

Article

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Cinema in Bengal, Early Film Cultures, And Women as ‘Actors’ / in ‘Action’

Film archives open up multiple paradoxes in the history of Indian cinemas, subjects of historiography, and historical times. In such contexts, I wish to accentuate certain recent research and feminist rewriting of film and cultural narratives,¹ to illustrate how, besides the notable ‘male’ directors and producers who controlled industrial and production systems in the subcontinent during the 1920s-40s, several exceptional and pioneering ‘female’ figures, such as Fatma Begum, Jaddan Bai, Devika Rani, Glorious Gohar, Sabita Devi, Ratan Bai, and others, performed as actors and also reinvented themselves as writers, directors, producers, etc.² While a few researches have emphasised how the formation of the big studios during the early 1930s initiated the institutionalisation of specific cinematic prototypes and nationalist (as well as elitist) imaginations,³ and have also indicated the processes of marginalisation of the ‘Modern’ enterprising women,⁴ Newer studies have excavated historical material and refocused our research on women's groundbreaking contributions to film production.⁵ [Image-1: Kananbala nee Devi in the film *Anuradha* (1949)]



¹ See 'Women Film Pioneers Project', Columbia University. <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>

² See Debashree Mukherjee "Notes on a Scandal" & "Screenwriting and Feminist Rewriting", Rashmi Sawhney "Fatma Begum, South Asia's first female director", Madhuja Mukherjee *Voices of the Talking Stars*.

³ See Kaushik Bhaumik unpublished dissertation titled "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry: 1913–1936" and Madhuja Mukherjee *New Theatres: The Emblem of Art, the Picture of Success*.

⁴ See Majumdar, Neepa (2009) *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!*

⁵ Also see *Feminist Media Histories* Journal 2018 issue on "labor" (<https://online.ucpress.edu/fmh/issue/4/1>) and the 2016 issue on "Archives and Archivists" (<https://online.ucpress.edu/fmh/issue/2/1>); as well as *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* Journal 2020 issue on "Women at Work" (<https://www.intellectbooks.com/studies-in-south-asian-film-media>).



Popular print and publicity material of the 1920s-1940s published from Bengal, for instance, spotlight the public cultures and the powerful position of several women forerunners (see **images 1 & 2**). Popular magazines of the period, published in English and Bangla, also indicate fan cultures and public fantasies vis-à-vis the elusive and alluring ‘female’ stars.

[Image-2: Sumitra Devi in *Khela Bhangar Khela* (1957)]

The Bengali magazine *Chitrapanji*, for example, published a poem titled “Our Trio” (*Amader troyee*), which romanticised and eulogised the ‘actresses’ of the period. A rough translation of the poem (by Raghunath Kundu) would be as follows: ⁶

You are like the late summer moonlight [Jyotsna]
 You beam like the lilies....
 You are the woman of the temples
 You gather flowers [chãpa]
 Your voice flows like a rhythmic stream
 You are the lady of the garden [Kanan-bala]
 You glean nectar of spring from the forests
 Our hearts flutter like bees; we wish to collect the Rasa of delight.

You radiate like the dawn
 You are the shade [Chhaya] on the blue peaceful river
 The starry nights are yours
 You create the beauty of light and shadows. ...

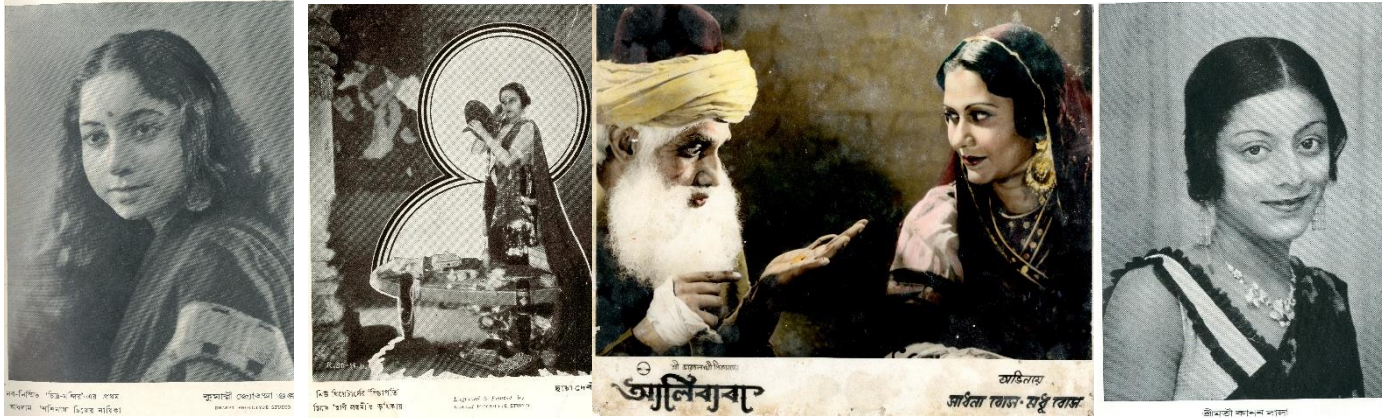
[Translation by the author]

In fact, *Chitrapanji* regularly published such fan poems concerning women actors of the period,⁷ And celebrated Bengali screen stars such as Jyotsna Gupta, Kanan Devi (then Bala), Chhaya Devi, Sadhana Bose, and others, and often compared them with international stars

⁶ *Chitrapanji*, 6.12, 1937 (Bangla 1344): 598.

⁷ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “Rethinking popular cinema in Bengal (1930s–1950s)”.

such Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Mae West et al. (see **images 3-6**). *Chitrapanji* also published reports on the (upcoming) studios and production, film reviews, and overviews of the life and works of popular actors and directors, accompanied by literary pieces, including short stories and articles.



[Image-3 to 6: Jyotsna Gupta, Chhaya Devi, Sadhana Bose, and Kanan Bala (nee Devi)]

Indeed, several shining stars and influential (women) actors during the 1920s-1940s enjoyed substantial control over film production, participated in public discourses through their writings, and eventually created a mark on the screen and collaborated in making films.⁸ Kanan Bala (aka Kanan Devi), for instance, began her career with the formidable Madan Theatres (exhibition-distribution-production company) during the silent era and performed in about five Madans' films (between 1926 and 1932), which were in disparate genres. Thus, she played various roles, including male characters. However, Kanan Bala's career took an upswing turn with Radha Films company (during 1933–36), thereafter with the New Theatres (during 1937–41), and later, after she joined MP Productions (1942–48). With New Theatres, Kanan Bala did a series of outstanding films, and her popularity as a singer soared high with the renditions of Rabindra-sangeet in *Mukti* (Dir. Pramathesh Barua, 1937) and soulful *kirtans* in *Vidyapati* (Dir. Debaki Bose, 1938). She reached the high point of her career with the successive releases of *Mukti* and *Vidyapati*. Kanan Bala was effectively New Theatres' first national (female) star as she essayed several popular Hindi numbers in *Street Singer* (Dir. Phani Mazumdar, 1938), *Sapera* (Dir. Debaki Bose, 1939), *Jawani Ki Reet* (Dir. Hemchandra Chunder, 1939), *Parajay* (Dir. Hemchandra Chunder, 1940), *Abhinetri* (Dir. Amar Mallik, 1940), *Lagan* (Dir. Nitin Bose, 1941), *Parichay* (Dir. Nitin Bose, 1941), and so on.⁹

Kanan Bala's popularity as a singer and performer was, in fact, unparalleled (her singing prowess was evoked in other films, such as *Shesh Uttar* [Dir. Pramathesh Barua, 1942], etc.), and she regularly featured in pan-India film magazines such as *Film India*. Arguably, her singing talent initiated several filmic plots in which she enacted the role of a singer or

⁸ See Madhuja Mukherjee *Voices of the Talking Stars*.

⁹ See Sharmistha Gooptu "Kanan Devi: a Bengali star" and Madhuja Mukherjee *New Theatres Ltd*.

performer (and she was often paired with legendary singer-actor K. L. Saigal).¹⁰ Besides the modernist story of *Mukti*, Vidyapati activated Kanan Bala's rise to stardom, and the popular magazines of the period frequently featured full-page photo plates of hers. Her image and her voice—circulating independently through gramophone records—signal early (aural) star phenomenon and also underscores the manner in which star studies throw light on unexplored areas of socio-cultural history.

In *Vidyapati*, for instance, describing herself as the “dustu” (disobedient) Saraswati (the goddess of learning), Kanan Bala plays Anuradha, the medieval poet Vidyapati's long-time partner, and in effect, she takes on the function of the narratorial voice. The character not only expresses her love for the poet publicly; Kanan Bala's bodily gestures, movement, expressions, the slanting light on her face, the lensing, and her vocal renditions, in short, her affective on-screen persona articulate Anuradha's emotions and make the film a significant text that speaks to female desires and drives.¹¹ Contrarily, her role in *Mukti* was that of a modern, urbane, self-aware *Bhadramohila*, in which Kanan Bala sang the first on-screen *Ranbindra Sangeet* (“*Aj sobar rongee...*”), and the character (Chitra) chose to be separated from her aggressive (artist) husband, played by Barua. Thus, *Vidyapati*, *Mukti*, and other films like *Street Singer* present the spectrum of her performative skills.

Nonetheless, and more important perhaps, is the setting up of her production company in 1949, namely Shrimati Pictures. Shrimati Pictures produced a series of successful adaptations of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels and short stories, including the blockbuster *Rajlakshmi O Srikanta* (directed by her husband Haridas Bhattacharya in 1958), starring the all-time popular pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Kanan Bala had also founded a film production collective and an organisation to support unaided, ageing, destitute woman actors. As a matter of fact, Kanan Bala's ‘Mahila Shilpi Mahal’ (Women Artists' Association) became crucial for multiple reasons. For example, in her biography (*Sobare Ami Nomi*), Kanan Bala narrates how:¹²

I had minimal chances to mingle, make friends and chit-chat with my contemporary artists. Many did not welcome my entry into New Theatres and my achievement as a heroine of many successful films.

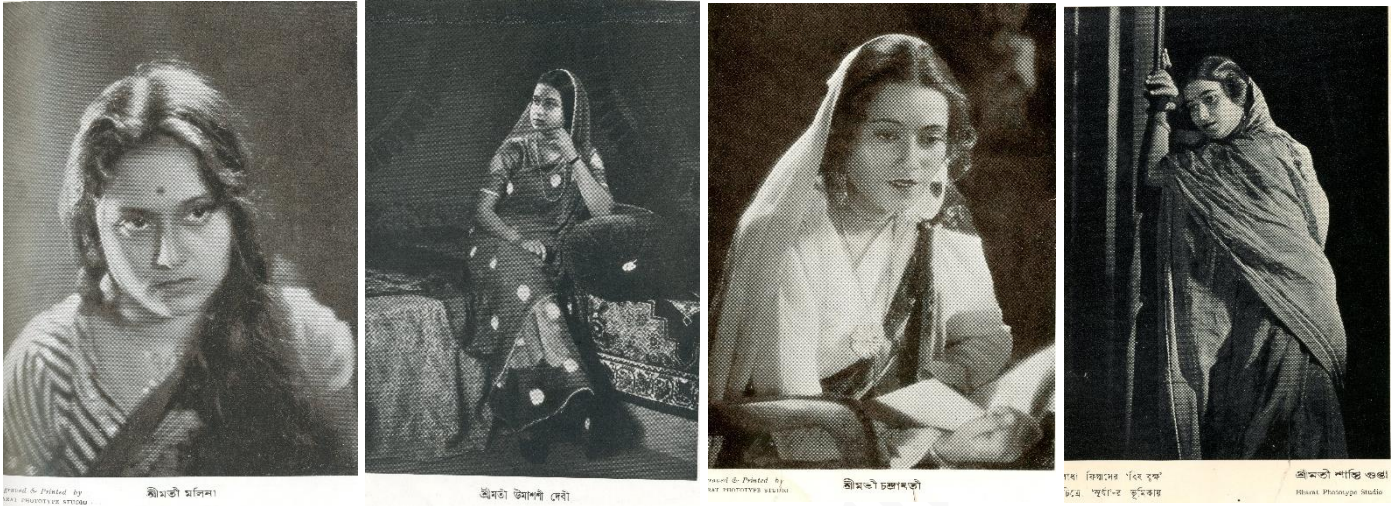
Malina's spontaneous friendship amidst this hostile atmosphere came to the loving rescue of my encumbered mind. In those days, Malina was a renowned actress. She acted in comic and serious characters with equal prowess. I never noticed any arrogance in her. She was unparalleled in her laughter, merry-making, and joyous attitude.

¹⁰ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “Early Indian Talkies: Voice, Performance and Aura”.

¹¹ See Madhuja Mukherjee “Early Melodramatic forms and the Subject of Bhakti”.

¹² From Madhuja Mukherjee edited *Voices of the Talking Stars*, pp. 81-82.

Malina and I owned a joint trunk. It contained packets of puffed rice, fried flattened rice, a stove, vegetable knives, bread, butter and various kinds of titbits to eat and cook. In the huge campus of New Theatres, we would sit under the mango tree near the pond and while eating puffed rice with peanuts, speak on various things. We used to exchange the deepest thoughts in our minds. During those times, two famous actresses were Uma Sashi and Chandrabati. [See images 7-10].



[Image- 7 to 10: Malina Devi, Uma Sashi, Chandrabati Devi, and Shanti Gupta]

The question of sisterhood (highlighted as a political stance during the later period) becomes crucial in feminist historiography. For example, in *Sonar Daag*, Gouranga Prasad Ghosh (1982) describes the life of Nirada Sundari, a ‘forgotten’ star, at length. Nirada Sundari started her career on the stage (with the mythical playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh); she was extremely popular and acted in several successful stage shows and several silent films. However, subsequently, she suffered an accidental fall from the stage, which resulted in permanent physical injury.¹³ Due to the accident, she almost lost one leg and eventually lost her eyesight as well. In due course, she secured refuge at a fellow actor’s house (Shanti Gupta), and at the very advanced age of 90, Ghosh found her penniless and petrified. In the light of this particular account and many more, the narratives of sisterhood and camaraderie, as retold by Kanan Bala, and the setting up of Mahila Shilpi Mahal become decisive.

Kanan Bala was *not* the lone female voice during the 1920s-40s. For instance, Sabita Devi or Miss Iris Gasper, was one of the biggest stars of the early 1930s. Moreover, although there is little information regarding her background and personal life, she is known to be from a Jewish-Eurasian family. Sabita Devi began her career with the British Dominion Films’ (with *Kamaner Aagun* [Dir. Dinesh Ranjan Das, 1930]) and also performed in the Indian Kinema Arts’ film *Kantahar* (Dir. Kaliprasad Ghosh, 1930). Moreover, Sabita Devi collaborated with the illustrious actor-director Pramathesh Chandra Barua during the production of *Aparadhi*

¹³ Especially in the silent era, during the massive popularity of stunt films the risk factors were very high, and a number of actors / actresses suffered physical injuries. Also see: <https://kindlemag.in/missing-story-lalita-pawar/>

(Dir. Debaki Kumar Bose, 1932). *Aparadhi* held a special status in the Bengali cultural sphere, particularly because, via the film, Barua pushed forward the use of artificial light – indoor lighting and night shoots – in the Bengali film industry. The English magazine *Filmland* (2.71, 1931) writes about Barua’s new production company and regularly featured news about his experiments with artificial lights, which flagged the shifting production conditions in Bengal, technological transformations, and industrial growth. *Filmland* (2. 88, 1931) declared that they



Sabita Devi, a player and Kumar Barua in the film “Aparadhi”



SABITA DEVI

“were invited to a night shooting of “Aparadhi” ... the elaborate and splendid arrangements of electric lights encourage us to expect a better picture from the standpoint of photography.” Moreover, another English magazine, *Varieties Weekly*, published from Calcutta, continually informed its readers about *Aparadhi’s* progress (see **images 11-12**).¹⁴

[Image- 11 & 12: A scene from *Aparadhi* and Sabita Devi nee Iris Gasper]

Meanwhile, Sabita Devi had earned fame through her writings. In a poem titled “If”, published in *Filmland* (3. 116, 1932: 14), she exclaimed: “If artist all we strive/ towards the building/ Of Hollywood within Bengal/ If we can strive/ wholeheartedly together/ We will attain/ Our glorious Hollywood”. In a manner of speaking, her poem addressed the larger concern for the augmentation of technology, technical skill and technique of cinema.¹⁵ Furthermore, an article published in *Filmland* by an anonymous (lady) artist on the difficulties of the ‘actresses’ in the industry provoked a response from Sabita Devi, who in her article tackled the subject of “respectability”, even when she defended the character of her fellow (male) directors.¹⁶ Likewise, the June–July 1937 issue of *Chitrapanji* (6. 9) published a series of articles which bring up subjects like ‘Vulgarity in Films’, ‘The Trap of Cinema’, ‘Women in Films’, ‘Actresses’ – some of the debatable topics of the period; Sabita Devi in her article titled “Why Should not Respectable Ladies Join the Films” (in *Filmland*) enquired:¹⁷

¹⁴ Also see See Madhuja Mukherjee “When was the ‘studio era’ in Bengal”.

¹⁵ See Madhuja Mukherjee *Aural Films, Oral Cultures*.

¹⁶ Also see Sarah Niazi “Sabita’s journey from Calcutta to Bombay”.

¹⁷ *Filmland*, 2. 84, 1931: 4–5.

Presuming your contributor to be a lover of her art, I fail to see how she can call herself ‘A Lady Artiste’ and at the same time try to alienate the minds of others from the films. She talks of ‘weak and helpless’ girls being at the mercy of unscrupulous libertines, the film actors and producers; she talks of luxury and passion as if they were the be-all and end-all of life, forgetting for the moment that man is not the only actor in this complicated matter of the sexes.

Noticeably, Sabita Devi actively participated in popular public discourses, just as she contributed to the production of films. Truly, women’s writing may be read as a potent tool using which several actors became active agents of the film world. Eventually, Sabita Devi shifted to Bombay, following the growing popularity of the ‘Talkies’ and the growth of Bengali language films. In Bombay she joined Sagar Movietone, who presented her as a ‘modern’ educated woman; she performed in a series of Sagar Movietone productions (in Hindi), including *Grihalaxmi* (Dir. Sarvottam Badami, 1934), *Shehar ka Jadoo* (Dir. Kaliprasad Ghosh, 1934), *Doctor Madurika* (Dir. Sarvottam Badami 1935), *Silver King* (Dir. Chimanlal Luhar 1935), *Lagna Bandhan /Acchut Daman* (Dir. Kaliprasad Ghosh 1936), *Gram Kanya* (Dir. Sarvottam Badami 1936) *Kulvadhu* (Dir. Sarvottam Badami 1937), *Teen Sau Din Ke Baad* (Dir. Sarvottam Badami 1938) and *Ladies Only* (Sarvottam Badami 1939).¹⁸

Furthermore, *Chitrapanji*, August-September 1936 (5. 11), published a lengthy (and backsliding) response to the question of women’s on-screen dances. The article mentioned here was prompted by a lengthy piece published in the previous issue of *Chitrapanji* (July-August 1936, 5.10), in which someone named “Chandrasekhar” asked, “Should [middle-class] women dance or should not?” and proposed that only women are capable of answering such queries, and thereafter, demolished the question itself. The rejoinder mentioned earlier, by someone named “Pulayudh”, asserted that Chandrasekhar did not address the differences between acting and dance (though both were performances) and stated that since women have to take care of their homes and bear children, therefore, “dance”, which is meant for “visual pleasures”, cannot be deemed acceptable. The same issue of *Chitrapanji* also comprised articles titled “Our actresses”, “Bengali actresses”, and so on.

In reality, by this time, dance discourses were a significant part of the larger socio-cultural milieu in Bengal, alongside the ‘women’s question’ / “Navina-Prachina” debates, which were enhanced by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s interventions (including his directorial venture -- New Theatres’ film -- *Natir Puja*, 1932). Additionally, *Chitrapanji*, March-April 1936 (6. 6), published an article by the dancing star Azurie, in which she asked, “Why are

¹⁸ See Virchand Dharamsey “Towards New Genealogies for the Histories of Bombay Cinema: The Career of Sagar Film Company (1929–40)”.

dancers not appreciated” even though it is a part of “Indian traditions” and is performed in the temples.¹⁹ Azurie narrates how her parents were highly educated, yet when she wanted to learn “dance,” she was deterred. Later, nevertheless, she learned art from one of her father’s patients, and eventually, her father let her join the field.²⁰ Azurie had performed in the film *Sonar Sansar* (1936), which was compared to Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). The review of the film, published in *Chitrapanji*, indicates that the plots of both the films dealt with subjects of industrialisation, unemployment and the condition of the women. Within the scope of the pulsating public discourses, I, therefore, evoke Christine Gledhill’s (2012) words to underscore how such writings by women actors enable ‘broadening the conception of the public sphere, it opens up the social history of cinema as it circulates through women’s networks, both public and memory construction’. (See images 13-14).



[Image- 13 & 14 : Azurie on the cover of *Chitrapanji* and *Azurie*]

Shree Bharat Lakshmi Pictures’ stunningly successful venture *Alibaba* (Dir. Modhu Bose, 1937) featured the distinguished dancer and ‘society lady’ Sadhana Bose (granddaughter of the influential nineteenth-century reformer Keshab Chandra Sen), who is believed to have introduced – the highly eclectic and hybrid -- ‘Modern Dance’ form, which effectually became popular via cinema, and circulated across multiple performative modes and the public domain. As apparent from the hand gestures, foot movements, and a comparative study with *Natir Puja*, Sadhana Bose’s choreography was heavily inspired by Rabindranath Tagore’s ballets. Pritha Chakrabarti (2017: 5) shows how her dance numbers were “characterised by swaying and soft hand movements, uncomplicated feet movement and a loose body, almost like a freely flowing

¹⁹ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “When was the ‘studio era’ in Bengal”.

²⁰ Also see Usha Iyer. 2020. *Dancing Women*.

form, which emerged out of the silver screen and was mediated through respectable Bengali bhadramahila figures on and off the screen.”

Alibaba was Bengal’s ‘first’ large-scale spectacle with horses, action, large-scale sets, elaborate orchestration (by T. Fritzpolo), and extravagant dance sequences in the climax, choreographed by Sadhana Bose. After the outstanding success of *Alibaba*, Sadhana Bose performed in *Abhinaya* (Dir. Modhu Bose, 1938), *Kumkum the Dancer* (Dir. Modhu Bose, 1940), and *Rajnartaki/Court Dancer* (Dir. Modhu Bose, 1941). *Rajnartaki/Court Dancer* was produced by Bombay’s Wadia Movietone and was the ‘first’ tri-lingual Indian film. Sadhana Bose was possibly one of the most successful stars from Calcutta who made a relatively smooth transition to big-budget Bombay productions. Sadhana Bose, in her autobiography (*Silpir atmakatha / Biography of an artist*, first published in 1963), narrates how she and the industry wrote during the later years of the Second World War and how she was unable to complete her project as her health deteriorated and the situation worsened. Bose writes (2012: 66-67):

In Bombay, I received numerous calls – the studio owners did not deter me from inviting me. However, I felt lonely in the far-off land. [...]

I returned to Calcutta. It was a familiar milieu. Yet, Calcutta’s winter didn’t receive me well. Although I had spent countless winters in this city. The main reason was the change of climate. I was not accustomed to Calcutta’s weather for a long period. When the shooting started, I had a fever. [...]

I was not only connected with the film, ‘Ajanta’, as an artiste, it was my own film. The film was taking shape under my production. [...]

In this film, I had to do everything. [...]

I can’t put it in words how excited I was at every moment; I was primarily concerned as to how to complete the shooting and editing of the film. [...]

Consequently, as destined, I became bedridden, and my dreams were shattered. My aspirational orchard dried up. There was both physical and mental agony. I was devastated and depressed. [...]

Doctor Bidhan Chandra Roy [later the first Chief Minister of West Bengal] treated me. Dr Roy said it was Pneumonia, and it had turned very serious. [...]

All my dreams fell apart like a house of cards.

[Translation by the author].

Moreover, it must be added that even when Sadhana Bose recovered in the long run, the film was never completed (see images 15-16).²¹ Despite that, her story informs us about the

²¹ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “The Shadow and the Arc Light”.

multiple roles and transitions that women actors pursue and their manifold aspirations, struggles, failures, and successes.



[Image- 15 &16: A still from *Natir Puja* (1932) and Lobby card of *Alibaba* (1937)]

In a recently edited volume by Monika Mehta, *Industrial Networks and Cinema of India*, we expanded the argument as to how film personnel have worked in multiple industries within India and across the globe and in what ways several silent period actors/ actresses (namely Jaddan Bai, Miss Padma, Patience Cooper, Sabita Devi, et al.) travelled between Bombay and Calcutta and worked in disparate industrial setups, and also transited from the so-called silent era (and its technological modes) to the “talkies.” Moreover, in the light of the concept of “networks”, we emphasised matters of women and work, considered their narratives of travel and action, and underlined industrial conditions and configurations of networks between Bombay-Calcutta-Lahore-Madras and other places.²² Such networks also highlight the import of transgressive desire, gender, culture, and practice, which are visible both in the films' making and their narratives.

Studies in studio histories, cinema in the regions, and the formation of Post-Independence ‘new’ melodramas in connection to subjects of gender, identity, citizenship and modernity have drawn attention to the formation of the star duo: “Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen”. Moinak Biswas (2000) particularly argues about “heterosexual couple formation”, which came to embody ‘our’ evolving and decolonising modernities.²³ As evident from the industrial conditions of the period, the status of the stars changed considerably with the Second World War and following the Partition and Independence of India. However, Bengal experienced this historical catastrophe in more ways than one, and the fact that the Bengali film industry was gravely affected is an understatement. Truly, the parameters of production altered dramatically

²² Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “The Public in the Cities”.

²³ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “Framing the Couple”.

following the disintegration of the studio structures in the context of the in-flow of unaccounted ‘black money’ in the industry, rationing of raw stock, the cutting off of Europe’s technical support, strict censorship, the compulsion to produce war propaganda films which eventually crashed, and also due to the scarcity of available theatres in comparison to the growing number of films produced.

Moreover, as shown by Biswas, Uttam Kumar’s star persona became the face of emergent modernities and postcolonial premeditations. Likewise, in his unpublished dissertation, Biswas (2002) suggests that “[i]n a large number of films, at least in the majority of the classics of the period, Uttam Kumar is someone who has come from the country in search of a career, or someone found living on the fringes of the city”. He asserts that (Biswas, 2002: 123):

[t]he new melodrama quickly responded to the phenomenon of women entering into jobs in substantial numbers. It is impossible to find any other actress being cast so persistently as Suchitra Sen in professional roles – as doctor, lawyer, social worker or teacher.

Briefly, Biswas argues for a new method of reading the cinema of post-independence (West) Bengal and proposes debates around the stupendous stardom of Suchitra Sen and the types of characters she featured on screen.²⁴ However, I shall not dwell on the significance of Suchitra Sen’s stardom here; instead, I wish to call attention to a few of her contemporaries (actors), namely Manju Dey and Arundhati Devi (nee Mukherjee), who became directors in their rights (see images 17-20).



[Image- 17 to 20: Manju Dey (source internet); Song booklet of Manju Dey directed Swargo hotey bidhaye (1964), author’s collection; Poster of Doshyumohan (1955), author’s collection; and Arundhati Devi is in action on the sets of Bicharak (1959), the author’s photograph.]

²⁴ Also see See Madhuja Mukherjee & Kaustav Bakshi edited volume *Popular Cinema in Bengal*.

While, like many films of the celluloid era, Dey's popular films (for instance, *Abhisapta Chambal* [1967] and the thriller *Sojarur Kanta* [1974], involving the legendary 'truth-seeker' Byomkesh Bakshi) are lost, and even the films' memorabilia and images are difficult to trace and revive, one of Arundhati Devi's films *Chhuti* (1967), amongst the others such as *Megh-ouroudra* (1969), *Padi Pishir Barmi Baksha* (1972), is available in digital formats and is a classic that demands our critical attention, rereading and rethinking.

Arundhati Devi, who also regularly played roles of women in different professions, had written the following about an actor's work in *Anandabazar Patrika* (1960):²⁵

The artists' performances should embody the actor's life's forms, colours, and designs [experiences]. Their performances ought to become an artistic manifestation of life. The screenplay can only then be transformed into a 'life's play', and films can develop into a reflection of life.

[Translation by the author]

Such critical thinking regarding the relationship between an actor's embodied performance and visual figurations is reflected in Arundhati Devi's first directorial venture, *Chhuti*. *Chhuti*, in particular, becomes crucial not because it is the sole surviving National Award-winning Bengali film made by a woman of that era. However, I contend that it is pivotal because of the extraordinary aural and narrative sensibilities it creates. For instance, the first six minutes of the film (exposition) linger on the landscape and the spaces, and these shots are juxtaposed with the affective voice of young Bhamar (Nandini Maliya). I want to draw attention to the languid pace of this first sequence, the later scenes, and how it unpacks – or the screen time spent on – feminine desires and dread.

The film narrates the story of a young adolescent girl (Bhamar) at the threshold of adulthood and death and dwells on her dilemmas. In another sequence, therefore, as Bhamar's friendship with Amal (Mrinal Mukherjee), a visitor at their small hill town of Bihar, develops, Arundhati Devi's unique narrative style becomes perceptible. For instance, following Diwali, as Bhamar and Amal return home, they talk and sing a Tagore song ("Sundar hey Sundar"/ Oh beautiful). Besides her individualistic visualisation of Rabindranath Sangeet, which deserves separate analysis, I wish to discuss the scene in which Bhamar and Amal walk back home and later, before entering their home (youthful and effervescent), Amal asks her whether his breath has a nicotine odour. Bhamar's close-up shows her nervousness about the suggested intimacy, and in a later scene, this (embodied) disquiet evolves into longing. Bhamar is seen actively moving around the landscape, her hands held up in dance-like gestures, on a swing, and playing with her cat, while the evocative music and Amal's voice resonate on the soundtrack; later, Bhamar whispers Amal's words: "look over" (*dekho toh*). While it is not unusual for Indian films to

²⁵ Exhibited in the context of the "A Star Named Arundhati" centenary programme to celebrate the actor and director at Kolkata Creativity Centre, Bengal Biennale exhibition, 2024-25.

displace sexuality into music and songs, the exceptionally unhurried editing of the sequence, which foregrounds feminine passion and exuberance, remains a distinct cinematic attempt of the period.

Yet, a range of lost films and the forgetting of such ‘female’ pioneering directors and their work during the 1960s and earlier—alongside some of the celebrated ‘auteurs’ of the period—alert us about the urgency of feminist historiography and new archival research to understand the pivotal, albeit disremembered, roles played by the female pioneers.²⁶

Acknowledgement: All images, except those specified otherwise, are courtesy: The Media Lab Project, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, author’s collection, and social media.

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²⁶ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “Bodies in Waiting” and “Speaking with Suhasini Mulay”.

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