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Inside a dark hall: space, place, and accounts of some single-theatres in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a part of ongoing attempts to shift the focus of research on Indian cinemas from textual analyses, studies of authorial styles, movements, also from language specific readings of cinema of the regions, to a more complex understanding of film practices and viewership. Through research conducted on certain single-theatres of Calcutta, it shows how some of these theatres, namely Rupabani, Chhabighar, and Regal, operating since the 1930s, bore the signs of historical changes. The emphasis on 'spatial' transformation draws attention to alterations within the industry, narratives of migration into the city, changes within public cultures and cinematic forms, and the 'Bengali' film industry's dependence on Hindi films or its big-Other. The essay reads photographs and printed materials as sources that inform us about the formation of these theatres in specific locations, their significance and years of growth, and gradual weakening since the 1980s, after which many of the theatres closed down, especially during 1990s. Nevertheless, some of the theatres, like Regal, survive through multiple intercessions and in effect, bear the physical marks of change.

KEYWORDS

Single-theatre; Calcutta; viewership; film industry; film history

The 'Unsettling Cinema' issue of *Seminar* journal raised critical questions regarding the methods of reading and writing about Indian cinemas, and underscored the unwarranted stress on textual analysis and on works of 'great authors'.¹ While introducing 'the problem' Brigupati Singh enquired, '[h]ow do we move away from this set of problems? Here is an initial suggestion: we shift "cinema" from its conception as a purely textual object to being a socially embedded set of practices'.² It is in relation to such questions this photo-essay explores the sites of popular cinema and public culture, and examines the long-drawn practices of film viewing in Calcutta/(Kolkata). It builds a narrative history of certain single-theatres located in Calcutta (those which were operational since the 1930s or from before) by returning to the vestiges of these theatres, drawing from research conducted on peripheral theatres, publicity material and film magazines.³ In this context, the specificity of the single-theatre as opposed to the emergent globalized multiplex ethos is crucial.⁴ The research underscores the significance of *place and locality*, that historically theatres came up specifically in three localities of Calcutta – namely, Beadon Street (now Bidhan Sarani)–Sealdah Station area, Dharmatala–Chowringhee–New Market area (in Central Calcutta), and in Bhawanipore (South of Calcutta) – locations marked by the peculiarities of the bazaar and middle-class habitats, often making them community specific house of leisure.⁵ Thus, borrowing from Stephen Hughes one may suggest that, '[a]ny consideration of films' meaning cannot exclude in principle and in advance its living, dynamic and reciprocal relationships with its viewers'.⁶



Figure 1. Chaplin cinema, 13 March 2013, the country's first permanent theatre.



Figure 2. Chaplin cinema demolished during May 2013.

Studying space as a repository of history, this essay retells narratives of some of the major and popular single theatres of Calcutta (several no longer existing), recounts disparate aspects of their film cultures, the trajectories of their struggle during the 1980s and 1990s, and survival on the fringes, despite their damp walls, cracked chairs, waning of audiences, and withering of their distinction. 'Cinema' (i.e. the larger notion of cinema involving films, stars, cinema-going publics, fan cultures, publicity mechanisms, popularity of film magazines, etc., but, more specifically 'cinema' as in the theatrical spaces) therefore, is studied here as a pivotal realm of social transactions, a marker of memory, and a testimony of histories of transformations of the city, its architecture and public sensitivities.⁷

I

Kaushik Bhaumik in his unpublished dissertation, 'Emergence of Bombay Film Industry, 1913–1936', discusses in length the function of cinema halls in Bombay and the uniqueness of



Figure 3. Metro Cinema of MGM, built in 1935.



Figure 4. New Empire, one of Calcutta's biggest theatres, built in 1932, stands adjacent to New Market.

their neighbourhoods. By elaborating the growth of the Sandhurst Road cinemas (1910–1917), and Grant Road-Lamington Road cinemas (1917–1928), Bhaumik argues that:

Imperial, Royal and Majestic [on Sandhurst Road] were bungalows converted into cinema halls. The Mangaldas Bungalow on the junction of Lamington Road and Girgaum Back Road became Imperial cinema, [...]. These halls stood in courtyards which had shops, trees and wooden benches placed for spectators waiting for shows to begin. [...] The new cinema halls [on Grant Road-Lamington Road] projected a different image of the cinema. They were symbolic of the cinema-as-urban-lifestyle, an activity which had to be separated from humdrum routine and stood for cultural capital to be gained from the experience. If the Sandhurst Road halls sold cinema as a new commodity, the Grant Road-Lamington Road halls bestowed prestige on it.⁸

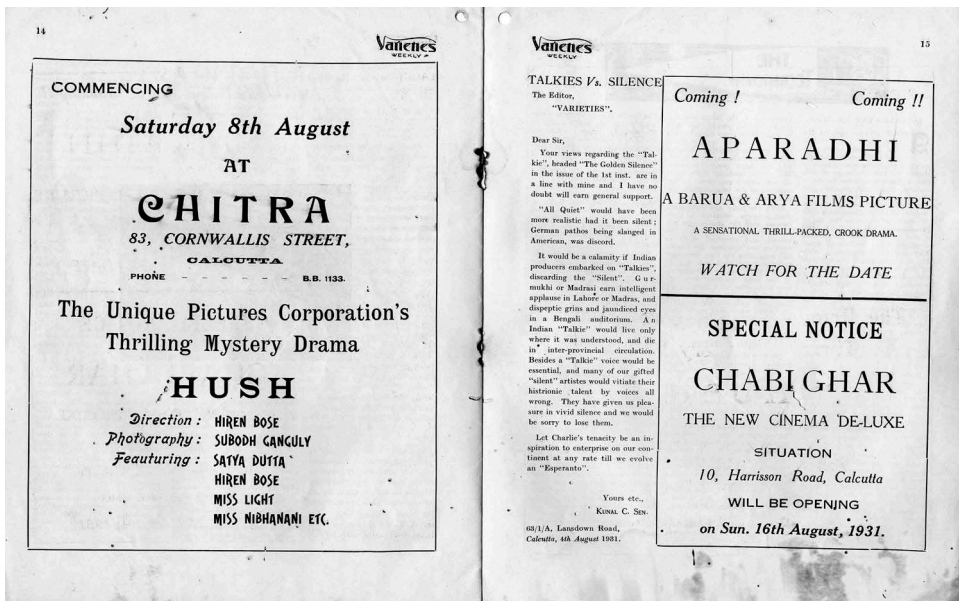


Figure 5. Advertised shows at Chitra and Chhabighar, 1931.

Such growth of ‘prestigious’ theatres in tandem with the advancement of big studios in Calcutta, and their meticulous planning and designing through the association of prominent artists and engineers, also inform about the manner in which Bengali language films, and cinema as a whole, were being envisioned by the middle-classes, and how especially theatres in North of Calcutta (along Bidhan Sarani) and Bengali *bhadralok* imaginings were interlinked.⁹

Inaugurated in December 1932, Rupabani (with 976 seats) was set up by the Screen Corporation Limited, and was located near the famous Star theatre, and New Theatres’ Chitra cinema (a 900 seater theatre). The Nan brothers of Screen Corporation, headed by B.C. Nan, were collaborating with European companies, distinguished artists and Bengali engineers trained in England, to build the structure. Descriptions of Rupabani’s architecture, along with those of Chitra and Chhabighar, located near Sealdah Station, were published in popular journals of the period, namely *Varieties Weekly* and *Film Land*. Rupabani also installed a state-of-art ventilation system and mechanism to control temperature. Needless to say, it was producing a social space for the ‘respectable’ classes, and the inaugural brochure presented Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal’s literary and cultural icon, as the ‘chief organizer’ (see Figure 7). In his long poem published in the brochure, for example, Tagore wrote¹⁰:

One hears Akashvani [voice from the skies]/...
 The disembodied image unites with disembodied speech/
 It floats on waves, across the yards of the body [of the film?]

Chitra another ‘respectable’ cinema house patronized by the *bhadralok* was inaugurated earlier in November 1930 by the nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, who apparently urged its proprietor B.N. Sircar, the proprietor, his employees, and the public to ‘to give less importance to foreign language films and focus on films made in Bengali’.¹¹ In fact, in the emergence of theatres owned by Bengali entrepreneurs was inherent the appropriation of ‘the popular’ by the *bhadralok*, just as, concerns over architecture, design, reserved seats for *Bhadromohila* (or ‘ladies’),

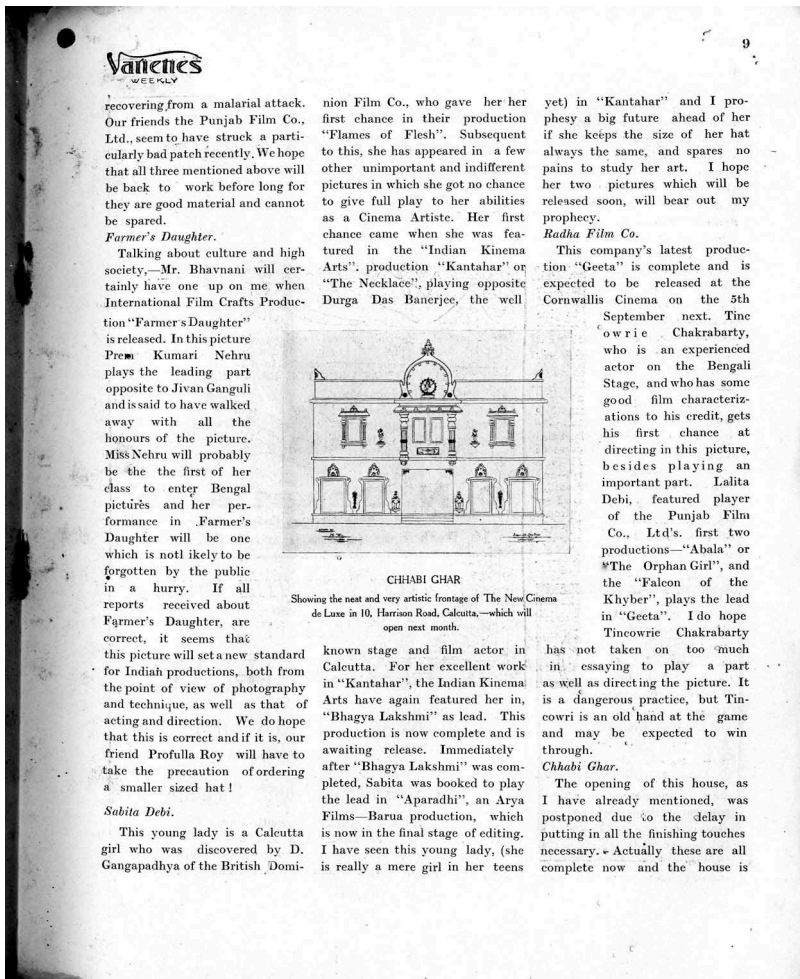


Figure 6. Chhabighar's design.

and the promotion of a certain type of films demonstrated their intense negotiations with existing production-distribution-exhibition systems, especially with Madan Theatres and with the widespread circulation of 'stunt' and 'second-hand' or 'cheap' Hollywood movies.¹² Furthermore, the location of the theatres such as Rupabani and Chitra (now Mitra), around Bidhan Sarani, and its proximity to such landmarks as Duff Church, Bethune College, Star Theatre, is significant in the ways these were instrumental in specifying spaces for *bhadralok* intercession.¹³

The first film shown at Rupabani was Pramatresh Chandra Barua's futurist-comedy *Bengal 1983* (1932). Yet, despite the enthusiasm about the film, and the newly developed 'Cystophone' sound equipment ('invented' by the maverick science college scholar Bamapada Chatterjee, a part of the larger nationalist project), the film fared poorly at the box-office, and eventually Barua had to shut down his own production company and join New Theatres. In an article titled 'Bengal Productions of 1932', published in the weekly magazine *Film Land*, the author had stated the following:¹⁴

BENGAL 1983: On 24th December last Rupabani was opened to the public with Barua's first talkie 'Bengal 1983'. It was highly disappointing from start to finish. This film was howled down mainly due to bad recording. The heroine was a bag selection. Mr P.C. Barua was responsible for story and direction. He also

Varieties
WEEKLY

recovering from a malarial attack. Our friends the Punjab Film Co., Ltd., seem to have struck a particularly bad patch recently. We hope that all three mentioned above will be back to work before long for they are good material and cannot be spared.

Farmer's Daughter.

Talking about culture and high society.—Mr. Bhavnani will certainly have one up on me when International Film Crafts Production "Farmer's Daughter" is released. In this picture

Prof. Kumari Nehru plays the leading part opposite to Jivan Ganguli and is said to have walked away with all the honours of the picture. Miss Nehru will probably be the first of her class to enter Bengal pictures and her performance in *Farmer's Daughter* will be one which is not likely to be forgotten by the public in a hurry. If all reports received about *Farmer's Daughter*, are correct, it seems that this picture will set a new standard for Indian productions, both from the point of view of photography and technique, as well as that of acting and direction. We do hope that this is correct and if it is, our friend Profulla Roy will have to take the precaution of ordering a smaller sized hat!

Sabita Debi.

This young lady is a Calcutta girl who was discovered by D. Gangapadhyaya of the British Domi-

nion Film Co., who gave her her first chance in their production "Flames of Flesh". Subsequent to this, she has appeared in a few other unimportant and indifferent pictures in which she got no chance to give full play to her abilities as a Cinema Artiste. Her first chance came when she was featured in the "Indian Kinema Arts", production "Kantahar" or "The Necklace", playing opposite Durga Das Banerjee, the well-

yet) in "Kantahar" and I prophesy a big future ahead of her if she keeps the size of her hat always the same, and spares no pains to study her art. I hope her two pictures which will be released soon, will bear out my prophecy.

Radha Film Co.

This company's latest production "Geeta" is complete and is expected to be released at the Cornwallis Cinema on the 5th

September next. Tincowrie Chakrabarty, who is an experienced actor on the Bengali Stage, and who has some good film characterizations to his credit, gets his first chance at directing in this picture, besides playing an important part. Lalita Debi, featured player of the Punjab Film Co., Ltd.'s first two productions—"Abala" or "The Orphan Girl", and the "Falcon of the Khyber", plays the lead in "Geeta". I do hope

Tincowrie Chakrabarty

has not taken on too much

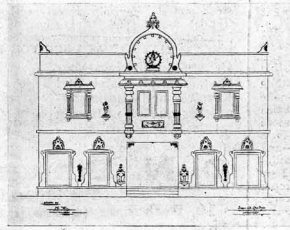
in essaying to play a part

as well as directing the picture. It

is a dangerous practice, but Tincowrie is an old hand at the game and may be expected to win through.

Chhabi Ghar.

The opening of this house, as I have already mentioned, was postponed due to the delay in putting in all the finishing touches necessary. Actually these are all complete now and the house is



CHHABI GHAR

Showing the neat and very artistic frontage of The New Cinema de Luxe in 10, Harrison Road, Calcutta, which will open next month.

known stage and film actor in Calcutta. For her excellent work in "Kantahar", the Indian Kinema Arts have again featured her in, "Bhagya Lakshmi" as lead. This production is now complete and is awaiting release. Immediately after "Bhagya Lakshmi" was completed, Sabita was booked to play the lead in "Aparadhi", an Arya Films—Barua production, which is now in the final stage of editing. I have seen this young lady, (she is really a mere girl in her teens

has not taken on too much in essaying to play a part as well as directing the picture. It is a dangerous practice, but Tincowrie is an old hand at the game and may be expected to win through.

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Figure 7. Rupabani's inaugural brochure.

appeared in the main role supported by Tincowrie Chakravarti, Sailen Chaudhuri and others. Bibhuti Das cranked and T. Chatterji was in charge of recording.

Indeed, evidences of the spectacular opening of Rupabani juxtaposed with reports about the failure of *Bengal 1983* exemplify the variegated ways in which films were being received during 1930s. A history of Calcutta's theatres pieced together from advertisements and other published materials shows *three* broad phases. (A) a vibrant late-colonial history (B) the success of 'new' melodramas during 1950s–1960s, (C) a moment of industrial crisis during the 1980s and 1990s, during which many theatres were temporarily shut down due to labour strikes, resulting in reorganization at the industrial level during the same period, when exhibitors not only opted for colour films, but also, regularly screened Hindi films, including cheaply produced small-budget movies, and thereby produced new publics and cinema cultures.

A study of Rupabani (along with Chhabighar) for example, shows how during the 1980s–1990s, these theatres regularly scheduled repeat runs of Uttam Kumar–Suchitra Sen hits from the 1960s. However, it was *Beder Meye Josna* (Dir. Motiur Rahman Panu, 1991), a Bangladeshi production drawing heavily from folksy narratives, and screened between 7 February 1991 and

13th August 1932. FILMLAND 23

success, speaking eloquently of the abilities of the producer.

Unlike the Madan productions in which either the story is a sorry mixture of romance and classicism, or the actors move about in a stiff and stazy manner and last of all the settings are only an altered view of the Corinthian stage, the Imperial Film has proved what can be done even from a most commonplace story by actions, photography and other technicalities. The characters of the play have shown a full realisation of the characteristic significance of the story, and have done justice to their roles.

Judged from an Indian stand point, this is what one can ordinarily expect. The sound technician who recorded the voices claims the unqualified praise of the audi-

ence. The photographer can also claim a place of honour—especially for the coloured picture of the marriage ceremony which has infused life into the film. I can not forget the scene of smoke going distinctly into the mouth of the king's daughter and afterwards inside the bottle. And the ghost inside it was a marvellous piece of photography. This is all that one can say about the brighter aspect of the picture.

The director would have done better if he had given a bit more care to the study of the Indian domestic etiquettes. For, all along his story he had betrayed a poor knowledge of it, and though there are minor points of criticism, in a good film like this, they should not be overlooked. When Susil came back to his sister's house with his wives and friend he was seen

Break Your Silence
INSTALL
CSYSTOPHONE
Made in India
SOUND FILM EQUIPMENT
BASED ON
CHATTERJEE-SONO-SYSTEM
*Convert your Silent Cinema to a Permanent
Talkie House with your Existing Projectors*
Best Material—Finest Service
Cheapest Price
For Particulars Write to—
SARKAR, DUTT & CO.
STEPHEN HOUSE Phone: Cal. 1919
5, DALHOUSIE SQUARE, CALCUTTA

Good News
TO ALL SHOWMEN
In India, Burma and Ceylon

LOOK OUT FOR
Sensational Talkies
RECORDED ON
RCA Photophone

To be Released by
**The East India
Film Company**
2-1, Central Avenue South
CALCUTTA

FOR SALE
RCA
Portables &
Fixed Type
SOUND REPRODUCING
EQUIPMENTS

APPLY IMMEDIATE
FOR
Special Terms and
Particulars to

The East India
Film Company
2-1, Central Avenue South
CALCUTTA

Figure 8. Advertisement for the 'Cystophone' sound machine initially installed at Rupabani.

18 July 1991, which enjoyed a 'houseful' run for thirteen consecutive weeks, and became a marker of the city's new cinema cultures. The success of *Beder Meye Josna* was an indicator of a changing urban demography, preferred tastes and film-going practices, and highlighted the persistence of bazaar cultures in the city. Indeed, one may return to Bhaumik's point regarding Bombay cinema that¹⁵:

[...] cinema was itself located in the *bazaar*. [...] People flowed into and out of the hall following the ebb and tide of the hectic economic and labour schedules in the *bazaar*, as did the characters on the screen. The audience read or heard about larger-than-life adventure heroes and heroines from stories told or published in the *bazaar*, read about thrilling real-life adventures in the newspapers, consumed folk musical and dance performances as well as the *fakir's* discourse, saw the martial regalia of the princes and aristocrats on the streets, enjoyed the *tawaif's* dances as well as Parsi and *nautanki* plays and watched Sulochana romances in the *bazaar*.

In fact, through the early 1990s, until its permanent closure in 1994 due to a land dispute, Rupabani continued to screen a range of popular and small-budget Hindi films (such as *Tohfa*

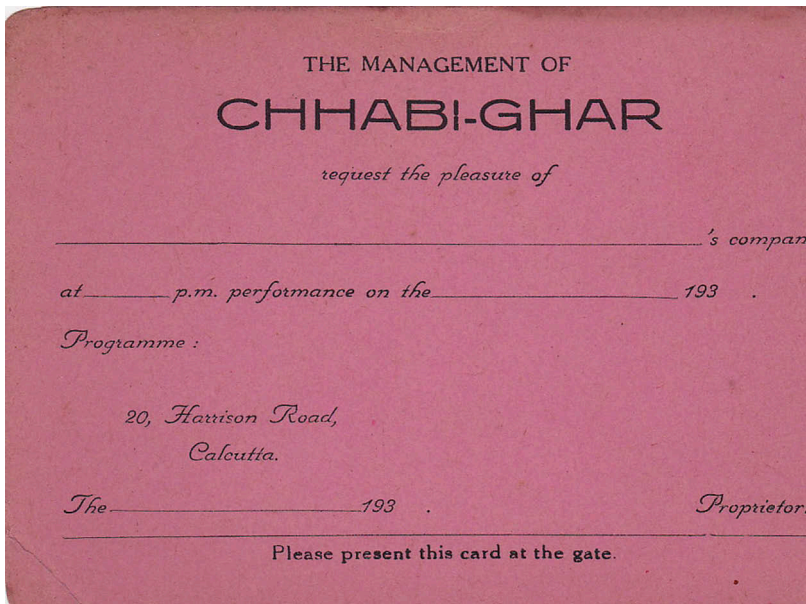


Figure 9. Chhabighar's invite, 1933(?).



Figure 10. Chhabighar now.

(Dir. K.R. Rao, 1984), *Taaqatwar* (Dir. David Dhawan, 1989), *Guru* (Dir. Umesh Mehra, 1989), *Phool Bane Angaray* (Dir. K.C. Bokadia, 1991), and thereby redefined what constituted 'Bengali middle-class' cultures.¹⁶

Chhabighar, constructed in 1930 by H C Paul, is another case in point. The theatre had a seating capacity of about 600 people, with proximity to the railway station (Sealdah), a whole-sale bazaar, lines of shops selling a variety of everyday items, colleges, guest houses, and 'mess-bari' (boarding houses). Set up with new sound equipment and attempting to cater to middle-class

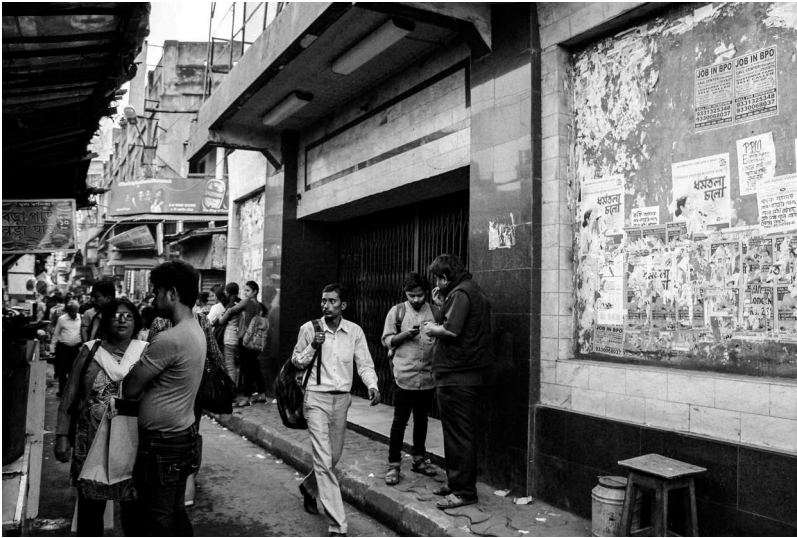


Figure 11. A flyover looms over Chhabighar.



Figure 12. Remnants of Chhabighar's design.

sensibilities, *Chhabighar's* story, as narrated by the Manager Sri Rabin Seth (interviewed by the author on 11 June 2010), gives an account of shifting industrial conditions, especially from the 1960s through the 1980s. One of the major grossers was *Goopi Gayen Bagha Bayen* (Dir. Satyajit Ray, 1969), which was shown in the theatre for 33 weeks; thereafter, with the dwindling investments and market during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chhabighar regularly screened old Uttam Kumar–Suchitra Sen hits such as *Pathey holo deri* (Dir. Agradoot, 1957). Following a seventeen days lockout in 1983, Chhabighar was shut down for 2 years, after which the house restructured itself by showing Hindi blockbusters like the Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Bemisal* (Dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1982).



Figure 13. Chhabighar, closed presently (All images were taken during 11–12 December 2016).



Figure 14. Globe Cinema is a mart now.

II

According to the *Indian Cinematograph Year Book* (1938) theatres were divided as cinemas for ‘Foreign’, ‘Mixed’ and ‘Indian’ films. If film viewing in Kolkata began with tent shows at the Maidan in central Calcutta, this was quickly followed by the growth of picture houses in and around the New Market area, particularly in Dharmatala–Chowringhee. The Madans were in business since the turn of the twentieth century, and following their tent shows at the Maidan, Cornwallis theatre, and film shows at the Corinthian Theatre (Dharmatala), they started Elphinstone Picture Palace in 1907 (adjacent to the ‘New Market’, then Hogg Market). Elphinstone Picture Palace, India’s ‘first’ permanent theatre, was later renamed Minerva after



Figure 15. Purna cinema façade.



Figure 16. Remains of a 'first class theatre', Purna Cinema.

the change of ownership in 1969, and then Chaplin after the West Bengal state government took ownership in the early 1990s.

By 1930s the present New Market neighbourhood was packed with working class emigrants, young Bengali students, office-goers and upper-class shoppers.¹⁷ As the growth of theatres continued 1940s, and several cinemas in the area including *Roxy*, became fashionable after showing the Bombay Talkies' production *Kismet* (Dir. Gyan Mukherjee, 1943). A number of the cinemas of the period, for instance, Chhabighar, Chitra (now Mitra), and Metro (of MGM,



Figure 17. Purna “Housefull”



Figure 18. The Regal, a theatre in the bazaar.

1100 seater), New Empire (Humayun Properties, 1100 seats), Regal (of Madans, 350 seats), Crown (of Madans, 1084 seats), Park Show House (600 seats), Plaza (430 seats), as well as Bijoli (also by H.C. Paul, for ‘Foreign’ films, with 600 seats) Purna (by Mr Bannerji, for ‘mixed’ audiences, 700 seater), etc., had a high social currency among the elite and middle-classes. Of Purna Cinema, located in south Calcutta, it had been noted (in an interview before the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927–1928), that it was ‘one first class Bengali independent theatre’ and their investments were around ‘2 or 3 lakhs’.¹⁸ Many of the same houses were virtually reduced to wreckages with transformed industrial and viewing conditions, produced by extra-legal circulation of videos, DVD releases, the popularity of local video-halls, TV premieres, as well as changes in viewing practices, neighbourhoods, and the arrival of multiplexes.¹⁹



Figure 19. Regal's employees.



Figure 20. The Regal 'Now showing' (2016). All images were taken during 23–27 November 2016.

III

Regal Cinema was set up in the 1930s, in the New Market area. At present, one encounters the old façade layered with posters, predominantly of American 'soft-porn' films. Regal is an important landmark bearing evidence of industrial transformations, which materially bears – on its surface as it were – narratives of early industrial transactions, and the account of the shifts in production-distribution-exhibition networks, as well as changes in viewing practices. Originally a high-class theatre, Regal outlasted industrial change, and till date has the customary four shows of the single-screen theatres. Prices of the tickets are virtually 1/10th of the multiplexes, with about 10–15% of the seats generally occupied on weekdays, with increase to

20–25% during weekends. Located in an area populated largely by (Muslim and Christian) working-classes, as well as being close to Government and private offices, and to New Market and other small-make shift shops, Regal has a diverse clientele. During our interview on 18 September 2008, the Manager (name withheld), an employee of over 30 years, indicated that they were showing ‘porn’ films, ‘due to public demand’. Though originally showing popular Hollywood films, it began showing mainstream Hindi films from the 1970s. From the 1990s, as business dropped, it showed ‘soft-porn’ and small-budget Hindi films. According to the Manager, in the recent past, Regal had also screened Malayalam and Tamil (or South Indian) ‘porns’, which was ‘illegal’. While it is apparent from the above research how the *bhadralok* envisaged theatrical spaces as places of cultural and political negotiations, the porous passages between ‘Indian’ ‘Foreign’ ‘Mixed’ films, as well as screenings of ‘Bengali’, ‘Hindi’ ‘English’ and ‘Bangladeshi-Bengali films’ during disparate phases, inform us about changing industrial and social circumstances, and cinema’s location in the bazaar; it also pushes us to review shifting cultural landscapes and urban demographics.

Notes

1. *Seminar*, 525, 2003(<http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525.htm>). Kaushik Bhaumik also raises questions regarding film historiography in the introduction to his unpublished dissertation.
2. Singh, ‘The Problem’, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20the%20problem.htm> (accessed on 26th September 2015). Also see Vasudevan’s article “Cinema in urban space” in the same volume for a study of Delhi theatres, and SV Srinivas’ article “Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?”
3. See Mukherjee, “Not so Regal Show-Houses of Calcutta.”
4. See Athique, “From Cinema Hall to Multiplex.”
5. For example, Uttara-Purabi-Ujjala, Minar-Chhabighar-Bijoli, Rupabani-Aruna-Bharati were theatre chains linking North, Central and South Calcutta respectively.
6. Hughes, “Pride of Place.”
7. I am particularly considering Lefebvre’s readings of ‘spatial practice’.
8. Bhaumik, “Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry 1913–1936,” 25.
9. On institutionalization of *Bhadralok* imaginings during this period see Madhuj Mukherjee unpublished dissertation, and Gooptu.
10. From Tagore’s poem titled ‘Rupabani’.
11. Ghosh, *Sonar Daag*, 142.
12. Also see Govil and Hoyt, “Thieves of Bombay.”
13. Bethune College was founded as a school in 1849 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune. In 1879 it became the ‘first women’s college’ in India. On Star Theatre see Rakshit, “Communication Through Public Stage.”
14. *Film Land*, 28 January 1933, 11.
15. See note 8 above.
16. Similarly, the saga of Chitra, and the extended court-cases between Sircar and the Mitras (now owner of Chitra) See Chakraborty, *Chalachitrer Itihase New Theatres*.
17. See Chaudhuri, ed., *Calcutta, The Living City*, Vol. II.
18. Laharry, *Indian Cinematograph Committee Report*, Vol. 2, 770–802.
19. Also see Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*.

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