Big Five (Paramount Pictures, Leow Inc., 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros. and RKO) controlled the major cinema halls located in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. By the 1930s, Paramount controlled almost a thousand theatre houses located in major metropolitan areas. The five major studios controlled only 16% of cinema houses in America and yet claimed 75% of total theatrical revenues (Universal, Columbia and United Artists controlling 20% of revenues), a feat achieved through proper sampling and selection of theatres. The policy of controlling exhibition houses to maintain an oligopoly control over the entire cinema business was of paramount importance to the studio system in Hollywood, so much so that the 1949 Paramount Decision by the United States Supreme Court ordering the divorce of the studios from the exhibition sector led to the demise of the studio system itself.² In fact, according to Douglas Gomery, the studios should be classified as ‘diversified theater chains, producing features, shorts, cartoons and newsreels to fill their houses.’³

By contrast, in the Indian case the exhibition and the distribution sector grew up independently of the production sector right from the silent era. The lack of coordination between the production and the exhibition sector was evident from the very beginning when foreign films, primarily from Hollywood, compensated for the lack of indigenous filmmaking in the first decades of Indian cinema. Even when Indian filmmakers came to the fore, exhibitors showed more interest in foreign films than in Indian productions. Although things started changing with the emergence of the talkie era when vernacular language films began to grow and rapidly occupied a dominant share of the market, coordination between the stages of production

and marketing continued to be absent. Various stakeholder groups began to comprise the marketing and distribution sector of the film industry. Studios like New Theatres and Bombay Talkies, which dominated the production sector in the talkie era, hardly made an effort to bring about coordination between these different stakeholder groups.

According to Someswar Bhowmick,

The sudden collapse of the Madan Enterprise in the late 1920s made the latter (sic) studios wary of entering into the exhibition business or acquiring theatre chains. This in turn probably accounts for the high mortality rate of the Indian studios and their products. A series of ‘flops’ or even a single major failure could spell a studio’s doom.⁴

The exhibition business also grew through individual entrepreneurship, barring a few exceptions like the Madans. A survey on the nature of people who joined the exhibition business will direct us towards the *zamindari* class, some members of which were on the decline at the turn of the twentieth century, while others were newly acquiring status. The rising merchant class along with the *babus*, or the middle class bourgeois, contributed to the mixed economic nature of the cinema exhibition business, and of the cinema business as a whole. For my present survey, I have mostly concentrated on districts and the regions in Bengal outside Kolkata. I shall draw upon the interviews and field notes I have taken over the last two years.

The Roy Chowdhury family had been the *zamindars* of Baruipur in South 24 Parganas (district adjoining Kolkata) for centuries. They started the Baruipur Show House in 1942. The *zamindari* system was already on the decline, causing Ramendra Kumar Roy Chowdhury to supply ironware during the War to the railways. This changed the family fortunes and Ramendra Kumar decided to invest in the cinema business. The first structure of the cinema hall was built on the field adjoining a pond that was owned by the family. The field, called Bakultala, was the venue for various festivals like *rathyatra* and *raaspoornima*. These festivals would attract large numbers of people from the neighbouring villages. Fairs were the main attraction and Aurora Films touring cinema used to set up temporary film exhibitions as a part of those fairs. This was as early as the mid-thirties. The film screenings were very popular among the villagers. Ramendra Kumar, grandfather to Santanu Roy Chowdhury, whom I met, was buoyed by the people's enthusiasm for cinema and started the cinema hall in 1942. It took him another two years to finally acquire the license. Santanu fondly recalls the days when life in Baruipur revolved around that cinema hall:

The rush during the festivals was uncontrollable. We ran extra shows. Sometimes they ran till 1:30 at night. Film shows were as popular as circus or firework shows, which were held at *Neelkhet*. During *janmashtami* and *shivaratri*, popular Hindu festivals, the film screenings went on over the night, and even until dawn. The patrons were not only locals but were also from faraway districts. Later, a power loom was set up at neighbouring Piyali, Phoolta. That brought in labourers to the area.⁵

Ravi Vasudevan has written of cinema houses as an ‘everyday space: composed of the hall, its internal organization of foyer, auditorium, seating and the projected film, and its public presence, as in its façade, advertisements, marquees, hoardings’.⁶ The stories about the cinema hall, which Santanu often heard as a child, reveal the neighbourhood character of the cinema halls, their being a part of everyday space. He fondly recalls that during the initial years, the area was largely inhabited by people whose main occupation was agriculture. ‘Hardly anyone had a clock’ he recounts. Songs were played on loudspeakers half an hour before the shows started. It was a way of announcing to the people that they were about to begin. The songs came to signify time for the locality, much like the sirens of factories once did.



Milan

Milan was another cinema hall in the region which started almost at the same time as Baruipur Show House. Until the seventies these two cinema halls were the only exhibition centres in the region. In 1944, Bibhutibhushan Banerjee started the cinema hall with the help of local contributions. By then he had already bought huge areas of land in Amtala and Gopalnagar in South 24 Parganas, and had acquired

the status of a *zamindar*. Tapan Deb Banerjee, the present Managing Director of Milan and the grandson of Bibhutibhushan, recounts the history of the cinema hall:

Before the war broke out, my grandfather worked in a German company. The WWII turned the wheel of fortune for him when the Germans, under British onslaught, left the company in his custody. Although the cinema hall hardly generated any profit in the initial years, my grandfather held onto it for the social recognition that it ensured.⁷

This social recognition was also much sought after by the business class. Asok Jain of Baharampur regrets the collapse of the Jains in their pursuit of becoming *de- facto zamindars*, although he still cherishes the cultural

accomplishment that they have left behind. 'Baharampur is older than Calcutta. The Jain community contributed a lot to Murshidabad and Baharampur. Jains like Jagat Seth, who financed the Nawab of Murshidabad, have left behind a rich legacy," he said with pride.⁸ Asok Jain and his ancestors were traditional businessmen. Besides having invested in various businesses like oil and rice mills, they were the owners of the electric supply establishment of Baharampur until 1983, when Indira Gandhi's policy of nationalizing public utility industries came into effect and forced the Jains to let go of the business.



Asok Jain

By this time they had already established a monopoly over the exhibition business in Baharampur. During the days when the trade flourished, the Jains owned all the four cinema halls in the district town. Mohanlal Jain, father of Asok Jain, started the cinema business with the theatre house Kalpana. Mohan, a hall that still stands, was started in 1950. In 1954, the Jains extended their business by acquiring Surjo, which

was previously an auditorium for theatrical performances. Asok Jain then acquired Meera in the late seventies. Meera was also an auditorium that traditionally hosted theatre performances until it was transformed into a film exhibition centre with a temporary license by the erstwhile owners of Simulbari Tea Garden. It was only after the Jains took control of it that shows became regular at the theatre.

The administrative and legal class also played their role in the growth of the exhibition business. Dipankar



Kalyani Talkies

Bose, the owner of Kalyani Talkies in Balurghat in the South Dinajpur district of Bengal bordering Bangladesh, recounts how his family got into this business. His father's aunt was married to a family in Balurghat in the early thirties. The aunt's in-laws had acquired a cinema hall license in 1946. The license was for exhibition of films at Natyamandir, a theatre hall in Balurghat. However, the women of the family put their foot down against the cinema business, deeming it immoral. The in-laws approached Dipankar's grandfather, who was a reputed lawyer in Dhaka. The grandfather was already making arrangements for migrating to India when his son, Ranjit Bose, expressed his willingness to take over the cinema hall business in Balurghat. When Ranjit took up business in the winter of 1946, little did he know how his fortunes would change with independence. The partition bifurcated the district of Dinajpur into West Dinajpur, which remained in India, and the rest which became part of East Pakistan, or what we know as Bangladesh today. Balurghat was initially inducted into the East Pakistan part of Dinajpur. It was only three days after independence that Balurghat became part of Indian territory to account for the absence of a sub-divisional town on this side of the newly set border. According to Dipankar, that changed his father's fortune as Balurghat was named the district headquarters and consequently became the business and administrative centre. The cinema business started to flourish as a substantial population migrated across the border and made Balurghat their home. However, Kalyani Talkies had no permanent license. The permanent license was finally acquired with the help of some administration people. The 1928 Club, still located in the neighbourhood of Kalyani Talkies, was a leisure joint for the district's bureaucratic class. Electricity was routed to this club from Kalyani Talkies and they used to gather there in the evening. In those days, the cinema hall ran two shows in the evening, at 6 and 9 PM. Shows ran on generators as Balurghat had no electricity at the time. It was at the officers' behest that Ranjit Bose set up a concrete building and acquired a permanent cinema license in 1953. Dipankar recounts how abandoned railway tracks were pilfered in the dark of the night and later were moulded into iron fences and installed in the balcony section of the cinema hall.⁹

We move forward to the 1970s. The story of New Mitali Cinema in Beldanga, Murshidabad, marks the entry of hall owners who did not essentially belong to the landed gentry or the business class. In Beldanga, a group of young men, fresh out of college and sharing a common political perspective decided to start a film exhibition centre. Joynal Abedin and his six friends were drawn to the Left movement, which was gaining great momentum in Bengal in the seventies. They were all part of DSO, the SUCI student wing. Working under the guidance of one Nityaranjan Das, who taught them in college and was also the classmate of the then District Magistrate, their dreams were fulfilled on 7 February 1971. Nityaranjan facilitated the entire

process and Saptarshi, the group formed by Abedin and his six ‘comrades’, started screening films with a temporary license. A projection system was arranged in a tent in a field, which was called the Power-House *para* because of the power transmitters located there. According to Abdul Kadir, one of the founder members, the place was a desolate patch of land in those days. It was only after the exhibition setup became operational that people started to trickle in and reside permanently in the neighbourhood. Finally, the present location at College *para* was acquired in 1974 with the help of an ex-MLA who donated this land to them.

New Mitali Cinema presents a very interesting case in the history of cinema exhibition, as we see a group of men hailing from a relatively lower middle class background joining the traditional owners in the business. Beldanga is primarily a Muslim majority agricultural belt. It has a sizeable population of daily wage labourers and *bidi* workers. In the absence of any large industry, *bidi*-making is central to the lives of many. Women and children constitute the majority of this group. Migratory labourers are also a dominant force, mainly working in construction. Abedin, one of the 18 present owners of the hall, recounts, ‘We had dreams of reforming the society. The cinema house was a step in that direction.’¹⁰



Baruiipur Show House

While talking about the past, Abedin betrays a sense of longing for a ‘mission’ long forgotten. As Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee and Jain narrated the stories of their cinema halls, their mood changed from one of fulfilment and satisfaction to that of gloom and despair. The tales of a grand past would soon transform into stories of a dismal present; not without reason, for according to statistics furnished by the Eastern India Motion Picture Association (EIMPA), the umbrella association of producers, distributors and exhibitors in

the Bengal circuit, the number of single screen theatres has decreased from 800 to 350 in the last decade. There have been certain changes in the business environment which have triggered this massive shutdown, but it is also difficult to ignore that there is an overinvestment in the narrative of social respectability that cinema halls accorded to its owner. There is an excess in value ascribed to accounts of cinema halls providing healthy environment for families and women. One cannot help wondering whether this narrative of value is ascribed to the past retrospectively in order to compensate for the lack of it in the present. Ravi Vasudevan has commented on how 'families and women audiences' accorded a value to cinema halls which he refers to as 'social legitimacy'.¹¹ The story of Baruipur Show House points to a narrative of decline, symbolizing a crisis that single screen theatres all over Bengal are facing - that is, a loss of social legitimacy. Santanu Roy Chowdhury, the present owner of the hall, recounts a past when the cinema hall was a preferred and safe public space for the respectable women of the extended neighbourhood. 'Families do not come to the theatre anymore', laments Roy Chowdhury. He fondly recalls the 1940s when his grandfather, swinging a lantern, used to escort the women patrons back to their homes after the night show. The question that arises then is who constitutes the present cinema audience of Baruipur Show House, and why does their presence signify an absence of social legitimacy?

At this point, it would be worthwhile to reflect on the following paragraph from Adrian Athique's essay, 'Cinema as social space: The case of the multiplex', which discusses the modern values that the cinema as a public space brought with it since its very inception, and which in turn made it a contested space, where questions of citizenship and democratic rights would compete with questions of social respectability or the lack of it.

In thinking about the implications of the cinema as a public space in India, it is crucial to recognize that in the early twentieth century, the cinema hall was a thoroughly 'modern' addition to public life, not simply in terms of its technological apparatus but in its reordering of social space. In a context where 'respectable' women may not have appeared in public at all, and where temples, residential areas and water sources were often subject to exclusive access by certain caste, faith and class groups, the gathering together of a diverse public within a single social space appears to have represented a radical departure from existing social norms.¹²

The popularity of cinema among the working class has been well documented by various film historians all over the world. What has also been written about is how the space of the cinema hall with its inclusive

attitude towards lower sections of society caused outrage and anxiety among the upper class bourgeois. Journals and newspaper articles written in Telugu as early as the forties point to the manner in which the upper class and middle class educated male audiences tried to fix the culture of film viewing experience within a normative bourgeois framework. The anxieties of various social groups regarding the nature of cinema halls as public spaces that could host a constituency of people spread across different caste/class lines were expressed in many newspapers and films journals¹³. S V Srinivas writes:

[T]he conflictual relations between the middle class public and other audience groups is central to understanding the public sphere of cinema. Discussions on cinema halls are particularly relevant since they became an occasion for the articulate middle class public to arrive at definitive normative formulations on the nature of the film-going experience on the one hand, and the nature and function of the public space opened up by the cinema on the other.¹⁴

Taking a cue from Srinivas, Adrian Athique characterizes the space of the cinema hall as contested space where questions of the nature of public sphere in a postcolonial context would be addressed, ultimately leading to the 'proletarianization' of the cinema audience.

While the terms of public debate on the cinema were determined by a male, middle class and upper class viewpoint, the development of this contest in its ensuing stages was to follow a pattern over the following decades where the cinema hall became increasingly dominated by the young men of India's urban underclass at the expense of the middle class spectator.¹⁵

This 'proletarianization' of cinema halls would happen under some conditions. For instance, one can cite Ravi Vasudevan on how a 'downturn' in the social value of cinema halls was observed in old Delhi from the seventies as a result of demographic reconfigurations caused by migrations away from the old city.

Better-off residents had shifted elsewhere, and the old city cinemas were no longer attracting families and women audiences, always considered crucial to the cinema's social legitimacy. Desai suggests that the change in the nature of markets also altered audiences in the area. It was around this time that the electronic goods markets emerged, and people used to come from far and wide to buy components and merchandise which they would be retailing elsewhere. This provided what Kirit

calls a 'floating population'. Perhaps we have an image here of the mobile 'bachelor' population, in the city for short stays, a restless, transient population hustling for goods and attracted to a cinema of sensation and distraction.¹⁶

Baruipur Show House had also witnessed a similar transformation. With the socially mobile middle class drawn towards up and coming southern Kolkata, the district has seen a rise in the number of unemployed youth. Chapal Roy Chowdhury, a family member who has been overseeing the daily running of the cinema hall for almost fifty years, rues the fact that *bhadroloks* or families do not come to the cinema nowadays. 'Only the Mohammedans do,' he sighs, hinting that nowadays the trade is sustained by the local Muslim population, who by and large constitute the lower class in Baruipur.¹⁷

Asok Jain maintains an indifference towards the nature of audiences his cinema hall hosts but yearns for the days when only people with 'respect' could become exhibitors.

It was difficult to obtain the cinema exhibition license. 'Good' people from the society were chosen. Meera, one of the halls that we owned, was initially owned by the in-laws of Shyamaprasad Mukherji. The cinema hall business was a very respectable business. As much as it was respected, it increased social recognition manifold. My father had even screened *Ben Hur* and *Ten Commandments* in his time. Our cinema was for families. We had women and families as our major patrons.

The joint owners of New Mitali Cinema cannot boast of such a lineage, but they still echo a similar narrative where families and women patrons signified the social value of cinema halls. Joynal Abedin, one of the present owners of the cinema hall and a founder member, recounts:

There were many women patrons. After dark, we used to escort them safely back to their homes. Since we were political activists, we had social values. There was a prostitution business thriving in the locality. There was a sugar cane mill nearby and the women mainly catered to the mill workers. It was after we started the cinema hall that respectable people began trickling into the area. The prostitution business stopped. The people of this locality had great faith in us. On our call, the student community, even those affiliated to other parties like Congress, would assemble at Mitali, which has seen many political assemblies.

Talking to the cinema hall owners and listening to their memories of the past, one cannot help but notice how their accounts inevitably touched upon the subject of social respectability validated by the safe

environment that it offered to women and families. However, the stories of the cinema halls centring around the respectability and safety of women must be understood symptomatically. The uneasiness of the middle class/upper caste in sharing a public space with the lower caste/class is hardly articulated in a direct manner, but cloaked in a disapproval of the low taste and behaviour of the cinema audience, concerns about women's safety, and stories of social reforms. More than anything else, these stories betrayed an apprehension among the hall owners concerning the turning away of the middle class from the theatres. Srinivas presents articles from a popular Telugu magazine dating back to as early as the forties that raised many issues of public safety and hazards, including women's safety and sanitation, lack of drinking water, and many such basic facilities . Complaints were frequently raised about the standards of projection and illegitimate means of ticket sales supported by lawless management and audiences alike. This audience was deemed a rowdy one, not nuanced or cultured enough to engage either in a critical appreciation of cinema or a 'healthy' cinema culture. Srinivas quotes from *Madras Mail* and provides a close reading of what this piece actually meant:

One reader of the *Madras Mail* wrote, 'The people, in their anxiety to purchase tickets, fall on one another, tear the shirts of others and pick the pockets of others' (June 18, 1938: 12). He suggested 'the construction of an additional booking office for the lower classes alone. These [sic] can be used when there is a big crowd of patrons. The public will be grateful for these amenities (emphasis added).' The public, it is implied here, is constituted by non-lower class 'patrons', while the unruly behaviour of the 'non-public' necessitates separate booking offices. The duty of theatre management, it was suggested, was the efficient control or management of the middle class public's 'other' which gathered in strength at cinema halls so that the public was to be spared the discomfort of coming into close contact with it.¹⁸



Mitra

In keeping with the 'duties' of the management, policies and strategies were also drawn up to address the anxieties of the upper class which now had to rub shoulders with the lower classes. Segregated seating was arranged on caste/class lines. Thus, 'box seats' and balconies were reserved for upper caste/class patrons and were distanced from the general seats. The value of this seating arrangement couldn't be underestimated as

the following story reveals.

Like many upper class families of the day, the Mitras of Darjipara, who were traditional *zamindars* in that area, hardly ever visited the cinema hall, although they had allowed one to be built one on their premises. Chitra was established in 1930 by BN Sircar, the legendary owner of the New Theatres, after acquiring the land at 83 Cornwallis Street (presently Bidhan Sarani, Kolkata) on a lease from Narendra Krishna Mitra, the erstwhile owner of that property. Narendra Krishna Mitra, grandfather of the present owner Dipen Mitra, had leased out the property for a thirty-year period, which came into effect from 17 March, 1930. BN Sircar started the cinema hall business that very year and sub-leased the property in favour of New Theatres Ltd the following year. New Theatres would become the cultural emblem of the *bhadralok* cinema-going public, drawing in stalwarts like PC Barua, Pankaj Mullik, K C Dey et al.¹⁹ In the summer of 1945, Dipen Mitra's aunt expressed her desire to catch a show at Chitra. The boxes had already been sold off. This was a general practice, keeping in mind that the landlords were hardly regulars at the hall. However, it infuriated Narendra Krishna Mitra to such an extent that he pledged never to ever set foot in Chitra. His family followed suit. After the Mitras took possession of the cinema hall in 1963 at the end of a long legal battle with BN Sircar and other members of his family, Hemanta Krishna Mitra, son of Narendra Krishna and father to the present owner, Dipen, recalled his father's vow and changed the name to Mitra to allow entry of his family members in the cinema hall premises.²⁰

Compare this to a report brought out in leading Bengali daily *Anandabazar Patrika* in 2102 on the popularity of 'box seats' in cinema houses among the youth, especially in rural and mofussil areas. The box seats have presently become temporary enclosures with plywood partitions and are sold at a price three to four times that of a regular ticket. This made news once again on 2 September 2014, with *The Telegraph* reporting that police are investigating the alleged rape of a girl in a box seat of a cinema hall in Chandrakona, Midnapore. Ten days later, on 12 September, *Anandabazar Patrika* ran a full page news on how 'box-seat' cinema halls are thriving all over Bengal and functioning as 'subsidized guest houses' for sexual liaisons. This seating arrangement is also known as 'twin seats' or 'couple seats' and is reserved exclusively for couples. The box seats have become a very popular revenue earning scheme for theatres across Bengal, and in some cases have revived a cinema hall on the verge of closing down.²¹

We may conclude that cinema halls have failed to keep pace with the growth story of society at large, a key agent of which the globalised consumer middle class. In addition to that, restructuring the business operations of the cinema industry so as to favour corporate capital has shrunk the single screen even further.

The demise of the single screen theatre, which was once the marker of public leisure, must be seen as an index of global capitalist trends. On one hand, a new era has begun where the players will be the transnational corporations and none other. On the other hand, business models based on monopoly control are gradually coming to dominate the market. In such a scenario, the individual owners of single screen theatre houses will have to re-align themselves to become part of this new corporate structure, or perish. The role of the state as the arbitrator of power equations within a free market economy determining the kind of players who will operate also needs to be investigated.

¹M Madhava Prasad, "The Economics of Ideology: Popular Film Form and Mode of Production," in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

²Douglas Gomery, "The Hollywood Studio System: 1930-49," in *Hollywood: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Thomas Schatz. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

³Ibid.

⁴Someswar Bhowmick, "A Tale of Two Systems," in *Behind the Glitz: Exploring the Enigma called Indian Film Industry*. (Kolkata: Thema, 2008)

⁵Santanu Roy Chowdhury, interview with the author, July 26, 2013

⁶Ravi Vasudevan, "Cinema in Urban Spaces," *Seminar* 525, 2003, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20ravi%20vasudevan.htm/>

⁷Tapan Deb Banerjee, interview with the author, January 16, 2014

⁸Asok Jain, interview with the author, September 12, 2014

⁹Dipankar Bose, interview with the author, September 4, 2013

¹⁰JoynalAbedin, interview with the author, September 10, 2014

¹¹Vasudevan, "Cinema in Urban Spaces", op cit.

¹²Adrian Athique, "Cinema as Social Space: The Case of the Multiplex", in *Routledge Handbook of Cinema Studies*, ed. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake. (London, New York: Routledge, 2013)

¹³SV Srinivas, "Is There A Public in Cinema?" *Framework*, January, 2001, accessed January 22, 2016, <https://azimpremjiuniversity.academia.edu/SVSrinivas>

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Athique, "Cinema as Social Space: The Case of the Multiplex", op cit.

¹⁶Vasudevan, "Cinema in Urban Spaces", op cit.

¹⁷Chapal Roy Chowdhury, interview to the author, July 26, 2013

¹⁸Srinivas, "Is There A Public in Cinema?", op cit

¹⁹Madhujā Mukherjee, "A Social History of New Theatres," in *New Theatres Ltd. : The Emblem of Art, The Picture of Success*. (Pune: National Film Archive of India,2009)

²⁰Dipen Mitra, interview with the author, December 20, 2015

²¹Indranil Roy, "Bangla Cinemar Nibhrito 'Box'," ("The Reclusive 'Box' of Bengali Cinema") *Anandabazar Patrika* 12 September, 2014.