Chapter One

INTRODUCTION
THE PROBLEM & METHOD OF STUDY

Object of Study

Iconography – the term refers broadly to the study of subjects and themes in works of art. One of the principal concerns of iconography is the discovery of symbolic and allegorical meanings in a work of art.

In the modern sense iconography involves the collection, classification and analysis of data, from which the theme or subject of a work of art is deduced. Iconology, on the other hand, starting from the results of iconography attempts to explain the very basis for the existence of a work of art and its entire meaning. Any form of meaningful artistic expression is in principle susceptible to iconographic and iconological study.

Films are uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence gravitate toward it. A sociological research cannot be ambitious to capture the entire gamut of reality through cinematic enunciations. Instead, it works on a select subject-area. Our subject-area is broadly concerned with the question on gender. So, a precise subject-theme is carved out. Iconographical study allows us to mark out subject-positions assigned to woman protagonists in various film-works. We can delineate specific treatments on women’s portrayals in respective films. Films are meaningful wholes which cannot simply be reduced to plot-analysis to understand and probe a particular aspect of any film. So, a traditional descriptive – analysis of films will not suffice to collect different subject-positions of female

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1 The term is derived from the Greek word ‘eikon’ (English: icon, meaning roughly image). Originally it meant a wooden panel with a painting, usually in the tempera, of a holy person or one of the traditional images of orthodox Chirtianity. The word also has a range of related but disparate meanings, from the abstract and philosophical to the purely literal. In the ordinary sense it is used to mean an image or picture. See, Turner, Jane ed. The Dictionary of Arts vol. 15. (New York: Ohio, Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1996).
protagonists and classify them as per our research objective. Iconographical approach allows us to identify the icons as produced in different films at different moments of cinema in a particular society. The icons produced are crystallised, collective social-cultural aspiration for an 'ideal'. So, in order to appreciate the different subject-positions assigned to woman protagonists in films, it is useful to classify them as 'icons' for particular film and time. Icons are produced every time to contest or conform to dominant ideological – normative structure of any society. Icons are reinterpreted everytime in the light of new developments (material as well as non-material) in any given society. The changing representation of the women can be then be studied in terms of the shifting construction of the icons. Iconography not only allows us to order the 'mess' of data and classify the data, it also helps us to focus the study on the specific in lieu of using descriptive-analytical method of treating films as a whole, as an expressive medium revealing in the story varied characters’ experiences of life.

In particular, the theme of study is about the changing portrayals of woman in Bengali cinema spanning over the last five decades of the 20th century. The probe is all about whether at all and how stereo-typed images of woman drawn from family institutions are transcended on the screen. The research is to locate how over a period of time alternative subjectivities for woman are invoked through filmic enunciation. For a post-colonial society like Bengal, women often serve as the figure through which the contest between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are resolved. From a naive study of this opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, we would try to contextualize the changing opposition by focussing on the historical and social conditions which produce such changes. The precise

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2 Post-colonial refers to such phase of a society which signifies its bearing of the colonized past as it struggles to tread on an independent path of development.
problem of the present study is to locate the key moments at which influential images are invoked.

Cinema has something about it that is physical, visceral, direct and unmediated. Our experience is not filtered through a web of symbols but a direct experience. The images of woman in Bengali films is hypothesized to have undergone a change. Gender studies stand to gain a lot by investigating how the images of woman are circulated in a culture. Images are cultural products and they provide the underlying values with which people construct their views of the world.

Studying cinema in order to gain an access to the cultural world of Bengali society is the primary objective of this research exercise. Cinema has emerged as an object worthy of study and there has been an emergent academic as well as professional interest on cinema-study. A noticeable aspect of this 'development' is growing attention and (almost exclusive) prominence being given to popular/mainstream cinema.

Why is it so? It is being held that popular films serve as entry points for understanding the legitimization of social and political power through narrative forms commanding the widest of social constituencies. Also, there has been an overwhelming focus on contemporary cinema and/or contemporary practice of film-viewing although the films could be old classics/hits. The reason is quite obvious. Such films serve as vivid, highly public and politically immediate document.

Imaging a new woman involves a redefinition of women – this is an important cultural process happening in our society. For gender studies, the images are as important as the reality. Because it is through the images that

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the principles and assumptions of a society are circulated in its body. The contemporary world is saturated by images of women — in advertisements, magazines, on televisions, films. The images are everywhere — where we look, where we consume. We are taught to appraise these images, to look at and respond to.

Then, what is the dominant image of women in a male-ordered society? “Women as Women” are not represented in the cinema, that they do not have a voice, that the female point of view is not heard. The female is portrayed with an archetypal ambivalence. The “Eternal Feminine” has been aesthetically more a principle for realizing male objectives than a person in her own right. This has been the prevalent feminist criticism engaged in film-study. When we posit the same concern vis-a-vis our particular study of Bengali films from 1950s to 1990s, we tentatively observe that since 1950s there has been creative attempts to experiment with alternative assertions of women characters. Such alternative subjectivities for women do not straightaway dismantle a patriarchal value-system. But they effectively open up possibilities for further unfolding of women’s question. Over the decades, one can identify changes in such non stereo-typed images of women.

So for our research purpose, more than the problem of why “women as women” are not represented in the Bengali films, the question of whether this is always and must be the case in cinematic representation attains greater significance. What does it mean to move from the real experiences of concrete women to their representation in film? The interplay – correspondence as well as contradiction, between the images and the reality of women in Bengali society is intriguing. Images of women and the feminine historically reflected in popular cultural practices remain an important scope for exploration. In investigating the images of
women, we encounter an important set of conditions (images) which have influenced women's lot. So, we will be studying the ways Bengali cinema has viewed femininity and power, status and potential of women. We will be studying not so much actual women as ideas; and ideas as played out in real life situation and as resorted to in the project of redefining women.

The changing iconography of women in Bengali cinema constitute, thereby, a significant object, a structure on which a meaningful research can be carried out. An explorative sociological study would also indicate the emergence of new sensitivities on the identity of women in a changed state of society, as the world is also constituted, at least in part, by how it is represented.

**Rationale of study**

Without the sociologist in 'history', sociology is weak. We have records as well as explanations of the past. We have historians narrating, documenting events, facts and their interlinkages. Even, there has been a shift away from the orthodox focus on grand moments of the past. Under the auspices of the subaltern school of history, the everyday life, the variety of contestatory behaviour have attained significance as subjects of history. Nevertheless, the problem of what people do and why do they do as they perceive and as perceived by others cannot be documented, least be explained without a sociological inquiry. A sociopolitical inquiry in the hermeneutic tradition could explore the present which in turn would qualify as documents/record in history for future generation to re-examine and research.

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4 Forbes, Geraldine *Women in Modern India* (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1996).
Writing about women's lives/histories is essentially the historians' task in their probe of the status of Indian women. Historians are the first group of academics to point at the glaring omissions done to women’s question while studying significant events of the past. During 1970s, mainly due to the focus of the United Nations, the status of women were up for academic researches. Issues relating to women’s lives, issues important to specific groups of women systematically started receiving scholarly attention. Until then, the colonial historiography depicted a linear movement of women towards 'modernity' under the auspices of European rule and values from a stage of low esteem and degradation. Taking refuge in selective Indian texts such histories of women essentialised them as self-sacrificing, subordinate to males, yet rebellious and dangerous at times. That feminine identity as natural and essential – the plinth of conventional 'past writing' needs to be debunked to suggest that instead, feminine identity is a constructed one. Thus the first breakthrough was effected in 'knowing women'.

As and when the question of construction of identity emerges, sociology/social – anthropology cannot remain too far. In fact, fed on social-anthropological insights, the Subaltern school of historiography underscored women as one of the non-elite colonial subjects. So the task was to uncover and articulate the stories of the suppressed voices.

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5 The UN during the 1970s, possibly as a response to strong feminist movement in the West, asked its member countries to produce reports on the status of women by appointing fact-finding research committees.

6 See, Toward Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, New Delhi, Govt. of India, Ministry of Education and Welfare, 1974. The report was compiled under the chairpersonship of Dr. Phulrenu Guha.

7 Subaltern Studies appeared in 1982 (New Delhi, Oxford University Press). It had its intellectual epicentre in Kolkata; wherefrom the spirit of everyday resistance/protests/contestations was garnered in this new school of history–writing.

8 Kumar, Nita ed. Women as Subjects, South, South Asian Histories (Charlottesville and London; University Press of Virginia, 1994).
The patriarchal order exists, the oppressive system continues, even then within such orders women individually and collectively exercise their agency. This way of looking at women’s lives and social history involved collection of records, first-hand personal diaries, oral histories, memoirs, letters, photographs, literature etc. With the changed notion of historiography, new documents that go into the construction of women in dominant discourse is now more important than recording the lives and actions of women. This is so because, what women (men as well) do and think of themselves is a direct reflection of the way women are imagined and represented.

What the ‘modern’ historians have done with the past, the sociologist can do better with the present. By invoking the method of participant-observation, direct-interviewing etc. – after carving out a specific study-sample, the sociologist can stand out as the best chronicler of the present. Historians have done their job by locating and saving women’s writings and material objects. Working with the present, a sociologist can take help of such archival materials and historical findings while employing sociological/social-anthropological method of firsthand direct observation, dealing with both primary and secondary sources. Thus for posteriority’s sake a more round-about ‘knowledge’ could be generated, which can again be treated as archival materials. Obviously, such materials/resources will not be a historian’s reflection from a ‘distance’ of time. The added advantage in this case would be generated by the qualitative use of the field-work method.

Put simply, due to obvious socio-historical and intellectual reasons gender has been a compelling subject in modern social scientific research works. Modernity essentially attempts to show how gender is socially constructed through all the ‘ideals’ invoked by traditional values and
institutions. Freedom from the ‘past’ is celebrated as the clue to woman’s new image.

The social-cultural context of late 19th century and early 20th century Bengal has been the focus of most of the social–scientific endeavours to examine how the ‘colonial encounter’ instilled egalitarian values and cultural innovations so crucial for an emancipatory agenda for women. Given the wider context of the danger of an alien rule hegemonising every aspect of life, consolidating the family institution was of paramount importance for the nationalist social reformers. Caught in the family – reform – nation triad, the new image of woman was after all men’s construction. It is also being suggested that nationalist thought subsumed the women’s question; thereby its agenda lost out to the larger question of national liberation.

Even if in its formative relationship with the European thought, Bengal’s modernity exhibited inconclusive transformations, if not ambiguities, there had been tangible appearance of the new notions, attitudes, values and feelings in the life and mentality of the literate class in Bengal. Most striking feature of the ‘awakening’ was the changes in the lives of women. It is being pointed out that since the second half of the 19th century there had been a gradual development of the individuality of the female character. Conjugal love and husband-wife relationship had been increasingly focalised. These new ideas of man-woman relationship were

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12 Chatterjee, Partha ‘Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ in Sangari and Vaid eds. ibid.
hitherto absent. Amongst the literate in the middle-class, a moral or discursive portrait of the ideal feminine ‘bhadra mahila’ (the gentle woman) emerged. This aesthetic – ideological model is bound to shape the subsequent depiction of woman, but with different consequences for different strata of society.

Probing this emergence of a new woman in Bengal has been a fascinating area of contemporary social–scientific research. Woman as a symbol and womanliness as subject theme have been the centre–pieces of creative consciousness in different sectors of Bengali life. There has been numerous portrayals of women historically in Bengali literature and other arts forms in as–much–as analyst have looked for crucial changes in such portrayals over time.

Using novels, journals, tracts, women’s magazines, recordings of their own experiences by women as source materials, social scientists have tired to generate women’s history privileging female-agency. What has been established through these researches is the fact that to understand gender, to comprehend the status of women in society it is important to locate the way women has been imagined and represented in dominant discourses, be it art, literature, music etc. Because such representations and imaginations essentially go into the real lives of women – the way they see themselves and the manner they conduct their lives. For the present,

16 Nandy, Ashis At the Edge of Psychology (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1980).
17 It is important to not that, emergent women’s studies centres in prominent Universities of Bengal have directed their research towards documenting non–conformist behaviours/contestatory behaviours of women to question the monolithic received ides about patriarchal order in Bengal. Also see, Tharu, S and Lalita, K ed. Women Writing in India, vol. I,II (New York, The Feminist Press, 1991).
from the vantage point of employing sociological method, we explore how these representations are socio-historically conceived and produced as well as how such images are circulated amongst the people and negotiated there upon.

A fascinating area of study in the contemporaneous mood would be to look at representations of women in Bengali films – the ways they were being portrayed and imagined. Films have a very significant cultural role to play in terms of construction of ideal images or contesting received images. Focussing on films of post-independence period, we can thereby explore an important domain of contemporary Bengali social life\textsuperscript{18} where such constructions are well indicated and pronounced. For the economy of research and more importantly for thematic purpose, representative films from each of the five decades after independence would form our scope of study. Drawing upon past values, invoking culture-specific archetypes, dramatising real-life events these films make a symbolic sense of the world. such symbols and archetypes are all drawn from the changing state of society and are in fact the classification and interpretations imposed or an individual’s understanding of the world by the society.

Therefore, the study of the changing representations of women through the cinema could serve as means to gain access to the principles and assumption which a society uses to order and conceptualise its experiences. Cinema has impacted upon our lives. The movies or their inheritance shape our world. One may argue that with the coming of the

\textsuperscript{18} By Bengali society we are refering to that of West Bengal which is the result of the political division of United Bengal of 1947.
electronic media and its overwhelming package the popularity of cinema has dwindled, still films leave with us characteristic imageries which get thoroughly embedded in cultures. It is difficult to be oblivious of the inheritance of the films, for the simple reason that it gives people a common reality however different the actual locations of their everyday lives. With the coming of films, for the first time there has been a widespread common articulation of the beliefs, aspirations, antagonisms, and doubts of the huge population of modern societies. Simultaneously and variously, for the first time people could share the same sentiments.

It matters little that the film are ‘unreal’. But then they are ‘real’ too. Talking about mass communication, Andrew Tudor has substantiated this point. “what is created by accident or design through communication today becomes the partially given culture of tomorrow”.19 It is reified; it takes of an ‘objective’ existence. The imageries and representations that we take back home from the theatre–halls selectively enter our everyday living, they figure in our public discourse which subsequently enrich our cultural baggage. It is an endless circuit of circulation of images, as subsequent film-making thrives on that cultural baggage. The justification of our problem of study derives from the above understanding.

Scope of Study

Narrative cinema is what all we are concerned with. In the context of popular reception, non-narrative cinema (although experimented upon by many a great film-makers) has had very little possibility. Especially this is so, in the Bengali tradition and society where story-telling/listening is a

fascinating engagement right from the early socialisation period, through the adolescent fling of ‘adda’\textsuperscript{20} to adult life’s penchant for ‘Sharadiya Sankhya’ (autumn/annual issue of literary journals) or serial publication of novels of popular authors in mainstream vernacular dailies/weeklies/monthlies.\textsuperscript{21} In fact cinema’s way of narration moves beyond the literary phenomenon of narration. It is unique at the hands of the masters of cinema.\textsuperscript{22} True, in narrative cinema we see every object in a flowing context resembling the processes we employ in observing an object in real life. But it is more than that in expanding our imaginative response beyond the frame and the temporal, contextual flow of the images.

Cinema has an immense ability to reach people directly, without mediation by the over-intellectualising tendencies of much modern art, which so distinguished cinema from its predecessors. This could and did lead to a naive prejudice that cinema was not worth probing socially. Instead a handful, high-brow, intellectualising and ‘artistically acceptable’ films could only qualify for analysis. In the world of cinema, the ‘New Wave Movement’, publication of Cahier du Cinema and later Movie effected a change of attitude towards films. Gradually, everyday-cinema, cinema of all hues started receiving attention from analysts.

In line with the above trajectory of interest in cinema, we opt for a meaningful selection of Bengali films spanning over the five decades (from

\textsuperscript{20} It loosely refers to road-side, informal (at times tea-stall/cafe oriented) ‘gossip’ sessions.

\textsuperscript{21} It is significant that, societies of great depth and long tradition resurrect themselves, sustain themselves through oral traditions. Narrations of ‘histories’ or ‘memories’ build up this ‘Orality’. Even in these days of the supposedly eclipse of the print-media, the number of novels/novellas that appear in the much-awaited annual numbers of popular journals and dailies, and the serial publication of novels in the Sunday Supplements of the vernacular dailies are perhaps unmatched in any other contemporary Indian linguistic zone.

\textsuperscript{22} Das Gupta, Chindananda ‘Is there Life After Literature?’ in Probodh Mitra ed. 100 years of Cinema (Calcutta, Nandan, 1995).
1950s to 1990s). The selection is guided primarily by the public event of the films for the last five decades of 20th century. Such films problematise the opposition between the masculine and the feminine as represented by the male and the female protagonists of the narratives. We resort to purposive selection of such film that enunciates the subject–theme, already discussed in the previous section. We identify films representative of each of the five decades under study.

In other words, our selection of specific films is guided by their representative character and the wide critical response/reviews that the films generated, and also the intense delineation of our subject-theme in them. Therefore, their enunciation of women characters is a result of their negotiation with the discursive portrait of ideal femininity that Bengal’s modernity suggested. And, these films different from other Bengali films consciously invoke alternative subjectivities for women in cinematic portrayals.

Coming to the particular, the following films constitute our scope of study:

(1) 1950s  - (a) *Agnipariksha* (1954, dir, Agradoot)  
          (b) *Harano Sur* (1957, dir, Ajoy Kar)  
(2) 1960s  - (a) *Megha Dhaka Tara* (1960, dir, Ritwik Ghatak)  
          (b) *Charulata* (1964, dir, Satyajit Ray)  
(3) 1970s  - (a) *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979, dir, Mrinal Sen)  
(4) 1980s  - (a) *Paroma* (1985, dir, Aparna sen)  
(50 1990s  - (a) *Unishe April* (1994, dir, Rituparno Ghosh)  
          (b) *Dahan* (1997, dir, Rituparno Ghosh )  
          (c) *Paromitar Ek Din* (1999, dir, Aparna Sen)

Although, most of the academic work on films is, by and large, probes the popular cinema and on that count the films under our research agenda may invoke a debate between elite and popular forms. We need to
debunk ahistorical notion of ‘popular’. The question is that of cultural recognition and assertion. True, the final selection of the films is not entirely related to the popularity of the films at the box-office, because such a basis of selection would exclude a less ‘popular’ film that might otherwise have had an impressive influence in the public sphere in imaging a ‘new woman’. Therefore, the public event of the films – the recognition that the films have received in the literate world, the debates and discussions generated by these films qualify them to be selected for our study. While films are the primary source of ‘data’ and the focus of analysis, it is being underscored here that for sociological purpose, the film-experience (i.e., the reception side) is an important complement to our subject–matter. In our next section this issue would be elaborated in detail.

**Method of Study**

We acknowledge that films as socially significant art form have multifaceted aspects. Cinema creates many a social world – it has many facets of production and consumption linked by the crucial process of distribution of the various facets of cinema. We are interested in studying the communicational aspect of it. That is to say, we seek answer to, why and how certain representations are negotiated between films and its audience.

Studying the process of communication serves an important purpose of sociology. We can look/focus on the formal structure of a communicational situation. Also, we can probe into the thematic structure of this communication process, thereby arrive at particular patterns of relations which come to characterize specific communication process. We are best served by acknowledging cinema as a particular sort of interaction.

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23 Vasudevan, Ravi. ed. ibid.
In other words, cinema then ‘connects’ – it is a sort of creative participation in the complex of meanings that constitute our social world.

There is an advantage in identifying ‘what to know’ in any research programme. Then only we can value ‘what we already know’ and appreciate the need for knowing what we do not. Sociology has always recognised the importance of both of ‘objective constraint’ and ‘subjective action’. People communicate, interact, and exchange meanings; they are not merely the pawns of larger objective forces. When we do sociology of film, we admit this. Most classical studies of mass communications underplayed the interactive process, so instead of being a social process it remained merely as a process.24 Accordingly, the audience in the darkened cinema is only the receiver and not seen as part of a situation of social interaction. As if “messages”, “images” are generally created once and for all, they cannot be adopted to immediate response from the receiver.

In our focus of the communicational aspects of film, as in almost every other process of social interaction the characteristic attitudes of the receiver ‘interfere’ in the process of receiving. It is a case of ‘selective perception’. We make things meaningful for ourselves by fitting them into our preconceptions. We see what we intend to see, and we often twist meanings around to suit ourselves. So, far sociology of film, interaction encompasses the communicator, the content, the audience and the situation.

So, particular imageries and representations as resorted to by films are essentially to be treated as negotiated ones. Instead of taking meaning as fixed and final, sociology can try to demystify. Here we take common knowledge, the random information that comes the way of any perceptive member of a society, deliberately gathered information, and try to shape

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24 Tudor, Andrew ibid.
this unwieldy mess into some sort of order. As a provisional guide, we start by constructing a simplified picture. In the light of the ‘new’ information, through revisions this picture is further developed, thereby we approach our research goal.

The initial sense we make through already existing, in bits and pieces, theories. Given the state of knowledge, sociology has to benefit a lot from the insights thrown up by film-criticism. Film-criticism need not be brushed aside as ‘subjective’ endeavours. Only in the subsequent treatment of these material with methodological tools and rigour of analysis that the study qualifies as sociological.

In the present research, we attempt to link the micro aspects with the macro aspects of cinema. Empirical details we would provide while making formulations about particular films – the movie-makers and the receiver. Then the link between these micro aspects/elements and the macro elements of culture and social structure is examined and analysed. Looking at films as performing meaningful communications, we indulge in this to arrive at a sociological knowledge of them.

The cinematic enunciation of woman as key motifs we treat as important source of primary data. The significance of this cultural construction of gender is played out in the larger socio-political setting. Beyond the commonsense level of meaning – ‘denotation’, we look for ‘connotation’ – the implied wider meaning that are dependent on certain cultural associations. 25 Taking a cue from Stuart Hall’s contribution to media research with respect to the ways in which a symbolically coded text can be read, we focus on the ‘negotiated’ code. 26 Here meaning is

26 Hall, Stuart ‘Encoding and Decoding’ in Culture, Media, Language (London, Hutchinson, 1980).
generated out of a subtle contest on the interface between the interpreter and the encoded message. This leads us to engage in audience research.

Audience Study

In traditional mass-media studies almost without exception audience has a connotation of passivity. Such an understanding has some serious implications. It rules out any detailed analysis of the ‘audience’ situation, instead a generalised definitional characteristics is forwarded. Secondly, the impact of any medium with an audience is thought to be either disturbing or an insult to traditional values.\(^{27}\)

Our sociological exercise on films would be severely handicapped of we consider audience as passive recipient of media message or a member of an audience as a typical unit within a mass. In many ways and quite unavoidably movie audience ‘participate’ in the world offered to them by the movies.\(^{28}\) Going to the movies is part of a person’s social interaction. It offers him/her experiences which S/he enjoys, hates, learns from, and believes too. It extends his/her world. Often the viewer identifies with the characters of a fictional film and uses them to project his emotions, needs and pleasures. Such film experience or interaction becomes a part of his/her culture which in turn is used as part of the fabric of his/her social life.

Having stated the problem associated with the traditional view on the term ‘audience’, we now need to clarify, rather build a profile of film-


\(^{28}\) Such a conception is eloquently discussed by V.F. Perkins in *Film as Film* (Harmondsworth. Penguin Books, 1972). esp Ch. 7. He aptly uses the term ‘participant-observer’ to explore how depending upon various factors the movie audiences interact with the movie-world.
audience, free from the mass-media prejudice. With such a construction we can fruitfully engage in audience-study pertinent for our present research study.

In order to situate the audience we look for both the physical as well as the social environment. The physical environment all the film-audiences share in common — the situation of nearly total darkness dominated by the proximity of a large, projected, sound-synchronized, moving image. The consequence of such an absolute physical state can be best realised and identified by contrasting it with our more contemporary and predominant experience/interaction with the electronic media.

In constrast to television — viewing, a film-audience is taken out of one’s own reality to be placed in strong connection with the single source of information — the film. In the dark-hall and in front of the wide screen with synchronised sound system, the audiences are much freer to respond in otherwise unacceptable ways. There is no scope of ‘other’ things capturing wandering attention as in the case of viewing television in one’s familiar environment. A close identification/involvement is effected thereby.

Added to this is the many technological development of film that have strengthened the medium’s hold over individual’s senses. The sound and colour revolutions, the development of wider screens and digitial/dolby sound system have all contributed to make moving image on the screen as more immediate and engulfing the audiences. The nature of the involvement has been more intense and deep.29 However, for our, sociological study of films, we desist from the reductionist position that films have become just powerful medium of persuasion. Instead, we affirm

29 Glucksmann, Andre Violence on the Screen (London, British Film Institute Education Department, 1971).
that long term attitudinal change is very different to short-term emotional involvement. People react as conscious agents of history and culture but not always in the expected or suspected ways. We develop a sense of how people negotiate with media messages. Such a conception leads us to look at the social and psychological context of the audience situation. Also, we record the responses from a distance – i.e., we do not indulge in information/response gathering immediately after their film-experiences but at a point when the 'message'/meanings have settled down in their cognitive selves. At a more macro level, we also look to identify the social and cultural context of such film-making.

Through a combination of identification and projection most people relate to film. The character of audience situation encourages high levels immersion, while the nature of the audience shapes the meanings generated and negotiated thereupon.

Our sample size of the film-audience is 80. We shall delineate the sample more in the next section while discussing the tools/techniques of research. At present, we present the personal profiles of the sample.

Table 1: Personal Profiles:

(a) Age-group yrs./Sex | Less than 30 | 30-45 | 45 and above
--- | --- | --- | ---
Male | 13 | 10 | 7
Female | 21 | 26 | 3

(b) Income*-group Rs./Sex | Less than 10,000 | 10,00-20,000 | 20,000 and above
--- | --- | --- | ---
Male | 4 | 22 | 4
Female | 19 | 14 | 17

*Not individual but family-income is indicated from individual respondent.
### Table 2: Social Profiles

#### (a) Nature of family/Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of family/Sex</th>
<th>Nuclear</th>
<th>Joint/extended</th>
<th>Single/Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### (b) Profession/Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession/Sex</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Self-employed</th>
<th>Govt. employed</th>
<th>Semi. Govt employed</th>
<th>Private employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Going to the films is to participate in something more than a few hours of watching a flickering screen in a darkened auditorium. Apart from the tie-up between individual personality and cinema, an important aspect of cinema-going situation is the larger context in which members of audiences are placed. We enumerate the larger context in the following tables.

Table 2: Social Profiles
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominant nature of viewing/Sex</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>With Spouse</th>
<th>With friends</th>
<th>With Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total respondents: 80

Such social profiles work both ways. A person fits his/her film-experiences into his social context along with all the rest. Also, some parts of the socio-cultural world bear directly on the business of ‘going to the films’.

Importantly, we realise that the audience’s selection and choice of films is significantly guided by opinion-leaders in this case the film-critics, reviewers and film-journalists. Besides the importance of opinion-leaders, audiences generally converge on the significance of story-type or genre. With the dwindling of cinema-viewing, side by side, there is a very good response to certain socially-relevant meaningful films. Certain films have created an exclusive audience of its own. A clearly distinguishable sub-cultural trait in contemporary cinema culture can be located.

The reason for such an exclusive audience is that, of late, certain cinema-halls specialise in these films and virtually nothing else. So,

1. Unlike most film genre, this creates a concrete embodiment of separate status,

2. These films by their very nature demand a fairly articulate and educated audience. They thus represent very much a middle-class ‘intellectual’ genre. And
(3) These films promote a cinematic self-consciousness by their implicit claims to superiority as 'meaningful-films'.

Therefore, by these processes, the serious-film/ socially relevant film sub-culture has become one of the most crystallized form in the contemporary cinema. Audience of such a crystallized form of cinema-culture is important for opinion-formation process. Such an audience is often preoccupied with a set of expectation and beliefs about particular films, also a large majority of the audience has some general film-experience to draw upon. All these, along with the material factors of socio-economic nature, sex, age etc, varying together and separately characterise the audience. So, it is less fruitful to consider the audience as a 'mass' but we study them also as made up of personalities, groups, and cultures. Finally in our study, the film-goers—the respondents are not captive-audience but active participants.

**Techniques of Data Collection**

Given our subject-theme and research agenda, the techniques we employ in data collection are manifold and operate at different levels.

**Film-viewing as source of Primary data:** The select films of our study are subjected to rigorous viewing beyond our commonday acquaintance with them. For their value as representatives and/or examples of our subject-theme, select films from respective decades are dealt as cases/are considered as particular cases. With the help of film-archives/cine-clubs, the films are intensively viewed and the subject-themes/positions of the film are adequately identified. To illustrate, methodologically qualitative content analysis is exercised to develop the theme. Thereby, the film are organised as much as they permit us to illustrate the thematic development. This is a conscious attempt of the
researcher to systematise the 'data'. The qualitative content analysis helped as to look deep and critically into the tone and 'resolution' of the 'women's question' in the film narratives.

**Secondary and Tertiary data**: To understand the communication of meaning, we resort to secondary as well as tertiary data. If the films as the primary text provide us with the primary data, reviews/criticisms of particular films constitute the secondary texts; whereas write-ups/reviews/literature on the subject-theme in the public discourse generally constitute the tertiary texts.

The materials invoked in the present study are generated from a wide variety of sources. To emphasise the communicational aspect of films and their meanings, we admit that films do exist in various social worlds. So, we look to film criticism and methods of criticism as well. Reportage/opinions of films from various socially articulate sections/press etc. are also keenly recorded to generate all possible empirical details of such films.

**Interview Techniques**

To understand how the films are being perceived, cognized and responded to, in-depth interviews are crucial tools for the research work to reach not only a select audience, also important film-critics and filmmakers. Interviews served us as an essential tools of generating data.

By interviewing in an open-ended structure we understand how and what the audience thought about the subject-theme/portrayals of women as depicted by the select films. Also, we gather knowledge about how the makers/critics strategized about the changes in women’s representation.
Sampling and Research Mode: The respondents are essentially from urban, articulate section. A small number are from semi-sector, but then those sections are quite vibrant with cine-club activities. It is a purposeful sampling, as the social-cultural articulate section act in opinion-formation process in significant manner, also, almost exclusively this section shapes, figures, and refigures icons and ideals as far as our dominant culture is concerned.

Out of a purposive (guided by our research concern) random sampling a ‘population’ of 80 respondents are studied. Such random sampling, however, is guided at different stages by cine-club regulars. Hence a sort of “snow-ball” sampling is also introjected into our sample formation. In order to underscore the research theme, female respondents are privileged in number. Out of a total of 80 respondents, the male-female ratio is 3:5. A sizeable section of the respondents are identified with the help of film-club enlistments. Also, students of film-study centres/institutes, cultural and feminist activists are identified for our interview purpose.

First, through personal acquaintance we are able to identify active film-goers/ cine-club members. We approached them to initiate us to some others. Similarly, we could talk to one film-critic and take his help to reach out to another four. This way, the interviews flow to cover personnel from the film-world to academics, from political activists to feminist activists. A sizeable number of common cine-goers are also enlisted.

The doubts about the representative character of the sample can be put to rest by affirming that the study concerns a cultural configuration of the Bengali woman – involving cinematic representations and simultaneous cultural consumption of them by its audience. And, admittedly it is an
exercise in popular ‘elite’ culture. The background profile of our respondents conforms to this research parameters.

Given our subject of study and the ‘population’ of respondents we had no reason to hide our research interest. In fact, our honest admittance of research-interest prompted most of the respondents to provide us with their thoughtful insights/responses vis-a-vis our primary text, the select films. Allowing the interviews to flow in a narrative style, we are interested to see whether proto-typical narrative are available from the audience.

Review of Literature

For long sociology has tried to be quite defensive of its specialisations. Time has changed, no longer one is merged in unthinking empiricism and cultural prejudice. The disciplinary boundaries in human sciences are also becoming redundant due to fertile interdisciplinary researches. The web of meanings in which social life is carried out betray the scientism and objectivism of ‘rigorous’ sociology. Studying films, literature, theatre, various art forms etc. with sociological tools and modes of analysis has slowly attained recognition in universities across the globe.\(^3\)

In the Indian context, sociology no doubt has been the most reflexive of social science disciplines in contemporary times. Sociologists have meaningfully explored the issues of gender and from a range of

\(^3\) Tudor, Andrew ibid.
research interests the women's question has been problematised.\(^{31}\) It's being noted that most of the researches on women and gender were not done exclusively as 'women's studies'. Since the early 1990s, there has been an emergence of critics and historians acting as chroniclers of women's movement in India but exclusive research on women's lives and experiences is lacking.

In Indian sociology, however, two outstanding sociological compilations on the status of women and researches on the gender issues serve as a source book for further researches on gender.\(^{32}\) Subsequently women's studies in India has prospered drawing upon stimulating scholarship on women, gender and feminism. Such studies have been primarily inter-disciplinary. An important aspect of gender studies has been to direct attention more towards representations of women in popular culture – be it art, painting, literature, theatre, media etc.\(^{33}\)

Why this has been so? It is being theorised by feminist scholarships that images go a long way in determining the real lives of women. Images, which are cultural products, essentially strengthens the existing patriarchal ordering of culture. So, the images and their underlying values impact upon people's lives, as they, at least in part, construct their world by such values. That, the women imaged are presented as the object of desire to men and

\(^{31}\) Some useful contributions are,


(ii) Uberoi, Patricia 'Some Reflection on teaching the Sociology of Gender in Samya Shakti, no. 4 and 5, 1989, pp. 279-289.


\(^{33}\) For example, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Special Issue, 1997 or *Social Scientist*, vol. 28, no. 3-4, March- April 2000.
also to other women. Men and women are offered very clear subject-positions in relation to these images. For men, such a woman is the other, his opposite (the heightening of sexual difference is crucial in this), his complement. She is something to possess, have powers over, for without him she is incomplete, lacking.

On the other hand, for women, the represented women is to be identified with, emulated and measured against. She is what is seen as desired and desirable, a constant reminder of what woman is, and the social value she is assigned. All women are, by implication, identical in their desires and their incompleteness. The only significant desire is for the male other, for completion.

Against such a distorted, male-ordered, fetishized representation of women the agenda of women’s studies has been to gain a sense of self-worth (for women) and autonomy. Such studies emphasize the need for women to look at and represent themselves outside the conventions of the pervasive discourse. Women have to challenge the kinds of subjectivity offered by the images which bombard them and assert something different.

Put simply, gender studies of late geared themselves towards media analysis as there has been gross under-representation and/or misrepresentation of women in media.\(^{34}\) The practical aim of this concern was to seek to redress the situation by drawing attention to women’s absence and calling for increased women’s role at all levels of the media. So, more than the ‘real’ woman, the image and the ‘ideals’ are researched.

At the global level, talking about films, we cannot say that is has been an area overlooked or not attended adequately by sociology. A

growing body of sociological or quasi-sociological ‘literature’ has emerged on films.\textsuperscript{35} No doubt, but most of them are steeped in the mould of classic media research. This classic media research would heavily rely on empirical data collected on the basis of a perspective that mass media has a direct and immediate effect on the ‘mass viewers’. Such an influence of classic media research has stultified our understanding on cinema and its audience, and their relationship which gives a cultural pattern to a society. As against this trend, there are attempts to build a more inclusive scheme for studying films.\textsuperscript{36}

In India, as a contemporary political document cinema is appreciated in social-scientific scholarship. A number of researches have been conducted, especially with reference to the Tamil Cinema, to comprehend the political implications of popular cinema.\textsuperscript{37} Also, the leading social science journal \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} has accredited films, especially contemporary films, as highly public, vivid, politically relevant document through various articles during the last three decades.

Dealing with mainstream Hindi films, the social-psychologists have taken the lead in researching their contents and effects. One can see in the overall Indian cinema context, two contrasting explanations with respect to popular films. The alienating package of ‘unreal’ spectacle has a sort of


\textsuperscript{36} Tudor Andrew ibid.


Also, Chakravarty, V. ‘The Alternative Film and Tamil Cinema’ in the Seminar on \textit{Making Meaning in Indian Cinema}, IIAS, Shimla, October 1995, and, Pandian, M.S. \textit{The Image Trap} (New Delhi, Sage, 1993).
justification from the critics of rationality paradigm. According to scholars like Ashis Nandy, the homogenizing imperatives of modernization are countered to an extent by commercial films as they retain, however distorted, certain traditional ways of life and moral concerns. As against this, the rationalist school of film-making is severely critical about such ‘alienating’ package. The totalitarian irrational spectacle of popular films is the point of attack of Chidananda Das Gupta. Particularly in sociology, a very recent fancy is to study ‘popular films’ as important element of popular culture. From social – psychological angle, popular films are treated as dreams and fantasy which relate to the unconscious, inner needs and tensions of the audience. They primarily explain success of such films by the extent to which they meet the unconscious emotional needs. Such studies also problematises on whether the dominant institution and their ideologies are being reinforced through such films or whether they express a culture of conflict to make social meaning in the interest of the subordinate.

Coming to the particular theme of woman and cinema, quasi-social scientific reviews are carried out by the popular women’s journal Manushi since 1980s. The objective of such review are straight-forward: it is to counter the “trivialization” of women’s issues by the mass media. In such film-criticisms a lot of attention is drawn in no uncertain terms to “the systematic distortion of the life, situation and image of women” in popular cinema. These semi-academic exercise in film-criticisms/reviews

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38 Nandy, A ‘The Intelligent Film Critic’s Guide to the Indian Cinema’ in his The Savage Freud (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995).
39 Das Gupta, Chindananda The Painted Face (Delhi, Roli Books, 1992).
41 Such reviews are mainly written by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vamita.
42 Manushi no. 1., January, 1979, p.3.
continues in the pages of the journal till date. It signifies the seriousness with which feminists attempt to address the problem of women and popular culture. The focus of Manushi is on the film and its ideology. The conclusion drawn consistently is that the commercial cinema is the most powerful ideology created by capitalism to keep women in their gendered space.

A concern with realism is also a salient feature of film-criticism in the Indian context. Aesthetically and politically the popular films are away from realism. Realism demands a film’s aesthetics to be true to life, while its politics has to do with correct representations of women and formulation of “real” resolutions to the problems faced by women in real lives.43

During 1990s, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in popular cinema from the feminist perspective. This is due to proliferation of Media and Gender workshops across the country. The recent face of film-criticism is to recover the female voice from the patriarchal text. The new mode of analysis focuses on the sites of resistance within the parameters of patriarchy. Important contribution along this line of probing is Dulali Nag’s article in Economic and Political Weekly.44 The objective of the research is to point out that within the discourse of nationalism however homogenising, it is possible to locate “site of resistance”. Analysing a popular Bengali film, she probes a popular imagination of woman which allows greater autonomy for women than that allowed by the nationalist dichotomies of home/world. The assertion of female agency in the film is

brought to light by the author, who links it with the expression of
desire by the central female character of the film.

Another feminist intervention in sociological exploration of film is
from Patricia Uberoi. She studies a popular romantic Hindi film of 1950s
and places the problematics addressed by popular cinema terms of
eroticism in the face of different kinds of repression. In yet another study
of two popular Hindi movies in 1990s, Uberoi contends that popular
cinema focuses particularly on the relations of sexes, relations within the
family, and the relations between social classes to construct an ‘ideal moral
universe’ that intrinsically idolizes tradition and nation.

Lalita Gopalan examines an important problem of feminist criticism
when a film presents us with a seemingly progressive political position,
but through a mode of representation which may have a very different
impact on a section of the audience than one of helping them identify with
such positions. She links the cinematic representation of the female body to
the film industry’s relationship with the state. She advocates “formal
textual analysis” as proposed by western feminist film theory in order to
understand “the articulation of sexual difference” in film.

Although not exactly with sociological tools of analysis, a
compilation of essays backed up by theories of film-criticism demands
special mention at this point. The work is edited by Ravi Vasudevan.

45 Uberoi, Patricia “Dharma and Desire, Freedom and Density, Representing the Man-Woman
Relationship in Popular Hindi Cinema”, in Meenakshi Thapan ed. Embodiment: Essays on
46 Uberoi, Patricia ‘The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ’ in Contribution
Also see of the same author, ‘Coitus Interruptus and Love Story in Indian Cinema’ in
V.Dehejia ed. Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art (Delhi, Kali for Women,
Useful for sociological research is the finding by Moinak Biswas on a popular melodramatic Bengali film of 1950s. Employing textual analysis he shows how such a film depicts a particular set of desires that developed in the 1950s: the mobilization of an image and a space of the couple that made it the idealized emotional unit for a new society. Sociology of film stands of gain also from leading film-critics who act as resourceful chroniclers of Indian films and film-maker on one hand and on the other provide us with insights enriched by themes of cinema-studies.

In the more contemporaneous milieu of globalization of culture and politics, Sangeeta Dutta theorised on the ways in which new gender identities with and beyond the borders of the Indian nation-state are being fixed or directed by the film and television images. Scrutinizing the terrain of viewing women in the era of ‘MTV Culture’ that forms a part of globalized culture, she explicates the dual signal of the conservative underpinnings of the ‘confused’ feminine images and the increase in the right-wing homogenized images based on ethnic and religious identity.

A very thought provoking piece on popular Hindi film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* makes a very relevant sociological point. Sohini Ghosh tries to see the film spectator as also the author of the film-text.

"Where text and spectator collide, authorial intention may be subverted in order to create multiple meanings and pleasures. While ‘pleasure’ may not be inherently progressive or transgressive, it effectively provides insight into what makes popular culture ‘popular’ within its historical, material and social context. Moreover, by actively engaging with the text, and reading both with and against the grain the provide resistance and opposition to authorial


49 For example, Aruna Vasudev. Her important Contribution is *The New Indian Cinema* (New Delhi, Macmillan India Limited, 1986).

50 Dutta, Sangeeta ‘Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema’ in *Social Scientist*, ibid.
intentions and 'dominant' cultural meanings. Therefore when, during the monochrome title sequence, Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit directly address the audience and ask 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun'? We cannot assume that the answer is to same for all of us.\textsuperscript{51}

Succinctly put, in our review of the existing work on cinema and gender representation we find that growingly sociological rigour has been attached to such probings. Although most of the work are done from literary/film-criticism dimension, there are sociological insights forwarded by them. The recurring concerns in recent criticism appear to centre around question of the popular, of female agency, and the state. It is being pointed out that in such studies the register of rage or that of pleasure/desire are the only form of female agency that are being perceived. We need to take care that of the problem of collapsing agency into Rage/Desire, referencing thereby a realm of feeling conventionally designated as the feminine.\textsuperscript{52} Secondly, except a few of the studies (like, D.Nag and Sohini Ghosh's) most of the studies ultimately ends up by showing how the dominant ideological structure is being reinforced into the popular culture by such times. Our task in precisely the opposite. We seek to locate the areas of resistance and possibilities that are even available within conformist texts and also to locate the trajectory of such ‘openings’, breaking-away from the stereo-types. Thereby, instead of focussing on any one or two films we carve out a structure on our subject-theme.

\textsuperscript{51} Ghosh, Sohini 'Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.....!: Pluralizing pleasures of viewership’ in Social Scientist, ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Niranjana, Tejaswani 'Question For Feminist Film Studies’ in Journal of the Moving Image, no. 1, autumn 1999; pp. 91-101.
It is crucial to theorize gender question in their intersections with other crucial socio-political issues of our time, while analysing media representations. Important for feminist criticism is the integration of explanation and analysis so that history does not become a mere backdrop. Merely relying on feminist commonsense about the ubiquitousness of agency and desire will not suffice. It is being very rightly pointed out of Tejaswani Niranjana that investigation of film-studies has to be directed in the present context in relation to women. Also she has appealed that modes of critical cultural analysis to be inspired by feminism. Such a mode of analysis requires investigation of female audiences. She clarifies on the nature of such audiences as well. She emphasises on women as historically constituted subjects interpellated by certain kinds of cinema. As future possibilities she calls for retheorisation of female spectatorship itself.53

In this brief review of already existing literature we note that there is a scope for further advancement on the front of sociology of films. Certain social-scientific treatment has already been conducted on Indian films. Social-psychologists too have advanced their theses. Rigorous usage of sociological tools to understand not only film as primary source of data but also exploring the audience responses ought to be undertaken to broaden the horizon of sociology of films in India.

Scheme of Chapterisation

In the introductory chapter 1 titled 'The Problem and Method of Study' – the present chapter, we explicate what we intend to study and how we intend to study. At first, we explain our object of study. Then we justify our object of study. We reason out the importance of studying sociologically the representations of women in Bengali films. Subsequently we deal with the exact scope of our research work. We enumerate the select films that constitute our primary data source. In the method of study we chart out the ways we intend to gather knowledge. We explain the nature of audience that we propose to study to realise the negotiated aspects of the primary data. The technique of data-collection is dealt subsequently as well as the sample character is elaborated. Finally, we conduct a brief review of literature thought to be relevant for basing our study.

Chapter 2 is titled, 'Theories of Gender, Representation of Women and Film-Studies'. As per our research agenda, we seek to be theoretically informed by the themes of gender, media-representation of woman and film-studies. Our sociology of film theoretically sustains itself on the interface of the three relevant disciplines. The present work is not an exclusive exercise in anyone of the three areas of study. It stands to gain from the existing theorisation on femininity. It uses the leads provided by media-researches on women’s representation, and finally the scope of film-study guides the research to use the tools of film-analysis.
Chapter 3 is titled, ‘Cinema and Woman in Bengal: Meanings Through Time’. In order to probe the changing iconography of the woman in Bengali films we thought it prudent to base the study on the prevalent meanings of the Bengali social-cultural map. In chapter 3 we indulge in outlining the historical meanings of the two categories in Bengali society. How cinema and womanhood have been conceptualised by the Bengali intelligentsia as well as the masses and the changes in their significance through time is the content of this chapter.

Chapter 4 is titled, ‘The Encounter with Modernity’. In this chapter into parts we study in films of 1950s-1960s and also that of 1970s. We study how the films represent the socio-historical set-up of the respective decades. Thematically we explore the phases of reconciliation and assertion of femininity. Each film is analysed separately to develop the overall construction of women. We complement the primary data with data collected from audience-study.

Chapter 5 titled, ‘The Search for Alternatives: The Decades of 1980s and 1990s’. Here we analyse the alternative assertions of women in 1980s’ and 1990s’ representations of female protagonists in select Bengali films. The way we approached chapter 4 in the same way we deal with the film of 1980s – 1990s.

In the concluding chapter titled ‘Femininity and Its Representation in Bengali Cinema: A Dynamic Profile’, we enlist our major findings and place them in the context of present debate in feminist thought and feminist film criticism.