CHAPTER III

City/Cities of Conflicts and Hope: Calcutta Represented in the City

Films of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen

Cinema is a peculiarly spatial form of culture . . . because cinema operates and is best understood in terms of the organisation of space: both space in films, the space of the shot . . . and films in space, the shaping of lived urban spaces by cinema as a cultural practice. (Shiel 5)

As Mark Shiel notes, “since the end of the nineteenth century, the fortunes of cinema and the city are inextricably linked”. Film, from the very beginning – from Lumiére Brothers’ Paris of 1895 – has been interested in representing the “distinct spaces, life styles and human conditions” in the city, and it uses a variety of techniques that include lighting, location filming, etc., to capture the dynamism of the spatial dialectics of the cityscape (1). Barbara Caroline Mennel points out, quoting John Rennie Shorts, that “modernity, capitalism and postmodernity” link the study of films to the study of cities. The best way to read a city is to analyse “the operation of power and the struggle for power” in the cityscape, and urban films unfold these narratives in several ways:

Power relations are organised by social differences in class, gender, age, race and ethnicity which produce urban patterns and processes. Films reflect such urban patterns in how they code neighbourhoods as rich or poor . . . They reflect class in costume and setting, and in whether characters are positioned inside elaborate domestic spaces or outside in the urban public space. (15)
In this chapter, and the next one, I follow this close link between the cinematic form and the city, and the various signifiers of urban reality that films encode. I attempt to explore, first of all, the representations of Calcutta in selected city films of the three acclaimed masters of Bengali cinema – Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Kumar Ghatak and Mrinal Sen.

**Satyajit Ray: Mahanagar, Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha and Jana Aranya**

“I don’t feel very creative when I am abroad somehow. I need to be in my chair in Calcutta,” the master filmmaker Satyajit Ray famously told Andrew Robinson, in *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. A visit to Ray’s flat at Bishop Lefroy Road, and Robinson knew why the filmmaker needed the refuge of his reading room. Robinson described the room with its “subdued colours, cavernous ceilings, louvered windows and revolving fans of the Raj—no air-conditioning”, a room with “crammed bookcases”, old and rare magazines and books, “many of them presents from his friends and contacts all over the world”, an impressive record and tape collection, a piano, a bust of Beethoven and “a photograph of Eisenstein” on the wall (Robinson 4). This was Ray’s milieu, the place where some of his greatest creations were conceived. Ray lived almost all his life in Calcutta, one of the few exceptions being a brief stay at Shantiniketan. When Ray graduated from Presidency College, Calcutta, he was very much an urban youth, with pronounced Western leanings and sympathies. It was in this city that he was exposed to world cinema as a child, his firsts being *Ben Hur*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Thief of Baghdad* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and it was here that he wrote film scenarios, the first based on “Williamson”, a short story by Manik Bandyopadhyay, and another on *Ghare Baire*, a novel by Rabindranath Tagore. The city of Calcutta and Ray’s art were thus inextricably linked, a reason
perhaps why he finally did not leave his “chair in Calcutta” even when he had contemplated leaving the city for good in the turbulent 1970s. Ray’s trajectory, from his celebrated lineage to his sojourn in Shantiniketan and his early struggles as a filmmaker, is meticulously documented in several critical and biographical volumes (Robinson 1989, Banerjee 1996, Cooper 2000, Ganguly 2000, Seton 2003, to name a few) and for reasons of space, my study will plunge straight away into an analysis of his city films.

Mahanagar is a cinematic adaptation of Narendranath Mitra’s short novel originally titled Abataranika. Ray read the story in 1955 and almost immediately he knew he wanted to make a film on it. Surabhi Banerjee, in Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame, talks about why and how Ray chose the subject, “He was struck by the author’s acute observation of middle class life—the field was narrow, familiar and even humdrum, and yet unusually rich and varied” (Banerjee 69-70). The story of Mahanagar is set in 1955 and the metropolis of Calcutta blends into the narrative from the very first frame as we see the electric wires of the city’s tram line. The story focuses on the domestic space where poverty rules. There is no money for Subrata’s father’s spectacles or for Subrata’s tea. The daughter-in-law of the house, Arati, is seen as an archetypal home-maker, always mindful of her duties. When Subrata brings in the news that his friend’s wife has started working, Arati feels that he is suggesting that she should get a job to make both ends meet, and she ultimately does so. Her orthodox father-in-law does not approve, her mother-in-law is a silent suffering figure, her son feels lonely in her absence, and it is only her sister-in-law who is happy with Arati’s decision. She dreams of emulating Arati one day in the future. At the office, she quickly becomes her boss’s favourite and she also befriends an Anglo-Indian colleague, Edith Simmons. Edith jazzes up Arati’s homely appearance with some lipstick. But as she becomes more self-confident, her husband feels threatened and asks her to give up her job. The pressure of orthodoxy and the stereotypes that define gender roles at “home” have caught up with him. But just as she prepares to resign, her husband loses his own job, and Arati is compelled to take up the responsibility of being the sole breadwinner of the family. The atmosphere at home grows bleaker as Subrata’s unemployment makes him depressed and bitter. Events take an unexpected turn when Arati resigns from her job as a sign of protest against the
unjust treatment meted out to her friend Edith by their boss. The film ends on an optimistic note, with husband and wife both exploring the city for new job opportunities.

“At its simplest, *Mahanagar* is a story of clashing social values: those of an older generation that would keep women at home, set against those of a younger generation that see the necessity for change, whether for economic or social reasons, or both” (Robinson 149). I would suggest that through the characters of the old parents and the younger couple, Subrata and Arati, we are introduced to the idea of the *work ethics of the new city*, linked to a major social change: people who earn a living are the only ones to be valued. The key players in this ethical shift are Priyogopal and Arati. When Subrata was the only earning member of the household, he reigned supreme over the lives of the others in his family. Arati, I argue, does gauge her own value in the household at this point and realises how it can change if she takes up a job. When she does enter employment, there is a change in the domestic politics. In the beginning, with the disapproval of the mother-in-law and the son heavy in the air, Arati goes out rather apologetically. She broods over the fact of how the meaning of time has changed for her, what was once the time to bathe her son has become the time to take a bus to the office. The home setting changes further when Subrata loses his job. Arati is the only earning member of the family then, and we see how her indulgent mother-in-law places the fish-head in her plate, saying she has to eat well since she works so hard. She now occupies the venerated status of the sole earner of the family. She brings home the spoils from the city outside, goodies that the family could not afford till she started work. We see a new confidence in her stride, as she is seen to be crossing the street; the city no longer seems like a hostile space to her. She moves around in the city, goes door to door trying to sell the knitting machine her company manufactures. Subrata’s father also experiences this ethical transition, though in a different way.
He keeps saying to his son and daughter-in-law that he is after all an old man and has little or no value in the family since he cannot earn. It is clear that Subrata had replaced him long back as the sole breadwinner of the family (just as Arati would later replace her husband) and has rendered him powerless. In the privacy of their bedroom, Subrata suggests to Arati that his father can start giving private tuition at home. Poverty makes him feel the uselessness of his father in their house. The father tries to earn though in an indirect and sometimes counter-productive way. He takes money from home to participate in crossword puzzle competitions. As matters get worse, with his daughter-in-law starting to work, something never reconciles to, he takes to visiting his former students who have made it big in Calcutta and literally begs for financial help, saying that his son does not take care of him.

Underlining all the films in the city quartet is the sense of the “other” city which is morally degrading. This “other” city lurks under the seen, the visible city. I would argue that this sense gets amplified as we move chronologically through the quartet. Though the “other” city is very much a part of the main city, the moral and ethical structures here are so different that it is almost a new world. In all these films, there is a central character who enters this “other” world and brings to it his/her own ideology. That scale of values is profoundly altered by contact with the “other” city. In the case of Mahanagar it is Arati who crosses over, and takes with her the older beliefs and value systems. At the beginning of the film, Arati is seen continuously working for the others in the family. The work ethics of efficiency and loyalty are pronounced in the household. But the others in the family take this for granted, since these are the virtues expected of the woman of the family. However, these same values are noticed and appreciated at the office. Arati’s boss rewards her for her efficiency and ability to work hard without complaining too much and gives her a raise when her husband loses his job. As in Jana Aranya, where
Somnath is appreciated and helped in the “other” city for being one of the mainstream, *bhadralok* class, Arati also is valued at the office for talents which were rarely appreciated in the domestic space of the middle class, torn apart by economic uncertainties. But at the end, when this “other” city demands complete allegiance from her, seeking to make her its own, and claim her absolutely, thereby obliterating the traces of her past world, she refuses to give in. When she looks around her, at the tall office buildings of the city and says in a big city like this, where there are so many jobs, she is sure to land one, she seems to be challenging this “other” city – she will survive in it even while she holds onto her old ideals.

Ray’s next city film, *Pratidwandi*, came out in 1970, seven years after *Mahanagar*. In the 1970s, Ray made three films on contemporary Calcutta which together are famously known as his “Calcutta trilogy”. All the three films had, at their core, educated young urban men fighting against the conditions of the city they lived in. By the middle of the 60s, the “city of palaces” was facing crises at large, as already discussed in the introduction: the continued effects of post-War decline, the food riots of 1966, the steady influx of refugees from East Pakistan and finally, revolutionary terrorism and state repression. By 1967, the peasantry was up in arms in Naxalbari. Charu Majumdar, a Maoist ideologue, had coined the slogan “China’s chairman is our chairman” and this slogan appeared prominently on the walls of the city. Ray makes startling use of these wall graffiti in *Pratidwandi* to convey a sense of immediacy and menace. The Naxalite movement gathered strength and force in the year 1969, and by 1970-71, it had become an urban movement. In 1971, while the Naxalite movement was losing its steam, Bangladesh was born and a fresh wave of refugees entered West Bengal. The conditions in the city were bleak; political corruption and bribery had become the order of the day. University examinations were cancelled because mass-copying was encouraged and invigilators were beaten up. Marie Seton
describes in her book *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray*, this period and its impression on Ray’s work:

Increasingly, during the second half of the 1960s criticism has been levelled at Satyajit Ray, particularly in India, that his films failed to reflect the immediately contemporary scene. The core of this criticism has been that Ray evaded grappling with the developing political situation. It is true that up to 1970 no Ray film touched directly upon politics. . . . Ray’s latest film *Pratidwandi* (Siddhartha and the City), plunges into the current climate of Calcutta and reflects the existing political situation. (Seton 283)

Ray found the political situation so compelling that he had to make films which reflected these conflicts. He could not help but react to his surroundings by making *Pratidwandi*, perhaps his most politically conscious film. The film was adapted from Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novel by the same name. Sunil Gangopadhyay is a critically acclaimed Bengali poet and novelist and his novels like *Pratidwandi* are a vivid picture of their times and scathing criticisms of contemporary society. Supriya Chaudhuri, a second year undergraduate student at Presidency College, Calcutta, when *Pratidwandi* came out in 1970, recollects in *Apu and After: Revisiting Ray’s Cinema*, her watching the film at a special press preview at Tollygunge and the political climate that heightened the immediacy of the issues in the film:

The Naxalite agitation was at its peak, and soon the college would shut down for several months. . . . Our friends thought they were making history, but we knew that we had little hand in the process. History was being made, but it was a history of
failure and disappointment, of immense energy expended in wasted purposes.

(Supriya Chaudhuri, “In the City” 251)

What is most obvious about Pratidwandi, the film, is the discomfort of location in Siddhartha, the main protagonist, with respect to his city, Calcutta, and his final escape from it. The film was made in 1970, and the highly volatile political situation in the city during that time makes its presence felt through the film. In the preface to the English edition of the novel, Ray describes, “…the central character of Siddhartha, so endearing and believable in his contradictions, set by turns against his family, his friends, the girl he takes a fancy to, and the society which ultimately drives him to take refuge in a small job in a small town. If I were asked to give just one good reason for choosing this literary work, I would say it was Siddhartha” (qtd. in Surabhi Banerjee 74). The domestic space occupied by Siddhartha’s mother, younger brother and sister and himself, is in a state of crisis, as we see the family becoming more and more dysfunctional. His father’s untimely death leads to Siddhartha’s dropping out of medical school. The film opens with the funeral scene of the father, with the entire scene shown in film negative, which is also the moment of Siddhartha’s ultimate isolation. He cannot find a job, even though he is a science graduate. In stark contrast, his sister has found a job, though she is not as bright as her brother. The younger brother has obviously found his life’s calling in Maoist politics and dreams of a revolution. Siddhartha himself is an interesting case of confused ideology and muddled beliefs. From the words of the faceless advisor at the coffee shop we understand that in college, Siddhartha was an active member of the Marxist students’ union, but as Tunu (his brother) says, he has changed in the last two years. Now most of his energy is spent in trying to find a job, but he is not comfortable with his recent avatar. There are contradictory characteristics in him, as we see in the scene of his job interview, when he describes the Vietnam
War as a more important event of the past decade than man’s mission to the moon. He is shown saying that technology is predictable but human courage during times of crisis is not always predictable and hence is more praiseworthy. Yet in contrast to this radical conviction, Siddhartha also experiences, just before this scene, a vision of himself wearing a formal suit, standing in a greenhouse surrounded by flowers. The vision presents the character in a sanitised space, a space of desire, though oddly untouched and unreal. This is in direct opposition to the chaos and violence of the city he traverses. When he sees his old friend from medical college stealing funds from the Red Cross box, he pounces on him to stop him, but it is a momentary reaction, he soon leans back on the bed. Siddhartha had once sold two of his medical books to gift Tunu the complete Bolivian diaries of Che Guevera, a book which perhaps changed the course of his younger brother’s life, but everyone around him (himself included) knows that if there is a revolution around the corner, Siddhartha will not take any part in it. He is too much of a thinker to actually do anything, says his friend. One interesting incident which brings out these traits in Siddhartha, is where he encounters a group of men beating up a car driver who has hit a pedestrian. In the charged-up city scene, he participates in the mob hysteria. His reasons though are very different; for him, the symbol of Mercedes Benz on the car is a symbol of capitalism and his ire is directed towards this. But soon his eyes fall on the young girl crying inside the car and he comes back to his senses. It is a moment of truth for him. This is the same man who eulogises the courage of the Vietnamese peasants in front of the interview board.

Siddhartha’s sister, Sutapa, though a minor character, has significant negotiations with the city. I would argue that Sutapa of *Pratidwandi* is an extension of the Arati of *Mahanagar*. A reading of the women characters in these two films will bring out some aspects of Ray’s meditation on morality/immorality in terms of the ideals set by Bengal Renaissance. As Partha
Chatterjee points out in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, faced with the modern ideas set in motion by the colonial state, the renaissance leaders negotiated with the “woman question”. They conceived the ideal “new woman” in terms of her spatial location in family/state – “the inner” and “the outer”. The new woman is adept at running the family (the inner) in harmony with the laws of the outer. She is allowed to go out into the outer and even get employment as far as it does not threaten her “femininity” defined by various markers including social demeanour and obedience. But as the urban economy unleashes its power, these markers are erased in women like Arati and Sutapa (as well as the Kana of *Jana Aranya*), and men are faced with a dilemma. These women have limited mobility within the city as against their male counterparts, and the narratives are often uneasy about their presence in the city. Adapting Elizabeth Wilson’s arguments, discussed in the first chapter, I would argue that these narratives essentialise the roles of urban women: “Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood which triumphs over temptation and tribulation” (5-6). A look at the various women characters presented in the city quartet discussed here proves quite easily that Ray has largely assigned them roles that conform to the range accepted by the “male urban consciousness”. If Arati is heroic womanhood, Sutapa’s character borders on the “fallen”. In terms of degrees of adherence to the social diktats, we can arrange these women in a band ranging from the “virtuous” Arati to the “narcissistic” and “wayward” Sutapa. While Arati steps outside her home strictly to earn a living, Sutapa does more than that. She takes dance classes late in the evenings, accepts expensive gifts from her boss and is not squeamish about the idea of being a model. One rung below her is the nurse in *Pratidwandi* who works as a part-time prostitute in the nights. Arati adopts certain principles of the “other” city: she is seen continuously talking about money,
a development that disturbs her predominantly patriarchal household. Edith, her Anglo-Indian colleague, gives Arati a lipstick, a signifier of all the values of the outside world, the values which threaten to topple the balance of the “home”. Subrata is shocked to find it in Arati’s purse and she has to throw it away. While Arati is valorised for holding back her complete allegiance to the “other” city, and acting more for the family than for herself, Sutapa is seen as a self-centred woman “more interested in clothes, make-up, modelling and having a good time than in family prestige” (Robinson 209). When Sutapa drags her brother to the terrace to show him her newly acquired dance moves, her “exhibitionism”, argues Cooper, makes her into a “femme fatale” for her brother and the audience. For Siddhartha, “Sutapa has already become the fallen woman” (Cooper 101) (emphasis mine).

Ray’s treatment of these characters, I propose, often gets trapped in the vicious circle that characterises 19th century handling of the “woman question”: How do we deal with the woman who goes out of the house to go into the morally degrading city to find a living? How much freedom can be allowed to her? How do we deal with the fluidity of gender roles characteristic of the urban economy? Sutapa and Arati clearly do not share the same platform, even though both are working women. When Siddhartha’s friend asks him how his sister got a job, his first reaction is, “Have you seen my sister?” He suggests that his sister got a job because of her good looks.

As Seton notes, “the exact period of the action [in Pratidwandi] is April 1970 when the shooting commenced with considerable use of Calcutta’s streets and actual political demonstrations” (283). The events obviously take place during the sultry summer months of a humid Calcutta. Most of the footage is shot outdoors. The body and its relationship with other bodies and the city become central theme in the film. In one of the early scenes, Siddhartha is
seen dangling from the footboard of a city double-decker bus, craning his neck towards the open air, away from the sweating grimy bodies of the others crowding in the bus. Sweating, wiping sweat with handkerchiefs, unmoving ceiling fans and lack of enough air are recurrent images in the film. At an interview we even see a man fainting because there are too few seats and he has to stand for many hours waiting for his turn. At Sutapa’s employer’s home, Siddhartha keeps looking at the stationary ceiling fan until the Boss comes in and switches it on. The outdoor locations explore the Calcutta of everyday life, and not its iconic representations. The point is how the physical conditions of the city, how its grime, dust, immobility, impact on bodies – it is a discourse of bodies in space.

In the middle of all this, Keya brings to Siddhartha a fresh breath of air, by being from a different class altogether, with very different views. Perhaps, if the argument is stretched further, we can also say that Keya is a different side of the city, a more sanitised and a more elite side. With her, Siddhartha also sees the city differently. On a bus ride, he shows her the Tata Centre at Chowringhee, glittering with lights in the evening. He promises to take her there. When they go up the building, and view the city from a height, it is laid out like a map in front of their eyes, as their gaze spans its expanse. From this height, the city looks nothing less than beautiful, but this is not the everyday Calcutta that Siddhartha negotiates, dangling from crowded buses. Even as they see the Maidan, they can see tiny dots which are really people who have gathered there for a rally of some sort. They are far from the tactile field of bodily feelings, where the people gathered on the Maidan would have felt the heat and dust of the day. Supriya Chaudhuri in “In the City”, adapts De Certeau and reads Siddhartha and Keya as voyeurs who have been transformed by their altitude and for whom the city is laid out as a text (262).
Calcutta is seen as the centre of the universe for the characters in the film. The faceless advisor has a job for Siddhartha, but does not offer it to him right away since it is not in Calcutta. When he does, Siddhartha is not desperate to take it, he does not want to move away from Calcutta. Yet the city consumes him and his family; the relationship between the three siblings is disintegrating and family bonds have loosened. The siblings are enmeshed in their own realities, with almost an autistic inability to connect to each other. The city is seen as opposed to the countryside by means of a spatialised memory when Siddhartha goes back to the childhood memory of a visit to the countryside with his two younger siblings. At present the only thread connecting them is the bird’s call they had heard as children in that rural setting, where they had all been part of this communal experience. We see the chain of events through Siddhartha’s eyes, and never see the three of them together, except in this memory. He tries very hard to connect to both of them in the present moment, visits their rooms and tries to converse with them, even trying to strengthen his position as the male head of the family, but his attempts are thwarted by both his sister and his brother. Urban life always privileges the individual over the community, but there is an interesting dichotomy here. Siddhartha finally can hear the same bird call when he migrates from the city to the bucolic space of Balurghat. Here he can hear it clearly, in the absence of other distracting “noises” (of the city). The city can only be understood in terms of the bird-market he visits with his friend, where the individual bird call cannot be recognised in the cacophony created by too many birds cooped up in too little a space. So, finally, I would suggest, the city does not come out as a space where the individual has any voice or opinion, the cacophony of too many voices drowns it. Siddhartha here is the archetypal urban citizen, following the rapid and confused flow of a plethora of signs and signifiers. There is no time or space for the solidification of his ideas and ideals. On a single day, he tries to negotiate his
sister’s boss, an interview, his friends from medical college, the visit to the nurse/prostitute, and his first prolonged meeting with Keya. This frenetic succession of activities slows down as he enters a rural life.

Andrew Robinson agrees with the reviewer of London *Monthly Film Bulletin* who thought that Shyamalendu of *Seemabadhha* is “what Siddhartha might have become had he prevaricated over his answer about the significance of the Vietnam War and the moon landing” (Robinson 214). I would extend the same argument to say Shyamalendu is also another version of Ashim or Sanjoy of *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Ashim is a bored and successful executive and Sanjoy a high-ranking labour officer in a jute mill. For both of them success has come at a cost, of swearing complete allegiance to the often claustrophobic and soul-killing principles of the “other” city. And it is this city and its ideals that they are determined to renounce by embarking on a reckless holiday in the forests of Palamau. Ashim describes the moral retrogression that his and Sanjoy’s professional life entails, “the higher you rise, the greater you fall”. Shyamalendu’s is also a man’s success story in the corporate world of the commercial city and the loss of his morals in the process.

*Seemabadha* was adapted from Shankar’s novel of the same name. Shyamalendu Chatterjee is the narrator and the main protagonist of the story.

*Pratidwandi* and *Jana Aranya*, the first and third films in Ray’s so-called City trilogy, open by plunging Siddhartha and Somnath into the rank and file of the unemployed. *Seemabaddha*, the second in that trilogy, begins with Shyamalendu confidently informing us that he has been successful in avoiding that trauma. . . . His
Calcutta is diametrically opposed to that of Siddhartha and Somnath: It is triumphantly vertical. (Cooper 153)

At the very onset, he sketches out for us his position in his company and his ambitions of climbing the corporate ladder. His linear description of his career graph, the flow-chart that he uses to show the family-tree-like hierarchy of positions in the company clearly indicate a rational, clear thinking mind which has absolutely no illusions about his future. The character exactly knows what he wants in the future, and what his expectations are from the city: upward mobility. His tall, lean, angular, clean shaven, keen-eyed look, and his carefully cultivated sartorial sense clearly mark out his “urban” success and ambitions.

The Chatterjee couple thinks less about family life and ties than about Shyamal’s promotion. Mrs Chatterjee or Dolonchanpa is a simple small-town girl who has willingly absorbed the colours of her husband’s metropolitan, corporate world of Calcutta. Their only son is in a boarding school in Darjeeling; Shyamal’s parents live in another house in Calcutta, and so all her energy and thoughts are channelised towards her husband’s much coveted promotion. Their interactions in the “domestic” space are constantly shaped by the news from the “other” city. Hindustan Peters Ltd manufactures lamps and fans, and Shyamal is the marketing head of the fan division. He has a rival for this promotion, the marketing head of the lamp division of the company. Another interesting thing to be noted here is the time frame of the story. It is set in 1970, a time when the Naxalite Movement was in full force in Calcutta, but the Calcutta that Shyamal and his wife inhabit is cleansed of this Naxal violence. They are part of the elite, upper-crust Calcutta who lunch at exclusive clubs, go to the race-course on the Saturdays, and host parties every now and then.
It is a neatly structured world, where Shyamal weaves his life around the company he works for, and his own position in it. An outsider’s view of this life is introduced through the visit of Sudarshana or Tutul, Shyamal’s sister-in-law. She comes to visit them from Patna, and brings with her a value system that Shyamal and his wife have left behind in their “urban” race. Tutul is “aware” of the political turmoil in Calcutta and she is surprised to see how the immediacy of the political crisis is negated in Shyamal’s domestic space. While Dolon tries to show off her flat to Tutul, a gift from the company, she proudly claims that the flat is much above the ground, much above the city irritants like dust, smoke, mosquitoes and flies. But even at this height, she cannot shut out the sounds of bombs and bullets. Towards the end, when they go out for dinner, and a cabaret show is on view in the restaurant, Tutul is made uneasy by this vulgar excess at a time of crisis for the city. Dolon assures Tutul that though their relatives in Patna are worried about what is happening in Calcutta and how it might affect their lives, they are leading a perfectly happy life. Tutul presents a wholly different world view in all this. When her sister says that Shyamal earns one lakh twenty thousand rupees a year, she exclaims that the amount was the same as Rabindranath Tagore’s Nobel Prize money. Ray complicates the story further by adding a new element, extraneous to the original story: Tutul’s boyfriend in Patna is a revolutionary. At the race-course, while the others are worried about which horse will win the race, Tutul wonders what will happen if the race-course gets bombed by the Naxalites.

But Tutul’s character is more complex than the archetype of a small-town girl: she is fraught with ambiguities that are brought out in her conversations. Surabhi Banerjee discusses Ray’s likening of Tutul to Siddhartha: like him, Tutul begins as an uncertain character and is completely disillusioned with the city at the end. She, like him, is the analytical spectator who observes all that is going on in the city in order to make her own decisions. She quotes Ray, “I
always feel that you must know two sides of a problem before you can make up your mind. Then you can make a really strong decision which, as in *The Adversary*, is not based on the dictates of an ideology but mainly springs from your own, human experience” (qtd. in Surabhi Banerjee 77). Tutul is someone who straddles both the provincial and the urban worlds, and though she is acutely aware of where she comes from (small-town Patna where she was born and brought up, the world the old couple belongs to), in this cosmopolitan Calcutta household of her sister, she tries to learn the ropes of a new life and a new world view. She shows no signs of rejecting this entirely different value system, until the end of the story. She refuses to judge the “other” city. Tutul believes that though Shyamal is now adapted to doing things that he does not always want to do, for fear of stagnation in Hindustan Peters, he will ultimately lose to his rival in the rat-race, since there is still some “Patna” left in him. There is a certain playfulness about her straddling both the worlds/spaces, which is why perhaps she is the one who suggests to Shyamal the solution of artificially “creating” a problem within the factory, so that the company does not lose credibility in the market. It is quite obvious in the film that Shyamal is attracted to Tutul, and his “city values” also demand from him that he has few qualms about “using” Tutul’s beauty in his house party or in front of Sir Baren.

There is also another aspect to their relationship. I would suggest that Shyamal wants Tutul’s appreciation: she is from his past, from the small town that he has left behind in his pursuit of achievements in the city, and her appreciation is a measure of his success. He takes her to the meeting room in his office exclusively reserved for the directors and on being asked whether he is allowed in there, he says, “not yet”. He shares with her his dream of becoming a director, when he says that once he was moving towards this room but now he realises it is the room that is moving towards him. In his mind, he makes Tutul into a benchmark. His success in
the “corporate city” is really based on how far he can go away from his past and his provincial roots and the value system that his past represents.

The end of the film presents a complete rupture; the height of his success is also Shyamal’s ultimate failure. He loses his benchmark, his roots in small-town Patna. When he reaches the home “space”, after “climbing” all the “stairs”, he is not bubbling with the fervour of success; he is tired and sweaty. He is, at the end, completely of the city. Success is not sweet any more, the city has sucked him in, the city has come to possess him completely. Small-town Patna rejects him when Tutul, who has understood the implications of the promotion and cannot support Shyamal’s moral prostitution, returns the expensive watch he had given her. The last shot of the film has the fallen hero slumped on his chair, surrounded by the material rewards he has earned but utterly and absolutely lonely. It is perhaps not untrue to say that this is the success of the city – it has obliterated the remnants of small-town values in the migrant.

*Jana Aranya*, the third of the City trilogy, is again a cinematic adaptation of a Shankar novel of the same name. The thematic concerns of the film are once again in accordance with the preceding films of the city trilogy and the earlier *Mahanagar*. The film explores decadence and corruption in the Calcutta of 1975. The city is present in the film from its very first frame. It begins with a Calcutta University examination hall in the 70s. The walls of the room are full of political graffiti praising the Naxalite movement. The scene is one of total anarchy, where books and chits are being passed around, where students are talking amongst themselves, and where “help” comes from outside too, as the invigilators can only stare helplessly. Ravi S. Vasudevan in *Apu and After* notes the narrative’s “simulation of a documentary mode, as in the opening scene of the examination hall, or the ironic tracking of an application through a postal system”. He contends that this mode signals “the realm of contingency, putting a face and a name to an
anonymous process” (110). We are introduced to Somnath, the protagonist. He is a student who does not fare well in the examination because the examiner cannot read his minute handwriting. and faulty system. I would argue that Somnath’s poor performance in the examination, the result of the examiner misplacing his spectacles, encodes the city’s depersonalised anonymous machinations by relating them to human frailty. It results in Somnath’s inability to find any “respectable” employment in the city (which reveres its white collar babus) and he finally becomes a middle-man or a commercial agent. The bleak end shows Somnath supplying a girl to an influential business man from whom he wants to secure an order. As coincidence will have it, the girl turns out to be the sister of his friend Sukumar. It is a story, much like Seemabadhha, where the erosion of the value system of the main protagonist located in the city, or the city’s corrupting influence on the “virtuous” individual, is the central point.

The Calcutta of Jana Aranya (literally, “a forest of people”), is a Calcutta in crisis. The civic amenities do not work, telephone lines are dead and electricity is almost always in short supply. People are frustrated with their lot, unemployment rules and agitation takes the shape of rallies, wall graffiti, and a general intolerance and irritation in people. The city has more people than it can take care of. The only two options, as Somnath’s friend sees, available to these young men who do not secure jobs, are, as Somnath’s friend comments, “either to go to the dogs, or to turn into revolutionaries”. At a job interview, Somnath is “asked the usual inane questions that drove Siddhartha to distraction in The Adversary, culminating in one that really stumps him: ‘What is the weight of the moon?’ After this he abandons the effort” (Robinson 219). It is not just the macrocosm of the city that is in crisis, the domestic space has its own share of crises:

Somnath’s home, . . . carries all the familiar signs of heaviness, listlessness, and dullness. . . . In addition, a power shortage has afflicted Calcutta’s electricity supply
with lengthy blackouts: Most of the time we see Somnath’s family—his father, his eldest brother, Bhombol, and his brother’s wife, Kamala—literally in the dark. Somnath yearns for every opportunity to escape from his home into whatever daylight the city has to offer, and the brightly illuminated operatic world of the middlemen is, in fact, granted to him as a refreshing contrast. (Cooper 144) (emphasis added)

The outside world with its physical conditions of heat and dust, impinges on the bodies of the characters, and as in Pratidwandi, the relationship between a city and the bodies inhabiting it, is a continuous preoccupation in Jana Aranya. Somnath is seen traversing the city-space for work, often sweating and wiping the sweat off his face. The father in the film, an idealist, is seen as increasingly retreating into a shell, as he can no longer relate to any of his sons, who live in a very different world/city. Somnath and his father no longer inhabit a world they can share with each other: the curtain that is symbolically drawn between them, in one of the scenes, is less of a physical one than a wall separating two realities – the reality of “home” where the father carefully nurtures values and the reality of the “other city” that Somnath traverses in search of money and security.

It is interesting to note that all the films in this city quartet include an old man, woman or couple – the father and mother who visit their son’s house in Seemabaddha, the mother in Pratidwandi and the father in Jana Aranya – who represent the people the city has trampled on to move forward. These characters are usually seen inside their domestic spaces, where they are partly sheltered from the ravages of the changing city outside, or to which they have withdrawn. They are constantly shut indoors (or are seen only inside the home-space). When the father in Mahanagar ventures into the city in desperation, he is shown as a misfit, literally a beggar.
When he goes out to negotiate the city on his own terms, even if it means lying about his son and begging from his students, he disintegrates.

In the scene where Somnath accidentally meets Bishu Babu, an acquaintance who ushers him into a completely different world of middle men, Somnath *slips on* a banana peel and falls down on a known street in a known city – Harrison Road in Calcutta – but, symbolically, he has *slipped into* a city/street which he has never known, the “other city” with a completely different set of rules or mores. It is as if the known everyday Calcutta hides another Calcutta down below. I am reminded here of Alice tumbling down a tunnel to Wonderland in the garden of her own house. Somnath does not seem to suffer the doubts or vacillation of Siddhartha or Tutul, he is too passive to question. This city is both “real” and “imaginary”, as the rundown building that accommodates many offices, and the fictitious “firms” seems to suggest.

In fact, it [the film] mirrors a huge consumer society which gives rise to a new class—agent or *dalal* (in Bengali) or ‘the middleman’. The title itself concentrates on the ‘class’. Thus the film which is not a euphoristic but a committed one, reflects the core of demoralisation from a sociological point of view. (Surabhi Banerjee 81)

(emphasis in original)

This is an interesting point in the film, as we are also ushered into a city within the Calcutta that we know. While the everyday Calcutta is seen to be in perfect chaos, this “other” city is one full of possibilities. This is a place where things actually work, and one gets a second chance. There are ways to do things even if they are crooked ways. And as Mr. Adok says, Somnath’s “good boy” looks have an appeal in this part of the city. Somnath obviously belongs to a different world, a world of middle-class, *bhadralok* values, where honesty and idealism are not dead. He
brings these values to the “other city”. Like Arati in *Mahanagar*, Somnath will be valued by his colleagues, and they in turn will collaborate to corrupt him, to suck him into this “other city”.

Somnath also brings this new city into his home. His brother is already no stranger to this “other” city, but his father is retired and his sister-in-law is a homemaker, both innocent of the knowledge that such a place can exist in their known everyday city. As Somnath gets more and more involved with his new life, the connecting links to the older life loosen. The changes in Somnath, I argue, find a parallel in Kana, Sukumar’s sister. Kana is reminiscent of the Sutapa of *Pratidwandi*. Kana has turned to prostitution, while Sutapa is allegedly in a relationship with her boss. Neither of these women have any impressive educational credentials and the films reveal how such women negotiate the city when they are forced by circumstances in the domestic space to go out into the city to earn and fend for themselves. They remind one of Shanti in Santosh Kumar Ghosh’s *Kinu Goalar Gali*. Finally, as Somnath supplies a call-girl to a corrupt businessman, the “other” city completely takes him over, appropriates him to be one of its own. Up to this point he had not faced such a dilemma. His morals are subverted for the first time, and like any first timer he feels immense pain. But the money from the order for the optical whitener would take care of him for a whole year, and that is too much of a temptation. He is also too weak to resist the decision of the professional Kana. The incident changes him forever, since he is introduced to a newer side of his own self. “He gets the contract, but like Syamalendu in *Company Limited*, he no longer desires it as he once did. When he steps softly through the darkened door of his family’s flat, he is no more the innocent boy, but a murky adult who will always feel the urge to hide in his own shadow” (Robinson 220).

Satyajit Ray’s entire oeuvre, as Suranjan Ganguly points out, can be viewed as negotiating with the modern nation. This dominant concern can be read into Ray’s films beginning from
Pather Panchali (1955). “The films from Pather Panchali onwards become an extended study of an emerging nation as filtered through the experience of the men and women who seek to define themselves in relation to the larger forces that are transforming their world” (Suranjan Ganguly 5). And Calcutta, the nation’s oldest and most cosmopolitan city, becomes the microcosm of the urban experience of the emergent nation. Read in this context, Ray’s Calcutta trilogy – Pratidwandi (1970), Seemabaddha (1971) and Jana Aranya (1975) – and the earlier Mahanagar (1963) become elaborate meditations on the decadence of urban morality through various stages of the nation’s progress or regress. This meditation/mediation has its roots in Ray’s clearly delineated affiliations to the values of the Bengal Renaissance and the values that Ray himself had often referred to as “timeless” and “universal”. Unlike Mrinal Sen, whom we will discuss in a later section, Ray is concerned with morality rather than with the class war raging in the city. Ray’s city films mirror the amorality of the city sinking into chaos and degradation. “It was the struggle and corruption of the conscience-stricken person that fascinated him” (Robinson 319). Ray did not randomly choose Calcutta to be the locale of these films. Calcutta was indeed the Indian city where the ‘modern’ was conceived. But in the 1960s and 70s Calcutta ceased to be the seat of progress and reform, scientific and rational thought and sank into a mire of political violence, corruption and bureaucratic machinations.

Suranjan Ganguly points out one prominent Renaissance benchmark used in the city trilogy: “education as emancipatory and instilling values”. All these films present characters who are complete antitheses to this. The central characters here are educated but, lost in the urban jungle, they partake of the sinfulness perpetuated by the city. In these films, Ray “turns to a generation born around 1947, that has the most potential to bring about change but invariably loses out to frustration and despair” for different reasons (Suranjan Ganguly 115). Whereas
Subrata, Arati, Siddhartha and Somnath know no other way to get out of the labyrinthine maze of poverty, Shyamalendu has internalised his identity as a rat who has to win the race at any cost whatsoever. I would also argue that in chronological order, these films show a steady decline of hope and belief in the redemption of a “virtuous” individual pitted against the corrupt city. In *Mahanagar*, there is hope and the suggestion of endless possibilities for Subrata and Arati in a big city like Calcutta. In *Pratidwandi*, the reaction is at the other end of the spectrum, where Siddhartha refuses to give in to the demands of the city he both loves and loathes and decides to migrate from the city. In *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*, both Shyamalendu and Somnath are finally led to the path of compromise, where the “other” city claims them completely, stripping them of their earlier beliefs.

**Ritwik Ghatak: *Nagarik, Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha***

This section will look at four city films – *Nagarik* (1952-53), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962) – directed by Ritwik Ghatak. Born in Dhaka (in erstwhile East Bengal) and brought up in various small towns in the eastern parts of Bengal, Ghatak’s negotiations with Calcutta were always politically and ideologically charged, tempered as they were through his involvement with the leftist Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) and his experiences of Partition and the consequent struggles of refugees in the city. Ghatak’s perceptions of the city are witness to his ideological commitment and urban experiences, and they shape his narratives of the city. The full-length feature films that Ghatak made include *Nagarik* (1952-53), *Ajantrik* (1958), *Bari Theke Paliye* (1959), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960),

Ghatak wrote the script of Nagarik (The Citizen) in 1951. The film was made in the typical IPTA way, as a community effort. The film begins by situating the main protagonist of the film within the teeming millions in the metropolis of Calcutta:

The first visual introduction of the central character comes only after a panoramic sweep of metropolitan Calcutta, the camera panning over the shanties and shops, high rise buildings and ghettos, webs of electric wires all over the city and streets crowded with common people going about their work. Then in a long shot taken from a height of at least twenty feet he first introduces his character, one of a crowd, helping an old woman to cross the street. (Safdar Hashmi qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 48)

The city is depicted as highly mechanised, even the urban river and sky have not escaped the metal shackles that man has devised for them. In this urban jungle, man also has lost all freedom, submitting himself to the clockwork routine of daily life. The narrative begins in the evening, when millions of tired citizens have turned homewards after a hard day’s work. Ramu, the main protagonist belongs to a refugee household in the city, and his family is going through an economic crisis. They have moved from a larger and more spacious house on the other side of the border to a smaller and dingier Calcutta house, surrounded by tall buildings on all sides. The suffocated, claustrophobic family, especially the mother and the son, cherish the hope of one day moving back to a better house. The film narrates the family’s trials and tribulations – the mother’s nostalgia for her roots in East Bengal, the sister’s pain at her rejection by prospective
grooms and her utter dependence on her brother, the father’s lack of faith and hope, Uma’s unending wait for Ramu, and Sagar’s generosity towards the family. As the situation turns bleaker, the family cannot afford to pay rent for their present house and prepares to move to the slums. At the end, Sagar joins them as he also has lost his job.

Ghatak affirms that the nature of the film was political, it was a “sincere attempt at making political statements. . . . Despite a naïve fervour, the politics in the film is loud and intense” (Ghatak qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 46). The Partition and the trauma of its victims quite obviously form the centre of his narrative. A reading of Ghatak’s films using the idea of “accented” filmmakers, introduced by Hamid Naficy in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, provides useful insights into the politics of these films. Naficy’s “accented” filmmakers, have migrated to the West from their postcolonial or third world locations of origin. And though Ghatak does not strictly belong to this category, he has had to migrate from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Calcutta, a dislocation that affected his vision for all time to come:

Ghatak took one rupture in the history he witnessed as central – the partition of Bengal. As he went on extending that event into a metaphor for everything that was alienating and destructive in the experience of his community, and talked about the pervasive degeneration of his country sometimes solely in terms of it, he faced puzzlement and even incomprehension from his contemporaries. (Biswas “Her Mother’s Son”)

The idea of “accented” filmmaking can be connected to Ghatak’s style because of the dialectics of displacement and emplacement in his films. Here it will be useful to distinguish between the
notions of “space” and “place”. Place is a segment of space that people imbue with special meaning and value. It can refer to any physical entity, a country, a state, a village, a house or a corner in the house. It refers not only to a physical entity but people’s relations to it and social relations within it. Naficy claims that,

In addition, since place is also historically situated, displacement and emplacement have a temporal dimension—often linked to the dates of a great homelessness or grand homecoming. . . . By marking the onset, or the end, of the exilic trauma, temporal milestones maintain a profound hold on the displaced peoples’ psychology and identity. (Naficy 153)

The Bengal Partition of 1947 proved to be such a “temporal milestone” for Ghatak, in whom the cinematic chronotopes refer to settings related to that event. In his films like Nagarik, Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar and Subarnarekha, Ghatak, the “accented” filmmaker, imagines his place of origin in certain ways that are driven by national, historical, political and personal differences, experiences and desires. The reason behind his obsessive need to see things in terms of the past trauma is perhaps the overarching silence about it. The Partition of Bengal did not elicit the response in terms of literature and films that it should have. Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen do not speak of the Partition in their films, though both of them come from East Bengali families. In Ghatak, in the “face of this silence, the history model of narration itself had to be played with, it had to be crossed with elements borrowed from traditional community-centred forms – epic, chronicle play, allegory, musical theatre” (Biswas “Her Mother’s Son”). By reading Ghatak as an “accented” filmmaker, I am interpreting his films not as essential depictions of a particular community or of himself, but as personal journeys that operate through and “play” with the multiplicity of his inherited inspirations, like the art forms that he had first
hand acquaintance with. The language used in “accented” films, as in Ghatak’s films, is also important here. This point will be discussed later in greater detail.

In Ghatak’s films, the homeland’s chronotopical representations (which are rare, however) emphasise the timelessness of the place in his mind, and the retrospective narratives of his films underscore the nostalgia and the longing to return. We have a rare example in Komal Gandhar where the theatre group travels to Lalgola for a show, and the actors stand on the banks of the river Padma, gazing nostalgically at the other side. Bhrigu points out to Anasuya a cluster of huts on the other side of the river, among which is his lost home too. His lament for his lost home, which is so near yet so far, part of another country altogether, rings in the ears of the viewers. The place of exile (in Ghatak’s case, it is Calcutta) is envisioned in “accented” cinema generally as interior locations and closed settings like constricted living quarters. The claustrophobic atmosphere created in such a mise-en-scene affects the psychology of the characters inhabiting such alien worlds. For Ghatak, Calcutta, the place his characters have been forced to migrate to, appears as an overcrowded city, with narrow lanes and buildings upon buildings. Individuals here are lost amidst confusing throngs of people. Most of his characters have lost their earlier material trappings and have to live without hope as people of the lowest rung of the society. Be it Ramu in Nagarik or Anasuya in Komal Gandhar, all of Ghatak’s characters desperately long to see a clear view of the sky in a city where smoke blocks their vision. “In accented cinema, therefore, every story is both a private story of an individual and a social and public story of exile and diaspora” (Naficy 31).

Ramu, in Nagarik, keeps looking at a calendar picture that he has in his room. It is a painting depicting a bucolic scene, which shows tile-roofed houses scattered over a vast valley. It is everything that his present habitation is not, and it is the utopia he wants to escape to from the
confines of the city, Calcutta. With infinite hope, he proclaims, “I am different. Whatever I wish, will happen.” Ignoring his father’s advice to acknowledge their pitiful state and understand that an overnight change is not a possibility, he believes that he will rise above his condition in a matter of months. But till the end, the rural idyll eludes him with its false promise of a better tomorrow, until it completely shatters and he tears up the calendar. Ghatak uses the recurrent figure of a violinist, who stands by the roadside and plays a hauntingly romantic tune, a tune which inspires Ramu to dream on. When his situation worsens, he sees that he cannot order the inspirational music either. It does not play when he wants it to, the violinist leaves when Ramu asks him to play the music for him, thereby suggesting perhaps that inspiration cannot be external, but should come from ones own self. In an urban setting, the violinist does not play for his own pleasure but for money. He asks for alms at the end of his performance, but when Ramu cannot give him alms, he has to move away from the violinist, embarrassed. With this, Ramu steps into the murky adult world of reality. “The violinist is used as a true theatre motif, i.e., the chorus or Vivek in Jatra. He becomes more significant when the romantic tune on his violin is silenced as the strings break and the chorus of [the] Communist Internationale takes over” (Somnath Mukherjee qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 47).

Once he actually enters the job market, Ramu realises that unemployment is rampant in the city and people more educated than him are applying for low clerical positions. In the beginning, his father had equated Ramu’s job hunt with his own habit of buying lottery tickets in the hope of becoming rich. Banking on getting a job is a gamble in the city, he feels. Calcutta is portrayed as a city of decadence and disintegration. There are political rallies everywhere, and petty party-politics seem to be a comforting refuge for these many educated, unemployed young men. A
friend advises him to join some group in order to survive. But Ramu is shown as reluctant to join this bandwagon:

Ramu contains within him assorted middle-class values and conflicts. His assertions against the degeneration around him never go outside the four walls of his house. Outside, in the world of affairs, he is a chicken-hearted escapist….A sense of deprivation and injustice wells up in him and it is revolting. But he simply fails to venture out of his well-defined middle-class boundaries. (Someshvar Bhowmik qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 49)

Ramu is contrasted to his friend Susanta, the fire-brand trade-union leader, and the escapist in Ramu does not want to understand or empathise with Susanta’s beliefs and ideals. Susanta dreams of the unity of the poor and the dispossessed. Till his dream turns sour, Ramu finds solace only in nostalgic reveries about his past and day-dreams about escaping to an idyllic location. The idyllic painting on the wall calendar is Ramu’s “locus amoenus” set off against the sordid city. The idyll represents a place of refuge, safety, pleasure and survival – in other words, “a pleasant place” (Andrews 57).

The women in the film have an interesting relationship with the city. The men are seen as largely emasculated, dreamy and impractical. The mother is an ever-suffering figure, trying to make both ends meet. She raves and rants and blames her destiny for all her miseries. Her daughter’s increasing age and her son’s unemployment plague her constantly. When her husband falls ill, as a last resort, she pawns her gold. Her only source of hope is her graduate son, and his chances in the city’s job market. But her son fails to secure a space for himself and she fails in her struggle against the city. Sita’s age becomes a deterrent in the way of her marriage. She does
not have education and so cannot step out of the house to earn her own living. Here, the city, I argue, becomes a lost opportunity, a possibility she cannot make use of. Ramu also has a love interest in the form of Uma, who lives in another ramshackle, old Calcutta house with a tenant in every room. She has an aged mother and a younger sister who takes to disreputable ways of earning money. While her mother lies ill at home, Shiuli (Uma’s sister) goes to see a film with a male friend, stepping out of the “home” space to the murky, disreputable, male city. Over time, Shiuli becomes part of the “other” city that Uma and Sita resist despite all odds. Shiuli says that her powdered face hides the scars of her past. Uma, on the other hand, pales into the background with time. She only has an unemployed lover. But at the end, she decides to be part of the people’s movement, identifying with the hopeless people who are moving to the slums, with a renewed zeal for life and hope for the future. She decides to remain part of Ramu’s life.

*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) begins in suburban Calcutta with a family of six. They are refugees from East Bengal who have been allotted a space in a refugee colony. The father is a garrulous school teacher. The mother is overworked and irritable, like the mother in *Nagarik*. The eldest brother Shankar is an aspiring musician. The second sister Nita is a rather plain-looking working woman. The other sister Gita is self-indulgent and beautiful, and Montu, the other brother, is an athlete. Conventionally, Shankar should have taken up the responsibility of running the household, but he is blissfully unaware of reality and devotes all his time to music. His irresponsibility forces Nita to take on the burden of back-breaking drudgery, which she is happy to do. She is in love with Sanat, a young scholar who wants to pursue further studies. Nita is proud of and happy for both these men in her life and is willing to sacrifice her happiness for their sake. The film follows Nita’s life over many trials and her suffering, and it ends with a hint
that Nita is not alone in this city, that there are many other women who sacrifice their future to carry the burden of their households.

The film primarily explores ideas of home, exile, displacement and emplacement with special reference to the Partition, which was the central issue of Nagarik as well as the other films I am about to analyse. Unlike Nagarik, the main protagonist here is a woman and it is her trials and tribulations that Ghatak follows in the film. Meghe Dhaka Tara is closer to Subarnarekha, where the women are symbolically sacrificed for the sake of the family, just like Bengal was halved into two. The film begins in Calcutta’s suburbs and as in Nagarik, has a dysfunctional family at its centre. The father is also embittered and sees no hope of a better life in the city. The mother is dehumanised in the quest to make both ends meet. She does not want her elder daughter married because she is afraid that if Nita leaves, the family will starve to death. She even pushes her younger daughter towards Sanat, the man with whom Nita is in love. Both the outside world of the city and the inner space of the house are spaces which offer no comfort to Nita. She goes out of the house every day to earn her daily living and that too by honest means. She tries not to become part of the “other” city, and struggles to earn a living like any man, except that the men in her life are emasculated like Ramu or Sagar. Gita chooses to take another route for survival. She understands that she has little chance of survival in the outside world. Hence she manipulates Sanat, who changes the course of his life to earn a living for her. Like Shiuli, she chooses to abandon her impoverished household and is not remorseful about the fact that she has stolen her sister’s lover. For her family, which has migrated from the other side of the border Calcutta is an exilic space; but Nita is doubly exiled when she is asked to leave the house by her senile father. She has tuberculosis and is a burden on the family. She is forced into exile in the mountains. The Himalayas are the scene of the happy union of Shiva and
Uma, but Nita goes there to die, alone and wasted. Nita, like Sita in *Subarnarekha*, is a woman whose dreams and aspirations are killed by the cruel realities of the city that they try to negotiate.

Nita’s father, the garrulous school teacher, is an interesting figure. We will see a parallel to him in *Subarnarekha*, in Haraprasad. The school and the school teacher were central to the refugee colonies that took shape on the fringes of Calcutta. Manas Ray, in his semi-autobiographical account of the birth and development of the refugee colony of Netaji Nagar, recalls the centrality of the school to the community that formed in the colony:

> In those days, the local school and the community were indivisible. The school was the most potent source of the imaginative mapping of the locality. The press for education (*shiksha*) was enormous. . . . Education of course brought the ability to attain economic security and, accompanying it, the ability to cope with moral vices. (Manas Ray 159)

We see Nita’s father and Haraprasad as trying to lay the foundations of the moral and economic development of the refugee community. Haraprasad’s failure in *Subarnarekha* is again a pointer to how the city scuttles these noble missions.

At the centre of *Komal Gandhar* (1961) there are two rival theatre groups, Niriksha and Dakshinapath. The leader of Niriksha is Bhrigu and the leader of Dakshinapath is Shanta. And while Bhrigu tries to maintain the creative standards of his group, Shanta’s team is more interested in downgrading them. Shanta’s niece Anasuya is a talented actress and wants to go beyond such petty behaviour for the sake of a future theatre movement. The film, in a sense, follows the love story of Bhrigu and Anasuya, through a number of incidents and accidents.
The film is based on the motifs of “journey” and “quest”. All the important characters are seen searching for something or someone worthwhile and the changes in scene and setting indicate the constant movement for this search. The film starts in Calcutta, with a theatre performance. And though the film moves from Calcutta to Lalgola to Kurseong to Birbhum to Budge Budge, Calcutta remains the stage of action. It is a crisis-struck Calcutta that is portrayed in Komal Gandhar. The city is seen teeming with refugees. The city is bursting at its seams with the pressure of increasing population, deaths from hunger, unemployed youths and a failing theatre movement in the midst of all this. The story is set a decade after the Indian Independence, an independence won at the cost of Partition. The film begins with a play based on Partition and the refugee influx into the Calcutta from the other side of the border, an issue that is central to its structure. An important utterance in the play, “Even the sky is all smoke”, portrays the refugees’ first impression of the city. And this “smoky sky” is a recurrent motif in the film, symbolising an asphyxiating city, Ramu’s city. The modern city of Calcutta with all its machines is oppressive to the people from the luxuriant, vast open spaces of East Bengal. The smoke-filled skies form the canopy of a shelter which is hostile for these people. It is less of a refuge and more of an exile. The lost Eden of the past is nostalgically reconstructed by juxtaposing the remembered golden land by the river Padma with the exilic city which is the present reality. Ghatak emphasises the sense of territoriality, geography and rootedness and the loss of these by means of the language of the film:

One of the greatest deprivations of exile is the gradual deterioration in and potential loss of one’s original language, for language serves to shape not only individual identity but also regional and national identities prior to displacement . . . most
accented films are bilingual, even multilingual, multivocal, and multiaccented. (Naficy 24)

In *Komal Gandhar*, the plays staged by Bhrigu’s group Nirikshan are often in an East Bengali dialect, where the characters act out the trauma of the Partition and mass migration. Most of Ghatak’s main characters have their roots in East Bengal and even when they are part of the Calcutta milieu, they often lapse into their East Bengali dialect, risking incomprehension and ridicule by a section of the audience.

When Bhrigu and Anasuya stand on the banks of Padma at Lalgola, the river, the memories of the lost homes and the pain of exile bring them together. Anasuya goes back in time and space to her homeland in East Bengal, and she claims that along with the loss of everything during the Partition, what the East Bengalis have also lost is "nishchindi" or tranquillity. They both articulate their exhaustion at their shared loss and the movement to Calcutta that the loss of home engendered.

The claustrophobia of the city is heightened in the two scenes where Bhrigu and Anasuya sit in the former’s room. In “accented” films, the closed form in the mise-en-scene consists of such constricted living quarters. The camera angles here further heighten the impossibility of going beyond the high walls, to any open space. The iron bars on the window of Bhrigu’s room communicate the effect of a prison house with the inhabitant as the prisoner. I would quote two more instances to take this point forward. In the first instance, Anasuya is attracted towards the window, on hearing a bird call. She tries to look beyond the iron bars, and we can see, with her, only a slice of the city sky, the vision mostly blocked by the high walls of the adjacent house. The chirping bird takes her back in time and space to a more idyllic setting. In the second
instance, the city is lashed by heavy rains. Anasuya is in Bhrigu’s room for the rehearsals. She extends her palms out of the window to touch the rain, a symbol of purity in a city afflicted by pollution. Bhrigu is shown in both instances as not having the inclination or the time to appreciate such benefices of nature. When they travel to Kurseong for the rehearsals, vast open spaces open up in front of them. There are mountains dotting the distant horizons. The characters run around singing songs praising the bounties of the universe. But Shibnath gets impatient, he can only think of getting back to Calcutta. Rehearsing at Kurseong seems like a luxury to him. For rebellious art to take shape, they have to be back in Calcutta, he claims. Perhaps this is a comment on Ghatak’s own art, one that comes out of the squalor and poverty of the city. Rishi comments on this saying that most of the members of the troupe have become so urbanised that they are “fish out of water” when they are outside the smoky city of Calcutta.

The two troupes which are at the centre of the action of the film are symbolic of the macrocosm of the city and act out on a smaller scale, the problems plaguing the city. The main characters are all part of the theatre groups, which are like contiguous families. The dynamics between the members of the groups of love and hatred, sympathy and jealousy, are played out as in any “normal” family. This reflects the unstable nature of the times during which the story is set, when “normal” families were torn apart and loss or death of family members was an everyday reality. Bhrigu’s mother died of starvation and Anasuya’s mother died in the riots. Members of the troupe take part in the struggles of the city with a revolutionary zeal. Their songs at the rehearsals often reflect the disturbed political situation of the city and their response to it. They go out to take part in a procession, singing protest songs, even on the day of their dress-rehearsal. Bhrigu also feels that an artiste should not live a closed life but take part in the political scene as a moral duty. The character of Debu Bose is that of a political activist who
mobilises politically conscious artistes like Bhrigu to participate in political rallies. Towards the end of the film, there is a protest march of primary school teachers and Anasuya walks into it, amidst police firing. Debu Bose takes money from her to pay for the tickets of some village school masters who were lost in the city. Most of the troupe members are seen not only as engaged in theatrical experimentation inside “Niriksha” but as tackling real problems of the outside world. Jaya fights against her orthodox, feudal family and takes part in the theatre movement, Rishi is ecstatic to see the theatre scene blooming, with many new groups bringing out experimental productions. Kunal and Gagan collaborate to write a masterpiece on the agitation over the Bengal Partition of 1905. According to Bhrigu, the play has the epic dimensions of Nabanna (a famous play by Bijan Bhattacharya on the 1943 famine).

In Komal Gandhar, the relationship between Anasuya and the city is explored for its many layers of meaning. In Anasuya’s psyche distinctions between categories like “home”, “exile”, “displacement” and “emplacement” are blurred. She has come to Calcutta from East Bengal, on a home-seeking journey. That the journey is not merely physical but psychological and philosophical is evident, when standing on the banks of Padma she opens her heart to Bhrigu and articulates her sense of exhaustion resulting from a journey of such dimensions. Her relationship with Calcutta is one of love and hate. She acknowledges it as a city which lacks the idyllic open structure of her homeland, even the sky is filled with smoke in the city, and it reminds her of the rupture between her past and present. This represents not just the loss of a motherland, but loss of the biological mother as well, in the Partition riots. But that she is now committed to the space of the city is clear when the chance to move to France is offered to her. The role of Shakuntala assumes symbolic proportions here. Anasuya, like Shakuntala, has to leave her home behind and go into exile, whether in Calcutta or in France. Unknown to her, Calcutta has ceased to remain a
place of exile for her. At the end, she realises that it is only in this city that she must stay, to participate in its exemplary struggles for survival, if she is to become a worthy daughter of her mother. The city’s pull is symbolically represented in the child tugging at Anasuya’s clothes, and she has to relent and reject the man for whom she has waited six years.

*Subarnarekha* (1962/65) begins in a refugee colony, Nabajeeban Colony, in Calcutta. Haraprasad and Ishwar have come together with the ideal of collective action, to reconstruct the lives of the people in the colony. Haraprasad will teach Sanskrit and Ishwar History in the newly opened colony school. Ishwar has a little sister, Sita, and he also adopts Abhiram, the son of a refugee woman abducted by her landlord. One day, Ishwar’s Marwari friend Ramvilas offers him a job in his iron foundry at Chhatimpur and Ishwar accepts it. Sita is excited at the prospect of moving to a new “home” and pleads with Ishwar to take Abhiram with them. But Haraprasad thinks Ishwar is a traitor who has let go of his ideals, by fleeing the city and its refugees who need his presence. Their new house in Chhatimpur is by the side of the river Subarnarekha. An abandoned airstrip and an airforce officers’ club are seen as symbols of the ravages of the World War II. Abhi and Sita make this their playground. Ishwar sends Abhi to a boarding school. A few years later, Ishwar is promoted to the post of the Manager of the foundry. Sita has by now grown into a fine woman who sings beautifully. The film, from here on, charts the romance and marriage of Abhi and Sita, defying Ishwar’s displeasure, and their life and tragic end in Calcutta.

All the main characters of *Subarnarekha* as in the other Ghatak films that I have discussed, are people who have newly migrated from East Bengal. We see young Sita constantly asking her brother about her new “home”. The refugee colony’s makeshift nature, and the violence that marks its space (like the abduction of Abhi’s mother), do not make it her “ideal home”. Ishwar is also eager to provide a better “home” for her, away from the hostile city. He
gives in to corruption and compromises on all the ideals that were his and Haraprasad’s, for this cause. This results in a rift between Ishwar and Haraprasad, for which reason Haraprasad does not even allow his starving children to stay with Ishwar after his wife’s death by starvation. Calcutta is seen as a city of refugees but it cannot really provide any refuge. Even after Ishwar has moved out of the city, the other members of the colony continue to be plagued by the destructive forces that urbanism can unleash on the city’s homeless.

Hamid Naficy stresses how exilic deterritorialisation in “accented” films necessitates an enhanced stress on territoriality, often in the form of emphasis on nature and the natural order. Here he also invokes Bakhtin who mentions the three “idyllic chronotopes”: the love idyll, the family idyll and the agricultural idyll. In Subarnarekha all these three elements are played out, once the family of three, Ishwar, Sita and Abhiram, moves from Calcutta to Chhatimpur. For my analysis, I extend the “agricultural idyll” to a general “natural idyll”, which refers to the locale of Chhatimpur with the river Subarnarekha and the vast open spaces, set up in opposition to the “smoky skies” of the city. Iswar, Sita and Abhi form a contingent family structure, much like the theatre groups of Komal Gandhar. While they are children, the relationship between Sita and Abhi is like that of siblings, and their childhood games on the airstrip remind one of Apu and Durga in Pather Panchali. It is only much later that they move to the next stage of their relationship, that too amidst tall, elegant trees, the gentle rustle of leaves and the mysterious chiaroscuro of sunlight and shade. Sita sings a Krishna kirtan for Abhi, while sitting among the hillocks by the river: “The spaciousness of Sita’s homescape as an adolescent contrasts with her claustrophobic confines in Calcutta as a young adult” (O’Donnell “Woman and Homeland”). The image of Sita singing by the river brings back to us Nita from Meghe Dhaka Tara. A related
trope of the film, is that Sita is not just Ishwar’s sister: she replaces his dead mother. Moinak Biswas elaborates on the scene where this relationship is articulated:

As the director keeps playing with his favourite low-angle shots the impending destruction comes to be signalled through the image. Iswar draws Sita close to him, asks her how she could exactly be like the mother she has never seen. Sita leans forward, caresses his forehead and whispers in his ear that she is his mother. We see the two of them in an extreme low-angle shot that takes in part of the fan whirling on the ceiling. The strain on the limits of the frame begins to point to the breaching of the borders of named relations. (Biswas “Her Mother’s Son”)

The Chhatimpur “natural idyll”, far removed from the polluting influences of the city, with its vast expanses of space and the undulating plains near the river bed provides the ultimate playground for all these characters and they “spend days of extended childhood” here (Biswas 8). The image of a “locus amoenus” surfaces here again. It is Chhatimpur and not Calcutta which serves as a site of refuge for the motherless and the “motherland-less” children in these three characters. A return to Calcutta for these three, at different points of time, proves disastrous.

Abhi and Sita elope and try to make a new life in Calcutta. But the city is as hostile as ever. As in Nabajeeban colony, in the slums that they inhabit, the promise of a fresh, new life eludes them yet again. Their days in Calcutta are marked by struggle against poverty and hopelessness. The modern day Ram and Sita are exiled in the city where trials and tribulations form their lives, while Ishwar acts out the role of Dasaratha. Later, when Ishwar travels back to Calcutta with Haraprasad, it marks the beginning of a tragic end. Calcutta as opposed to Chhatimpur is thus
seen as a space of conflict and strife. “Sita loses her brothers when the man-woman relationship is invoked in the space of the city which embodies the historical present” (Biswas 8).

Though the film really is about the turbulent times of displacement and emplacement of refugees seeking a new home, it is also indicative of the moral regression that the city, the state and the country had suffered at that time. At the end, it is less about geographical rootlessness and more about the loss of a moral anchor, and Ishwar serves as the symbol for this. Ishwar, from the very beginning, reveals the germs of a character who can lose his moral moorings. He deserts the other refugees as soon as he gets a chance to create a better life for himself elsewhere. He never understands the emotional depth of the forlorn tunes of Sita’s songs or Abhi’s sad stories. His degeneration reaches its climax, when he indulges in drunken revelry at a bar in Calcutta with Haraprasad. The music used in this drinking sequence underscores his moral erosion. Ghatak himself says, “Fellini used the ‘Patricia’ music in La Dolce Vita to lash out at a degenerate, decadent western civilization. I was tempted to pass a similar judgement on my dear Bengal in Subarnarekha. Hence the orgy in a bar has been juxtaposed with this music to throw an oblique hint at something” (Ghatak qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 67). Fate brings Ishwar to his sister’s room, as she prepares to receive her first customer as a prostitute. The brother, who had once given up his ideals to fiercely protect his little sister from homelessness, gives them up again to cause her death. It is the conflict between the collective and the individual, the rootless millions’ need to survive and the personal aspirations of Ishwar, their leader, that creates most of the tension in the narrative and the final tragedy. Ashish Rajadhyaksha very tellingly discusses the tragedy and the city’s ominous presence, at the end:

As he faces her, his sister and mother, in an incestuous relationship, all traditional images of the feminine principle lie destroyed before him. The last hold of a sanity
that clings to the eternal hope of salvation through a return to the Mother’s protection, is now destroyed before the commercialization that would respect no relationships. And lying in destruction with this is also the classical tradition, the music of the protective landscape, now devolved into a commodity like any other.

(Rajadhyaksha qtd. in Haimanti Banerjee 71)

While all these Ghatak narratives in some way or other, discuss the experience of homelessness that followed the Partition, they are markedly different in their treatment and description of Partition as an event. This becomes obvious when one contrasts them with classic Partition narratives, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) for example. These narratives were accentuated by the violence that marked Partition, the bloody riots and the retribution that followed. Ghatak’s cinematic renderings of Partition and its aftermath assiduously omit references to the violence, except for some stray references embedded within larger narratives. While they nostalgically recall the lost homeland, the characters keep violence out of their narratives. Probably Anasuya does refer to the riots when she talks about the loss of her mother. But, here too, there are no graphic descriptions of violence. Ghatak’s focus remains strongly on the material and emotional stress that the refugees suffer in the host city. The Derridean notion of “cities of asylum” is again relevant to the reading of these cinematic narratives. Contrary to the notion of a “hospitable” city, the Calcutta that appears in these narratives is one that constantly rejects those who seek refuge in its fold.
Mrinal Sen: *Akash Kusum, Interview, Calcutta 71, Padatik, Parashuram, Ekdin Pratidin, Chaalchitra and Kharij*

Satyajit Ray, in his essay “Problems of a Bengal Filmmaker”, in his book *Our Films, Their Films* (1976), speaks of a range of difficulties in regional language filmmaking. Since Bengali is spoken by only a small fraction of India’s population, films made in that language are poorly funded and equipped. There is also a scarcity of thoughtful, appreciative spectators. He says, “…having in mind the nature of our audience and the resources at our disposal, we are further obliged to aim at an overall simplicity of approach. ‘Big’ stories are out, and so are big stars” (Ray 42). Mrinal Sen, Ray’s contemporary and one of the great trio formed by Ray, Ghatak and Sen, epitomises the sparse and ‘simple’ film making that Ray described and advocated for the Bengali filmmaker. Sen has always stood for a Spartan style, seeking to break down class barriers through his films.

Born on 14 May 1923 at Faridpur (now part of Bangladesh), Sen came to Calcutta in 1940, to attend the Scottish Church College. He had arrived in a Calcutta caught up in the ravages of World War II, with bomb-scares, blackouts, famine and communal riots. Calcutta entered his consciousness in ways he did not understand fully, but the city influenced his art to a great extent:

As soon as I came to the big city, I was seized with a kind of fear. I confronted a crowd, a huge crowd. I felt I was standing alone in the crowd—an anonymous, self-absorbed, indifferent swarm, even menacing and monstrous. I (was) suffering acutely from a depressing sense of emptiness. Till things proved different, I remained an outsider. (qtd. in Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 261)
Sen plunged headlong into the politics of the city. He worked closely with IPTA, was active in volunteer work among Burmese refugees, and was witness to the ravages of the Great Famine of 1943. These experiences have tempered Sen’s perceptions of the city.

Bengali cinema in the 1950s and 60s was dominated by stars like Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, the legendary romantic pair, and the storylines were also in appropriately sentimental and romantic. It was at this time that Sen made Akash Kusum (1965), based on a story by Ashish Barman. The film did not find an enthusiastic response from the audience. Reviewers and critics condemned the hero Ajoy’s actions. The film also sparked off a debate that raged in the ‘letters to the editor’ column in The Statesman. The debate pitted Satyajit Ray against Sen. Ray questioned the topicality of the film, against Sen’s and Barman’s claims. He wrote, “If Akash Kusum has any contemporaniety, it is on the surface—in its modish narrative devices and in some lively details of the city-life” (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 51). It is these “details of the city-life” that prompt me to take up this film for analysis.

Akash Kusum opens with a long shot of the Howrah Bridge, thereby locating the film firmly in the city of Calcutta. Ajoy and Monica played by Soumitra Chatterjee and Aparna Sen respectively, meet at a wedding, but they have come from worlds apart. Monica gives Ajoy her address. It is in New Alipore, one of the most up-market neighbourhoods in Calcutta, while the very next shot shows Ajoy’s house: derelict and decrepit. Ajoy’s actions in the film are symptomatic of larger issues of the times. With the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru, the nation was on the brink of losing the idealism that characterized post-Independence India. At this point of time, Calcutta witnessed a change in its class make-up: “a rootless generation with an agrarian background was turning into the urban middle class” (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 61) of the city. The city’s economy was in the doldrums, with imports almost closed and foreign goods out of
the market. Corruption and money-making through illegal means were the rule of the day. At such a time, selling defective second hand goods was a profitable business, and our hero, Ajoy, indulges in this. When Monica’s mother asks for his address, Ajoy does not know what to say. He finally gives them the number of his rich friend, who has an apartment at the heart of the city. With Monica’s family, he uses the façade of being a rich, promising young man, using his friend’s trappings. Even when he is conning this family, he is confident of striking gold in the city with his new business of selling second-hand scientific instruments. There is an infectious optimism in him (which comes to the fore when he exclaims that he will one day buy the whole of the city of Calcutta). From the rooftop of his office building, he looks around the city spread below and feels like Napoleon, king of all he surveys. His friend, a cautious man, can only smile indulgently. This is the story of one man’s dreams of transcending class barriers and nursing aspirations typical of the city’s upper classes. The shot of the race course perhaps tries to prove this point. The race course is where the city hopes to hit the jackpot, making money overnight.

In one of the crucial scenes in the film, Ajoy is seen standing at the street corner with his supplier Fani Babu, in the neighbourhood adjoining the crossing of Wellington Street and Dharmatola Street (now Nirmal Chandra Street and Lenin Sarani), when Monica passes by in her car. Ajoy slinks away from her view and hides, an action which has its seeds in his presence in that area of Calcutta. Though the real estate boom in Calcutta has changed the space character of this area considerably now, in the 1960s, the neighbourhood was typically lower middle class and lower class in nature. As the spatial narrative of the scene shows, it had a dingy, unclean and derelict look with pavement dwellers and beggars thronging the streets and homeless people littering the Wellington Square Park (now Raja Subodh Mullick Square). The shops lining the streets were old and shabby, most of them old record stores and shacks acting as hardware shops.
and odd repair shops. It was not an area for Ajoy to be seen in, especially because he was posing as a successful and rich businessman. Here, the city is geographically divided in terms of class differences and solidified notions/definitions of who can be seen where. Ajoy’s presence in that space of lower class decrepitude would have defined the reality of his class situation for Monica, had she spotted him smoking at the street corner in the company of a decrepit looking Fani babu. As Sharon Zukin defines, this is a “failed” public space – “due to crime, a perceived lower-class and minority presence, and despair” (141).

Sen’s often cited (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 2009) practice of juxtaposing still and moving images is often used in the representation of the city in Akash Kusum. Ajoy and Monica plan to go out for a lunch date, but heavy rains stop them from meeting. This is followed by a sequence of stills depicting life in the city during the rains. Most of the stills show how life stops for an average citizen of the city, for the ones who travel in trams, double-decker buses or on foot. There are scenes of people trudging through the water-logged streets, or helplessly standing or riding in hand-pulled rickshaws. But there are also scenes of cars getting stalled in the water-logged streets. In an interesting use of cinematic technique; the stalled, static, delayed and paralyzed city finds its expression in these ‘stills’. On another level, the rains which do not let the two protagonists meet, is a great leveller, bringing down all class differences between a man who rides a car and the one who uses the bus.

Slowly a romantic relationship develops between Ajoy and Monica, and the city is seen through the eyes of the couple. This brings out another aspect of the city, as a space of intimacy. The city, beyond its hustle and bustle, opens up spaces where tranquil romance is possible. Sen carefully chooses certain stereotypical segments of the city to construct this space. Spaces of intimacy are developed around areas like the gardens of Victoria Memorial, the Maidan and the
ghats or landing-stages by the river Ganga, as the couple hold hands or take photographs of each other. These scenes are presented as frozen shots, perhaps to show that their relationship is based on many lies. With Monica, Ajoy is experiencing something that is not part of his ordinary life, romancing the daughter of a rich family. Since they are not part of his normal flow of life, perhaps these remain captured as static images in his consciousness. One might go a step further and speculate, reading the use of static images quite literally into the text of their affair, that the ‘stills’ are a visual representation of a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of Ajoy. And the spaces around which these intimate scenes are constructed are part of the elaborate deceit on which Ajoy bases his ‘imagined’ life. The gardens are a far cry from the street corner at the crossing of Wellington Street and Dharmatola Street, where he seeks his livelihood. These stills flow into a mobile sequence of the city. Later, a Calcutta street scene in shown, the traffic is in full flow, and a voiceover of Ajoy and Monica indulging in romantic banter is heard in the background. The ingenious use of sound mixing brings out the fact that the dialogue between them is not part of the dynamics of the city, which moves on of its own accord. All this, I would argue, brings out the notion of an indifferent city, that goes on irrespective of what happens to its inhabitants.

The first thing that Ajoy wants when he gets rich, he tells his mother, is a plushly decorated four roomed flat in a respectable locality. The new house will have a lot of sun and air, and a garden, unlike the dank, damp rooms they now stay in. The unattainability of such a house is accentuated by the physical context of the narration, the decrepit, damp room of Ajoy’s present house. The dream finds its anti-climax in a tragic-comic fall, as Ajoy falls through a hole in his bed. And there the image freezes: the frozen image of Ajoy falling in between two spaces, reminiscent of Somnath slipping on a banana peel in *Jana Aranya*. The end of the film is tragic,
as Ajoy is caught out in his lies even as he prepares himself to tell the truth. Sen’s vision ends
with an affirmation of the inability of the city’s lower classes to transcend class barriers. Every
class is put in its place and is assigned its space, and any possibility of moving upwards socially
or spatially is achieved through lies and dreams. The city cuts a grim picture, and has little or no
possibility for its youth.

*Interview* (1970), again based on an Ashish Barman story, was Sen’s first attempt at avant
garde cinema, and was influenced by the alienation techniques of western theatre. Dipankar
Mukhopadhyay feels that *Interview* has a deep connection with *Akash Kusum*, “It is a logical
extension of *Akash Kusum*: what could have happened to Ajoy if he had seriously tried to get a
job. . . . In *Akash Kusum*, the theme was, metaphorically, a take-off from Aesop’s fable of the
crow putting on the plumes of a peacock; in *Interview*, the protagonist literally goes on searching
for a Western-style suit in his attempt to enter the Big League” (86-7). While the credits roll on
the screen, we hear some typical job interview questions in the background. Ranjit, the
protagonist, “just a common man working at a press and staying at Bhowanipore”, is from a
lower middle class family in the city. He wants a job that is better than the one he has, and
Shekharkaku, a family friend, is helping him get one in a foreign mercantile firm. But Ranjit has
to appear in front of the board of interviewers in smart, western clothes. The rest of the film
narrates his comic, day-long sojourn through the city in search of a suit.

At the end of this futile search and after the loss of the proposed job opportunity, a
completely dejected Ranjit is met by a representative of the audience in a dark room. He
introduces himself as the spectator, asks him probing, ruthless questions. Ranjit is shaken and
loses his cool. Finally, it is obvious to Ranjit that in a dysfunctional system, where clothes define
people’s fate, revolution is an impending reality. Newsreel footages of the American civil rights
movement and the Vietnam War spring up on the screen and a seemingly trivial everyday incident in Calcutta is connected to these global political issues. Ranjit sees himself dressed in a suit standing like a mannequin at a shop window. In a surreal scene, he breaks the glass window and rips off the clothes of the mannequin inside. This act can be connected to the mayhem and disorder that ruled Calcutta at the time. There is a comic excess in denuding a mannequin in a shop window, but perhaps Sen is showing that resistance can come from any quarter and in any form. Everyday life in the city with its minor struggles, Sen seems to be saying, may include acts of rebellion. Ranjit’s failure to get a job is also his failure to transcend class barriers. Does Sen here suggest that class equations are, in a sense, an elaborate costume drama? We will later find a possible Ranjit, or what Ranjit could have been, in the well-dressed man who strips to his tattered underpants in Chaalchitra. After his initial eagerness to find a suit, we see a defiance growing in Ranjit, a defiance that becomes into a realisation that his failure is not incidental or accidental, but symbolic of the deep seated class divisions that the city has perpetuated as its structural edifice.

The film forms the platform on which Sen builds the edifice of his Calcutta trilogy, with Calcutta 71 (1972) and Padatik (1973). The year 1971 was an important year for Kolkata. As we have discussed in the introduction, by the early 1970s, the Naxal movement had transformed the cityscape into a war zone and this was followed by a show of force by the state and its police. For Sen, a committed Marxist, it marked a personal crisis. He often had to search for an appropriate and meaningful response to the mindless violence that had engulfed the city. One reaction was a tendency to depict the city through news reels, as Dipankar Mukhopadhyay notes (96). It was almost as if the filmmaker was searching for an image of the city, through the mélange of images of violence, decrepitude, poverty and death. This turbulent phase and the
director’s effort to come to terms with his personal crisis gave birth to one of Sen’s most complex efforts, *Calcutta 71*.

*Calcutta 71*, one could argue, grapples with certain questions. It seemed to ask: Does the city of Calcutta have a picture that can represent it? Is there a story that can narrate the city through the ages? Is there a character that can walk you through the history of this city? In answer, the film presents a mélange of stories, a range of pictures, but it has one single character – the 20-year-old revolutionary shot dead at the Maidan. He walks us through the history of the city – he is the narrator and the eyes, the camera through which one views the city. Structurally, the film has many sections.

It has a beginning divided into three parts—the opening statement of a twenty-year-old boy, a courtroom burlesque and another brief fantasy involving an innocent, charming girl; a middle, consisting of the film versions of three Bengali short stories representing three decades; and a conclusion which starts with a party scene and ends with another fantasy. (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 97)


Mrinal Sen’s city films have a documentary quality, a feature we must grapple with in the analysis of almost all the Sen films under consideration here. In *Calcutta 71*, this feature is most stark. This is revealed in the rows of photographs, news reels of *morchas* and most importantly,
in the use of a documentator – the young revolutionary who will witness each of the stories for the viewers and in the end, interpret them and connect them into an ideological view of the city.

The first story is the story of rain. Rain, often notorious as the bane of this city’s life, is the central character of the story. In one corner of this sprawling city, a family of six – two young boys, a girl, an infant and the parents – battles the rains in their leaking shack. Six bodies huddled together in an increasingly contracting “dry” space as rain takes over their home. The “home” is no longer a site of refuge. As the story begins the male members of the story are asleep but the women are awake trying to shelter the infant from the ravages of the rain. Their voices awaken the father, and then there unfolds the story of poverty, helplessness and frustration and the vainglorious refusal to go to the shelter for the homeless during these torrential rains. The roof of their shack collapses, and the family clings physically together to absorb some warmth. Tight close-ups are employed to heighten the sense of claustrophobia and constricted spaces. But as the bodies come together the frustration bursts out, and arguments begin. They play out in interesting pairs – father and mother, mother and daughter – and the cries of the infant pierce through these arguments. The father, Nilmani, tries to take out his frustration on a dog that barks outside the house, trying to get inside. It is poverty that has reduced human beings in the city into animals, and they have to literally fight it out with animals to carve out a space of some comfort in this urban jungle, which offers spaces of solace only to the rich. Finally, the family decides to leave the shack and go to a bigger house of the locality, now being used as a shelter. When they reach there, numerous refugees stare at them. All of them – men, women, old and young – share the same story. It is a class story, which people of the same class share together and the family’s battle against natural forces is repeated in the lives of all those who have huddled in the rich man’s portico. Sen depicts lower class existence in a city which has
little to offer them in terms of social security. It is the story of the city. Finally, the family finds a
dry piece of earth to rest, next to the dog which Nilmani had tried to ward off, moments ago.
This little piece of spatial comfort is shared by man and animal.

The second story has womanhood at its centre, narrating the city through the lives of its
poor women. A family of five – mother, two daughters, a boy and an absent elder son – plays out
the narrative. The story begins with a train journey into the city. The city has a visitor from Delhi
– somebody who wants to enquire about some of his long lost relations, this family. The story, as
its name suggests, is set in the times of the Great Famine. The visitor has a strange conversation
with his co-passenger. The co-passenger, when he learns that the visitor was going to Calcutta
only for some days, says, “Lucky, you don’t have to see the poverty. You can always leave.”
These words almost turn prophetic by the end of the story. The visitor is stunned by the squalor
that surrounds the life of his aunt and his two daughters, and their decline – both economic and
moral. At the end, the visitor leaves, hurrying so that he can escape the city before the black-out.
Once again, this is not an individual’s or a family’s story. Sen employs a host of photographs and
documentary devices to prove that the story represents the city, that Shobhana represents the
city’s poor women – violated by poverty, ravaged by war and death, forced into compromises. It
is a ruthless picture, as the city lies abandoned with the visitor hurrying back to Delhi. He is
someone who could have taken care of this family, but chooses not to. The outsider has no stakes
in the city, he does not claim it in any way, he treats it as a problem which cannot be solved and
hence should not be given much notice.

The third story begins on a local train from the outskirts of the city to its centre. We see a
group of young boys ferrying sacks of rice – the rice smugglers as the police term them. And
though they do not experience a normal adolescence, they travel to the city laughing and singing
on their way. Their co-passengers – the gentlemen of the city – demonstrate the city’s aversion towards these rural urchins. But the central character – Gauranga, the boy who sells his meagre stock of rice in the city to earn money for his mother and siblings – takes the war to the city’s camp. He mocks and laughs at it and is brutally beaten up for his defiance by the caretakers of urban values, which these boys supposedly contaminate. But at the end of the struggle, he fells his tormentor. “This is the new post-War generation, the lumpen proletariat, which shocks the genteel class by its profanity” (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 99). One might read Gauranga’s action as an allegory of the margins taking over the centre, as boys from the rural hinterlands laugh at the city which really is at their mercy during times of war and acute poverty. Or is it the city which preys on the rustic youths, which does not let them have a childhood? At the end, when Gauranga is detained by the police, and his bed remains empty at night, his mother’s anguished cry echoes in the audience’s ears. Sen depicts, through Gauranga’s story, the criminalisation of a generation, that is forced to break the law in order to survive. It should be remembered that with the imposition of food rationing after the War and during the 60s, rice could not be legally sold in Calcutta’s open market. Yet the government procurement system was flawed and corrupt. Farmers had to employ boys like Gauranga to “smuggle” rice to the city and sell it for a good price. In the earlier stories, though the depiction of poverty was equally ruthless, there was no sentimentalism attached to the loss. It is only at the conclusion of the rice smugglers’ story that the sharp edge of realism becomes soft, and a cry resonates. Again, as the stories are juxtaposed, we see a graduating level of anger in them: in “the first episode, there is an element of raw anger, but what prevails is a feeling of heartless cynicism. In the second episode, the anger is much more pronounced, as the characters openly demolish their middle-class values. . . . In the next, anger has become much more direct in the way the small-time smuggler boys react against the
police and the society of middle-class gentlemen. Sen calls it creative anger” (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 100).

After these episodes, there is a break in the chronology, as the next episode is from 1971. There is the roar of a music band on the screen. It is a party thrown by a prominent businessman of Calcutta. This is where Sen shows the most striking juxtaposition of poverty and plenitude within the city, as the film offsets the elite gathering with a series of documentary pictures and messages. As the upper class gossip turns vicious the pictures of poverty, of adults and children dying on the streets of the city, flash across the screen. Finally, the roar of the music band blends into the roar on the streets of the city. As the alcohol-induced rants of the socialites and the roar on the streets settle, we focus back on one face – the face of the young revolutionary shot at Maidan. Is he the city itself? Will the city that has seen the confusion of violence, injustice and exploitation turn into a rebellious young man? But will that rebellion be successful and produce fruitful social changes, or will it end with a gunshot that reverberates over the Maidan? Will the establishment crush every trace of rebellion within the city? These seem to be the questions that Sen poses through this series of disparate images in *Calcutta 71*. And though both *Interview* and *Calcutta 71* have angry crusaders of as central characters, Dipankar Mukhopadhyay sees an interesting difference between these two:

In the first film, Ranjit Mullick is a character of flesh and blood, representing thousands of such youth in Calcutta. yet in the end, when rattled by the probing questions of the spectator…he no longer remains a young man but becomes a concept of protest….In *Calcutta 71*, Sen makes it clear that the young man, who has no name or any other form of identity, remains a concept from the beginning. (102-3)
*Padatik* (1973) is set in the Naxalite period, when the whole of Bengal, especially Calcutta, was caught in mindless violence. The film opens with these words:

> Every time I return to Calcutta I feel it must be surely impossible that it can continue much longer like this... Yet it always does. An interval of a year makes the visual impact more painful... the squalor more squalid... the poverty more militant... the despair more desperate... I find Calcutta an intimidating and even infernal city, unredeemed and probably doomed.

This voice-over is not attributed to any narrator. Dipankar Mukhopadhyay points out that this statement finds its origins in a statement made by British journalist James Cameron (236). But we might imagine the words as spoken by the filmmaker, Sen, himself. Sen has “returned” to the city of Kolkata again and again, as the setting of his creations. More than a mere setting, the city has often been his principal subject. Sen’s films are often characterised by melancholic and often pessimistic beginnings. But as questions emerge and the characters try to find the answers, a new city emerges, a city that will survive. *Padatik* begins with the premise that the metropolis has become a problem, with lack of kerosene, erratic power supply, disrupted examinations, violent trade union movements, and corrupt political leadership. *Padatik* is the story of a political activist, a Naxalite, Sumit, in hiding. He is shifted to a posh apartment in an upper-class locality of the city, and the film is about the connections he forges with the mistress of the house, Mrs Mitra, a lonely divorcee. The film is also about the questions he has regarding his ideology, his party and the ideologues of his party, questions he has not posed before. As a result of his questions, he is expelled from the party.

The opening scene shows a man running through the labyrinthine maze of city lanes. He may be a Naxalite, and finally he is seen shot dead, as a gunshot is heard in the background. The
exigencies of the lives of these activists comes out clearly, as Sumit, who is on the run, is shifted from one house to another. I would suggest that this is not so much a geographical shift, as it is a social one. He is shifted from a lower middle class house to a luxurious apartment belonging to a woman working in the world of advertising. The owner of the flat, Mrs Mitra, is away. The shift, which is also a shift in terms of “class” settings, is defined by Sumit acquiring a new set of fashionable clothes. The apartment is located on a busy street, and the windows open to a vista of the city. But whatever be the outward trappings, Sumit feels it is only a beautifully decorated hell, a prison. The bathroom scene, in which Sumit luxuriates under the water-jet from the hand-held shower shows him giving in to sensuous pleasures. He comes from a lower middle class family, where his father is the only earning member. His aged father is shown in a scene trying to get into a crowded city bus and failing. This old man has to fight the heat, dust and grime of the city; each day for him is a struggle just to be alive. This scene is juxtaposed against Biman’s condemnation of Sumit’s father’s indifference to politics and their struggle. It is stated that the father was once a revolutionary. But the street scene brings out the fact that the revolutionary’s father is still engaged in a struggle, although a different one. In the city the struggle of everyday life is no mean revolution.

In the empty apartment, without any company, Sumit wanders around, reads at times and tosses and turns on the bed. When the bell rings, he fears an unknown or unwanted visitor. As the narrative unfolds, the beautified, sanitised interior space of the flat, as opposed to the peopled, noisy streets of the city, somehow seems to be more menacing in all its silence. In his loneliness Sumit plays a game. He changes roles as the servant and master as he serves himself tea, a transmigration of sorts, I would argue, between different classes. But, these games are punctuated by the presence of a volatile city outside, just as at the start, the narrative is disrupted
by the image of a printing press churning out newspaper headlines commenting on the city’s violence and anarchy. Scenes of revolution in Asia, Africa and Latin America, revolutions that characterise class war are juxtaposed with the scene where Sumit first encounters Mrs Mitra, who has come back to her flat. These cinematic techniques carefully construct Sumit’s alienation from his upper-class surroundings (and their spaces). But the space has transformed Sumit; he has appropriated the house in the two days that Sheela (Mrs Mitra) was not there, and he plays the host to her in a playful scene. Sheela is no longer the enemy, as they gradually connect to each other on a human level, where class affiliations are continuously questioned.

The interactions between Sumit and Sheela and the interaction between Sumit and the upper class space characterised by the flat, I argue, construct an “in-between space”. This is a space where two warring classes connect, a space in-between two classes. The two protagonists who inhabit this space are beings in-between ideologies and classes: Sheela, the advertising star who sympathizes with the Naxalite cause, and Sumit who, though playfully, vacillates between the roles of the servant and the master, and moves quite easily from questions of Marxian revolution to the problems of Sheela’s divorce and child-rearing. This space, I argue, brings together disparate elements. It reverberates with the laughter and cheers of an upper-class party, while the distant thunders of Punjab, where Sheela’s brother had gone off to wage an armed struggle, are still heard. Class barriers break down in this space, and we do not know whether the rules of the city will hold in this threshold region. We might analyse this space as a ‘liminal’ space, borrowing the idea from Turner. In the “threshold” space of Sheela’s flat, in that “temporal and enchanted territory”, Sumit, I argue, turns into a marginal being, and, as Turner theorises, forges vital relationships with other people, which are not ridden by clichés “associated with status incumbency and role-playing” (Turner 230). I also read the questions that
Sumit has about the ideological approach of his party as germinating in this space. The problem is whether these questions that occur to Sumit in the sanitized, decontextualised (“temporal and enchanted”) space can be comprehended by the “real” city. As the end of the narrative suggests, affiliations that are formed in the in-between space do not hold good in the real city that has clearly defined itself along class lines.

In all this, the city remains an enigma, posing new questions and throwing up new challenges. Calcutta refuses to be understood through a singular, monolithic vision. What the film does is to pose some difficult questions to its viewers about the city and its citizens, the millions of “padatiks”, warriors who tread the paths of the city on foot, struggling and grappling with the urban realities, often failing to form effective bonds with fellow travellers but raising important issues nonetheless. In the Calcutta trilogy, Sen’s heroes go through a process of self-realisation, and these characters can be seen to be part of an “urban” evolution of thought. Sumit is in the final stage, where he can both identify the enemy and identify with the enemy, knowing in the end that it is for him to choose his companions in the struggle.

In Parashuram (1978), Sen turns his camera to the pavement dwellers of the city, a neglected lot who symbolise, and are the product of, a complex urban problem. Most of these people are, as shown in the film, landless, displaced peasants, who were forced to migrate to the city after losing their land to moneylenders or bigger landlords. But the city does not treat them any better. These struggles are encoded in the central character of the film, a man who has come to the city from his village in search of work. I read the narrative as reworking the proverbial binary on which the city is based – that of the have and the have-nots. The two are locked in a continuous struggle to claim the city and, in the process, to annihilate the other. The physical space of the city is divided into the playground of the upper classes and the space of struggle for
existence for the poorer sections. Parashuram is a new entrant into this war zone, where he sees the police and the shanty dwellers fighting pitched battles to claim a narrow slice of the pavement. The contingent nature of the lives of these pavement dwellers is vividly demonstrated, in the scene where the young woman gives birth on the streets. The middle class passers-by do not know how to respond to what they witness. The patriarch of this shanty settlement, the old, invalid Haran, announces to the middle class babus staring at the woman that it is nothing new or strange, “It is just a pregnant woman in labour pains”.

The same space in the city can hold different meanings for different people. When Parashuram is struggling to find a job, the old beggar advises him to go to the Ghats of the Ganges. Affluent people come to the Ghats in their plush cars and Parshuram is sure to land some job or the other there. A cruel scene follows. An old man is seen throwing coins into the river, with a frenzied expression on his face, and street urchins jump into the waters to pick them up. Parashuram joins these children in search of some easy money. Later he tells the old beggar that he did not think it to be begging. Rather, it was a war and the river was the battleground, he argues. There was so much competition and the struggle to claim a coin was so physically exhausting, no less than a war. In the human drama enacted within the several narrative strands of the film – the stories of Radha, her father Gurupada, Haran and others – the city is seen as a predator. Radha falls prey to the city. As a child she was rescued by her parents from the floods in the village, but she gets lost in the urban crowd, never to return. Alhadi succumbs to the temptation of a better life, a life of the upper classes, and goes away with another man. The man is almost never shown, except for one scene, but his arrival is announced by the sound of his motorbike, a consumer product that he has (and Parashuram does not). This suggests that manhood and virility are measured in terms of money, and an emasculated Parashuram cannot
but commit suicide. The scene where he dreams of being in a boxing-ring, punching his class enemies, is soon seen to be ineffective, only a token protest. The truth is that he is rendered lonely, ineffective and eternally poor by the city, and that is the role that he must accept. The final gesture of rejection comes when he commits suicide, refusing to give in to the city.

Sen, I would argue, makes an overtly political statement by naming his hero “Parashuram”, the mythological and symbolic figure of virile and combative Brahmanism. Parashuram, the saint, is said to have killed kshatriya kings, enraged by the death of his father. Kshatriyas, symbolising the ruling class, had to give in to the anger of this Brahmin sage’s violent protest. Another apocryphal story says that Parashuram retrieved land from the sea using his axe. The sage hurled his axe into the sea and and sea gave way up to the point where the axe was buried, giving birth to the land now called Kerala, as folklore says. But the Parashuram who came to the city is a landless refugee. Does he have the potential to be a rebel? Could he be the one to put an end to the injustice perpetuated by those in power? Could he retrieve a piece of land for the teeming millions who come to this city looking for a shelter? Or is he the symbol of the Parashuram of our age – ineffective, cowardly and suicidal rather than combative? As all other Sen movies, Parashuram leaves us with more questions than answers.

Ekdin Pratidin (1979) is a film about the middle class life in the city. The film begins with a disaster, almost setting the tone of what is to follow. A lower middle class family, in some squalid corner of Calcutta, is at the centre of the story. The youngest son of the family suffers a head injury while playing, for which he gets three stitches. All the members of the family look a little broken and helpless. Their body language indicates the limitations of their life. Sen presents a slow, almost brooding, shot in which the house they live in unfolds. The house is almost in ruins, but it sends out clear memories of a past glory. It once had huge pillars, but is now
The family at the centre of the narrative is Hrishikesh Dasgupta’s family. He is a retired man, with five children and a meagre pension. His eldest daughter Chinu runs the family. She is shown as negotiating the hostile city, just as its male residents, getting into over-crowded buses and elbowing the crowd to find some space for herself. The narrative span of the film covers a single day. Chinu, as usual, leaves for work but she does not come back at the usual time. This unexplained “absence” of the woman who has gone into the city and has not come back constitutes the crisis that constructs the narrative, as the life of the city outside the house goes on in its own rhythm – people urinate on the street just outside the house, unabashedly, dead bodies are carried to the cremation ground, and everyday existence generates a lot of recognisable images. The crisis, as Sen shows, brings out the cracks in the family fabric and its essential economic decay. This economic decay sent Chinu to the city and they cannot blame her for her absence. The world outside is a distinctly male world, where it might not be always possible to hold on to domestic womanly values, like returning to the home before dark. These equations, I argue, complicate Chinu’s sudden, unexplained absence. The tension heightens as social surveillance puts more pressure on the family. The landlord, over-inquisitive neighbours,
the elderly neighbour woman who follows Minu’s every move – all of them try to glean matter for scandal out of the girl’s absence and the misery of the family. For obvious reasons, the family wants to keep the crisis private. But the spatial equations within the house, where families huddle together jostling for space, render this impossible.

Tapu, the brother, goes out into the city, with a friend, to search for Chinu. Through Tapu’s sojourn, the film maps the city – a city that looks ominous and menacing at night. At the police station he encounters a woman who has been brought in by the police, a woman associated with a prostitution racket and smuggling. This woman is, I would suggest, is the patriarchy’s archetype of a woman who stays out in the city at night. The morgue attendant’s carelessness about the bodies that he rather nonchalantly exhibits to a distraught Tapu shows the lack of concern that characterises inter-personal interactions in an urban setting of teeming millions. The city throws up a number of possible explanations for Chinu’s absence – a pregnant woman who has committed suicide, several unidentified bodies of women found in the city, and so on. I read the scene with the waiting relatives outside the emergency ward of NRS hospital as a vantage view of the life the city has to offer. Here, lives overlap, strangers to each other but part of the larger urban scene – they come together in this hospital setting. All of the visitors have their own stories about a female member of their own families, all wait with bated breath, not knowing whom the tragedy will strike. The dark cityscape with dots of light becomes a space filled with news of disasters, and as the sound of the printing press chugs on in the background, newspaper headlines announce more tragedies that have struck the city – the “severed body of a woman found in a box at Howrah station” and a “floating body of a woman found in the lake”.

Chinu returns, but she does not come back to the home she had left in the morning. Now that the family structure has been questioned, it cannot accommodate Chinu any more. Her
homecoming is not a happy one as the family is now unsure of its own stability. She wonders whether they had really wanted her to come back. The drama erupts in the front courtyard of the house. The ever vigilant, watchful landlord comes downstairs to the music of a marching band and tells Hrishikesh Babu to move elsewhere, since it was a bhadralok locality. The morning dawns, and the city wakes up to its daily chores. The tenants at the house on Nabin Mullick lane also wake up and carry on with their daily lives. As Chinu’s mother starts the day’s cooking, the young neighbour girl looks at the family with a sense of awe. She will perhaps follow Chinu’s footsteps some day, working in the city, in a male world. But there is a subtle hint of hope of change, as the mother looks up from her coal stove towards the sky to see a flying airplane, the messenger of freedom, of better places far away. The film ends with the suggestion that this fraught night and day in the city was just another day. It is soon forgotten by almost everyone since no one has the time to remember the exceptional in the midst of the mundane.

Sen’s Chaalchitra (1981) returns to the middle class milieu of the city. The narrative here – Dipu’s search for a saleable story about his middle class world, “an intimate study of his clan”, that would procure him a job with a newspaper – evokes an idea that Sudipta Kaviraj presents in his essay, “Reading a Song of the City: Images of the City in Literature and Films”. Kaviraj discusses lyric writers of Hindi films, like Majrooh Sultanpuri, who have a background of socialist politics, and create their protagonists in their own image. I argue that the character of Dipu, sketched by Sen, also falls into the same category, like Siddhartha in Pratidwandi, or Somnath in Jana Aranya, who look at the city and its downtrodden people in a certain way:

What is remarkable in the lyric is a kind of critical sensibility of the city which sympathises with the downtrodden, the fallen, the destitute—though one suspects that this is no common poor man, but the highly educated, lower middle class
protagonist of modern Indian literature—the central, dominating figure of its poetry and novels. He is a strange and potent mixture of achievement and misfortune—educated, cultured, highly sophisticated in his social and artistic sensibility, yet always short of money, and acutely sensitive to the indignity that his need constantly threatens him with. (Kaviraj 62)

Such a man explores the city differently from the people he is concerned about. Unlike the urban poor, he does not face the city with “dumbness, despair and deceit”, but carries on the struggle “in the arena of culture” with a middle-class eloquence (62-3).

The tussle between reality and illusion is recurrent in the film, and the city is mapped out in terms of this tussle. Kaviraj talks of Bombay, as represented in a song from the film CID, in much the same manner, “The city’s defining characteristic is the distinction, in paradigmatically Marxist terms, between appearance and reality, and its deep deceptiveness” (62). It begins with Dipu’s story about a smart, urbane, sober man in an expensive coat who takes him home. The man strips in front of him. In front of his eyes, the tastefully clothed and apparently rich looking man is rendered poor in his near-naked state. The incident can be read as symbolic of the many lives in the city, for whom reality and illusion are in everyday opposition. This man perhaps works as a salesman, and has to look good to sell his wares, where in effect he is also selling himself. But his reality is his shabby one room tenement, where he stands in a torn vest and underpants. The idea is that every man, every institution, every idea of the city is saleable, and that is the only way it should be. The editor keeps reminding him that the story Dipu is going to write can be about anything, but it has to be saleable, something that people will consume. The narrative that follows is a series of images from the lives led by the lower middle class residents of a particular house in the city, a house which is representative of the same class elsewhere.
Dipu lives with his family in an ancient house in Shyambazar, an old locality of north Calcutta, where many families stay in one huge and decrepit rented house, much like the setting in *Ekdin Pratidin*. The incident that involves Dipu’s mother slipping on the moss and the rice-starch on the front yard, and the bizarre conclusion of the fight that ensues, where all the women try to compete with one another in an attempt to clean up the common space, an area that they had all ignored till the incident, brings out the habitational patterns peculiar to the city. The front courtyard was a space that they all had used for years, but they neither cleaned these surroundings on their own nor did they form lasting connections with each other. Such a habitational mode is unique to the city and is the forerunner of life in the apartment buildings.

The situation is perhaps further complicated by the landlord’s indifference to the house, since he earns very little from such a property. The other struggle that goes on in the house is between the tenants of this ancient, crumbling house and the people in the posh neighbouring house. The neighbouring house is home to a different class altogether and they have objected in the past to many of the habits of the inhabitants of the crumbling mansion. The smoke that comes out of their coal stoves is a constant irritant to the rich neighbours. The rich woman’s objection to the smoke invokes the condition of the major part of the city, which is filled with smoke emanating from millions of poor households. Later, the rich woman throws all her garbage on this open courtyard in an act of revenge, and does not listen when Kalpana tries to dissuade her. Later Kalpana tells the others in the house that though the courtyard belongs to all the tenants, she was the only one to protest against this act of violation. This brings out the specificities of belonging to the habitational pattern that is narrated in the setting of the film: each family has rented a unit of two or three rooms, which is their own private space to be guarded and protected. The slice of the balcony in front of their rooms also is part of this space. But spaces like the stairway and the
open courtyard, that belong to no one in particular, are problematic spaces. The act of cleaning the courtyard, where everyone joined in, was a unique and rare act. It was neither organised nor planned. What Sen perhaps is asking here is this: In a habitational structure like this, who protects the rights of the public spaces? The problem is made more acute by the gendered division of labour. The men work in the city, outside the home, and consider this to be the women’s domain. The women, on the other hand, feel that if the men were more vocal, such violations of the public space would not have taken place. Meanwhile, the city outside the “home” remains hostile and unyielding, as shown in the thronging crowded streets of north Calcutta, where Dipu is seen running after taxis, in vain. The over-crowded buses, with people hanging from the footboards and the footpaths spilling over with pedestrians – all these bring out the difficulties of the common man’s constant negotiations with the city.

The city that forms the background to Dipu’s search for a story is a concrete jungle, with automobiles running on a street not lined by a single tree. He meets a number of representatives of the various classes that make up this city: a child labourer, who earns a paltry fifteen rupees a month, and whose mother comes from Canning every month to take away his wages; a street astrologer, Shivaprasad Bhattacharya, a poor man whose son is dead and who can barely manage to run a household full of grandchildren; a melange of tongawallas, rickshaw-pullers, fruit vendors and petty clerks. The class on which Dipu might base his story forms the majority of the city’s population and yet he cannot formulate his story, the story that narrates the city.

The story that Dipu finally decides on – a narrative about the coal ovens in Calcutta – is also formulated in class terms. The coal stoves and the fumes emanating from them are essential signifiers of middle class inadequacies. Dipu’s decision to write about them and his readiness to conform to the editor’s advice on the point-of-view in which to present the story – as a story
about how the pollution caused by the smoke is proving to be injurious to the health of the city’s populations and why it should be stopped – mark him out as a deserter. He takes up the garb of a participant, but when he takes up the pen, he turns into an observer. I read this as the city co-opting Dipu and his final capitulation to the lures of the city, where he abandons his class affiliations. “Chaalchitra, therefore, becomes Sen’s own essay on the mundane as he peeps at lower-middle-class life. It also points an accusing finger at Dipu as a deserter (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 154).

*Kharij* (1982), another one of Sen’s brilliant critiques of the city’s middle class, begins with a conversation between two lovers in a taxi, reminiscent of a similar situation in *Akash Kusum*. The scene establishes Anjan and Mamata, a middle class pair with middle class ambitions and aspirations. Anjan asks Mamata what she wants: a flat, a fridge or a radiogram. Mamata answers that she only wants him, and nothing else. The scene freezes and cuts to the present. The same snatch of conversation is repeated: Anjan asking Mamata again what she wants. But this time Mamata’s answer does not have the same romance. She, now a mother of a child and a seasoned housewife, wants a servant-boy to run errands for her and help her with the household chores. Immediately after this, Haran arrives with his son Palan who is appointed as the servant-boy in the household. Palan is asked to sleep in an open space under the stairs, along with Hari, the boy-servant of the landlord’s family. One night, when the newspapers declare it to be the coldest night of the season, Palan, unable to sleep and searching for a warm corner, moves from his usual space to the kitchen. He sleeps with the door closed, near the coal-oven which was still burning. In the process, he dies of carbon monoxide poisoning. It is with this crisis that the film opens and it grows into a brilliant thesis on middle class urbanity.
Though the film centres on Palan’s death, I read it as a narrative about the middle class and its perception of the lower classes. The story takes place in a dingy north Calcutta neighbourhood, where each house is pitted against the other, and privacy is seriously compromised. In this scenario, when Palan dies and the news comes out into the open, the death turns into a public spectacle. Inquisitive neighbours come flocking to Anjan’s door and the landlord has to shut it. Through the film, Sen focuses on the signature traits of the middle classes. Members of this class are not shown to be particularly cruel or inhuman. But in their indifference towards the less privileged they become exactly that. The film does not preach against child labour, at least not in any direct manner. Anjan and Mamata do not torture Palan or make him do more than he can. The problem lies elsewhere – in their sheer indifference. For them, Palan is little more than a household appliance. This comes through in the scene where Mamata haggles about the child’s salary with Haran. On that cold, fateful night, while they slept under a quilt, tucking Pupai, their son, under it, they did not find out how Palan was fighting the cold. When the police arrive to make enquiries, the family cannot provide them with Palan’s address or his full name. Their only link with Palan’s life outside the house is Haran, who comes to collect his son’s salary every month. This hypocrisy is worked into the middle class couple’s efforts to cope with the tragedy. The most distinctive middle class trait that Sen explores in this film is the sheer inability to own up to responsibility in a situation of crisis. Shibbabu, the couple’s neighbour and mentor of sorts, describes the situation as a “trouble for some days”. The apparently happy union of Anjan and Mamata threatens to break down as they become increasingly snappy and try to shift the blame on each other.

The tension heightens as Palan’s father Haran comes to collect his son’s wages. In the scene set in the cremation ground, Sen shows the classes clearly dividing themselves into two
camps. They are clearly polarised into two groups, the employers and the employed. Anjan is joined here by Shibbabu and Samir, the landlord’s son. They are all dressed in woollens to ward off the cold and stay at the ground only for some time, as a token gesture. On the other side, Haran has the company of Hari and some other servant-boys of the neighbourhood, all Palan’s friends. At the cremation ground, in an interesting cinematic tool used by Sen, the camera focuses on the walls on which political graffiti like “Samiran, we will avenge your death” are written. The word “revenge” keeps hammering at Anjan’s consciousness. The film ends in Haran’s silence, most striking and effective as a protest. Palan in Kharij remains a powerful absent presence throughout the film, much like Chinu in Ekdin Pratidin.

Palan has a predecessor in Sen’s oeuvre, the child labourer Dipu meets in his search for a story. These figures conform to the stereotypical child worker ubiquitous in this city – the child from a poor rural family on the margins of the city. He is sent into this city to fend for himself and to earn for his family. Palan’s father who comes unfailingly to collect his salary has a parallel in the mother who dutifully comes from Canning to collect money from her son working in the tea stall. Through these boys, Sen shows us another underclass of our cities – “the people in our society whom we walk past everyday and never truly see” (Gilderbloom 1).

In the final analysis, Calcutta continues to be Sen’s greatest muse. It is this “doomed”, “unredeemed” city’s eternal survival that finds its expression in Sen. The filmmaker grapples with the city in its myriad forms and he paints its inhabitants’ struggles and tribulations. Sen employs a whole gamut of cinematic and narrative means to portray the politics of this survival. The horrors of the Naxalite movement, food riots, famine and scores of other struggles that the city has witnessed haunt his imagination. As Sen observed, “After Bhuvan Shome I found the smell of gunpowder in Calcutta’s air, something I could neither dismiss nor avoid. If I expressed
myself rather bluntly and with a fair amount of aggression, I don’t think I did anything wrong” (qtd. in Dipankar Mukhopadhyay 234). However, I would also argue that Sen finds the roots of these conflicts in the foundational conflicts of human history – the conflicts between the capital and labour, the haves and the have-nots, middle class morality and lower class rebellion. Calcutta here becomes a microcosm of the struggles all over the world – be it the American civil rights movement or the Vietnam War. And, as we have seen, these struggles play themselves out in the spatial politics of the city.

Panu Lehtovuori, in his Experience and Conflict: The Production of Urban Space, quotes Richard Sennet to bring out one of the most powerful definitions of a ‘city’: the “city is a human settlement where strangers are likely to meet” (1). This definition clearly sets out the possibility of strife and conflict in the urban space. The city is a space where divergent ideologies, class interests and individual and collective desires converge. It is this “confrontation with the diversity, the un-expected, the unplanned, the resistant moment” (1) that characterises the Calcutta cityscape of these masters of Bengali cinema. This conflict is more immediate and compelling as the narratives of these films map eras of political strife and as they root themselves in the actual, historical experiences of the city. The city here is, at the same time, alluring and repellent. In both Ray and Sen, and in Ghatak to some extent, we have seen women venturing into the city, in a sense defying familiar gender roles and convictions. The films also comment on the suburbs and the rural areas emptying their populations into the cityscape. These populations constantly invade the city, in search of livelihood and sustenance, as the failure of the rural, agrarian economy, political upheavals, forced evictions and Partition collectively exert pressure on the state’s over- burdened economy. The impoverished families send their children
to work in the city, adolescents turn into smugglers lurking on the porous urban borders, agricultural labourers turn into beggars and pavement dwellers in the city, young, unemployed men and women challenge the dominant urban class formations. The films under review here present a cross-section of the economic troubles of the period, and their effects on the urban economy and landscape.

While they do narrate the city as a predator, a space that sucks the “weaker” class or gender into its ominous vortex, a space from where there is no escape, the city is also a space of hope. It remains a great leveller. Chinu in *Ekidn Pratidin* comes back to a family that is broken and questioned, but as the day dawns and the city wakes up to its morning chores, the trials and doubts of the previous night are forgotten. Chinu has to go back to the city again. Because its economy demands that the citizens do away with their conventional moral, gender and social stereotypes, the city does open up new possibilities. Arati, in *Mahanagar*, is not ready to give in and retreat into the home space. She knows there are possibilities out there for a woman. In short, the city allows its spaces to be inscribed and re-inscribed, again and again, as spaces of conflict and hope. In the process, I argue, emerge the ‘cities’ of Calcutta, plural aspects of a heterogeneous polity.