Chapter Three
CINEMA AND WOMAN IN BENGAL: MEANINGS THROUGH TIME

A Short History of Cinema in Bengal

What could be said about Indian Cinema and its history, in broad-strokes, the same is applicable in the context of Bengali Cinema too. At its very inception, films were exhibited as a scientific curiosity. Subsequently, the mythological genre was resorted to by film-makers to suit the popular taste. After the initial period, due to the influence of literary culture, a middle-class social cinema of reform evolved along with the development/introduction of sound technology in cinema. Basically through the films there were efforts to shake up and transform the fundamentalist/obscurantist oriented social structure. These films were at variance with other genres such as the mythological or costume films which catered to the plebian film-goer. This trend continued even after national Independence and it typified the decade immediately after Independence – the period of enlightened nationalist ideology propelled by socialist aspirations.

Film as a specialised art enterprise governed by cinematic language began to emerge from post independence period. This qualitative change was systematically supported by state investment in art cinema towards the close of the 1960s. The ‘parallel’ cinema emerged as the object of middle-class spectatorship, more so, in the wake of the ‘massification’ of the
commercial form into an encompassing and alienating package of spectacle, action and titillation.¹

Having outlined the historical trajectory of Indian films in general, it would be pertinent to elaborate the particular – the Bengali Cinema and its spectatorship. First of all, to appreciate the strong cinema culture of Bengal we can indulge in some plain facts and figures.²

In the 20th century, for nine decades Bengal has been embroiled in cinema enterprise. 1917 saw the first silent movie from Kolkata. The first talkie showed up in 1931. In Bengali, the first film-related magazine was published in 1929, while the maiden book on cinema appeared in 1930. Kolkata produced in total 119 silent movies during the period 1917 to 1934. With the advent of sound and speech since 1931 from Kolkata round about 2230 Bengali feature films have been produced till 2000.

In real terms, the film-society movement in India too had its beginning in Kolkata in October, 1947. Since then, with expected ups and downs, in Bengal another fifty to sixty film-society took shape in the next fifty years. Needless to say, there has been a proliferation of film periodicals and books during all these years. In the year 1952 Kolkata could boast of its first international film festival. Backed by an exclusive Bengalee audience and patronised by either the state government or private

¹ Valudevan, R.S. ed. Making Meaning in Indian Cinema (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000).
initiatives Kolkata, has hosted around twenty to twenty two international film-festivals.\textsuperscript{3} Given this factual data it is evident that Bengal could claim a distinct tradition of cinema culture. Needless to mention that this 'culture' produced internationally acknowledged eminent film-makers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen.

In 1985, Bengalees' film-activity received a shot in the arm with the inauguration of a full-fledged film-complex, Nandan. With its auditoria, Library and seminar halls it propelled Cinema studies in the state. Such a complex is different from any other cinema study institutes of this country, as this is not exclusive for only students, teachers, researchers or film-makers. This centre is open to general public audience as well. However, at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century the general Bengali cinema milieu is quite listless and if is being often claimed that over the last two decades of the century the cinema viewership as well as its average standard has experienced a downgradation. Ofcourse there have been films against the overall trend through the creative efforts of Buddhadev Dasgupta, Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghosh and Rituparno Ghosh. But these attempts have essentially being christened as exceptions. In such a current scenario, if is useful for us to check the history of Bengali cinema in more sociological terms. Here we can try to locate the meanings that cinema has had amongst its audience/viewers. Also, if we are interested to see how such cinema has had meanings for its viewers, inevitably we would be dealing with how the

\textsuperscript{3} Op. cit.
Bengali cinema viewers/audience has undergone a metamorphosis over the years.

**Cinema and its meanings for Bengali audience – the metamorphosis**

Till date, the average Bengalee viewer would associate cinema with the Bengali word ‘boi’ (i.e. book). Such an association synoptically captures the Bengali cinema culture. The rich literary history of Bengal and the intense Bengali penchant for theatre essentially shapes the Bengali viewers’ attitude towards a new art form – cinema. In fact, even prior to the advent of silent movies, theatre used to be the principal form of entertainment and mimetic art among the upper-middle, middle-class citizenry of Bengal. Inheritors of a rich literary tradition, what the average Bengali audience looks for a film’s narrative content. S/he considers cinema as primarily a transference of a “story” in a new medium. Amongst film-cities/reviewers it has always been an important question to note whether the cinema “has told a story” in a well-knit style. The search for narrative content still persists and is widespread among Bengalees.

It is worthwhile for us to acknowledge that for Bengalees the repertoire of literary works does not exhaust with the classical greats like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Rabindranath Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya. An array of literary luminaries follows with Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyaya, Tarashankar Bandopadhyaya, Manik

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4. In narrative cinema we see every object in a flowing context resembling the processes we employ in observing an object in real life. In real life when we speak to people, the impression we form is more than spatial and temporal context, and, what is more, we observe his/her body language and associate it to the observed image to judge the truth of the statement issuing from the lips.

5. A popular film journal, Chitrapanjali, as early as 1933 (1340 B.S., Sravan issue) in its review section, praised a film in terms of maker’s knowledge of how “to tell a story in cinema.”
Bandopadhyaya, Adwaitwa Mallabarman, Sunil Gangopadhyaya, Premendra Mitra, Ashapurna Devi etc. Film makers have constantly drawn upon the fictional writings by the greats of the early days, as much as drawn to literary brilliance of the present. In fact, this unique feature of Bengali literary works – its strong narrative content attracted film makers of other Indian languages to adapt and cinematically explore. Apparently this literary reliance in Bengali film-making would ensure a minimum box-office success, as the script-writers utilised this literary flourish to the dialogues.6

It is ample clear that right from its early days cinema in Bengal has been subject to a strong literary influence. Added to this was the fairly strong passion of Bengalees for theatre.7 Before cinema could appear as the most powerful art form in Bengal, theatre had become a part of the cultural mental baggage of the Bengalees.8

The advent of the new medium, cinema, did not straightway dismantled theatre from being the primary obsession for Bengal’s cultural endeavour. What is important for us is to recognize that the overwhelming impact of literature and theatre on Bengali cinema logically affected its cinematic language and its development. How far this impact/influence acted as a hindrance for cinema’s autonomous development is a different

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8 Culturally and Socially the tie-up between theatre and cinema could be well understood by the fact that the early theatre-owners who were at the same time producers-directors encouraged film-making by allowing film-makers to film that stage-production. See, Ray, Mriganka Shekhar. 'Bengali Cinema : An overview' in 100 years of Cinema ed by Probodh Maitra, Calcutta, 1995.
issue altogether. For our purpose, we appreciate that this encounter between theatre/literature and cinema has not been entirely distracting.

First, this influence and baggage popularised cinema. Secondly, in the process it set up a certain standard of good taste. In fact, the early screenings in Calcutta were held mainly in the theatre halls where films appeared as a double-bill attraction with the plays. The people who were glued to their seats included patricians and plebians alike and from the very moment cinema's future emergence as the biggest mass entertainment was on the cards. In Bengal another factor also helped the prospective film-makers. Calcutta already had a strong show-business outfit in professional theatres which came forward to serve as primitive show houses for films. A loyal audience support Bengali cinema could create by virtue of its narrative and dramatic content. This support is mainly among the Bengali middle-class and the intelligentsia. The juggernaut of Hindi commercial cinema with its new found/changing entertainment formula could well be resisted, at least till the 1970s, by Bengali cinema to a great extent.9

An interesting aspect of Bengali films, barring a few exceptions, is that compared to films made in Hindi, Tamil and Telegu even during the pre-independence period it hardly relied on mythological stories or religious themes. Instead it gravitated on tales of romance, familial sentiments, middle-class relationships of rifts and reconciliation. Whether it is upholding traditional Hindu values or affirming conventional social

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9 Towards the close of 20th Century, one can see a number of attempts in Bengali cinema to follow the 'formula' of Hindi movies, but most of them have gone into oblivion without a whisper.
codes (family codes), the film-makers satisfied the tastes and preferences of the average middle-class viewers.

Talking about Bengali films of the period just preceding Indian’s independence and years following it, noted film reviewer and critic Kironmoy Raha claims,

"Yet with all its deficiencies — they plainly stand out seen from the vantage point of hindsight — Bengali cinema during this period gained a reputation for artistic achievement which was not wholly undeserved. For one thing, it had avoided relying heavily on songs and dances. For another, and more worthily, it had set a standard of good taste not always found in films of other Indian languages. For yet another, no other regional cinema could measure up to Bengali cinema’s narrative appeal and, in many instances, its honest portrayal of aspects of Bengali society."

What is noticeable is that a sincere effort towards depiction, arration and representation of sentiments and problems of middle-class Bengali family has been the strength of Bengali cinema. This in turn helped Bengali cinema to build a support base among a good section of middle-class as steady viewers to stand by it. Important here to mention a very ironical feature of Bengali cinema’s history. During the crucial period (1940s) of freedom struggle interspersed with war and famines, with all their thematic variety, Bengali films failed to reflect contemporary socio-political realities. This is quite intriguing given the fact that in other artistic media like music, theatre and literature there was an obvious reflection and upsurge of popular sentiments for freedom/democracy/independence.

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10 Raha, K. ibid, p.33.
11 Sur Anshu ed. ibid. Blissfully Bengali cinema was engaged in producing wish-fulfilling comedies during the pre-independence time with the exception of possibly two powerful films, Bimal Roy’s *Udayer Pathe* (Towards Awakening) and Hemen Gupta’s *Forty-Two*. The first film portrayed a sensitive story of human relationship in the backdrop of Kolkata’s infamous famine of 1940s. The second one captured the spirit of the “Quit India” movement of 1942 in its narration.
The post-independence scenario was quite paradoxical in case of Bengali Cinema. As a result of partition of Bengal the market for films was extensively lost. Still, it did not cripple film-making in Bengal because a large number of profiteers emerged out of the post war economics who could (mostly clandestinely) sponsor/invest large amounts in film-making. The path of development and industrialisation process followed by independent India resulted in the rise of new classes in the society. The emergent working class, an “affluent” section of the peasantry along with the expanding middle-class became patrons of Bengali cinema. As a corollary, the thematic content and form of Bengali cinema inevitably had to go for an alteration. That is, the new sections/emergent new classes with differential aspirations and life opportunities faced trials and tribulations of life which demanded a new type of cinema, at least, cinema that was “speaking” their lives.

The overwhelming dazzle of Hindi commercial films – revolving on spectacle of songs, dances and fights and the ‘star’ phenomenon, could successfully be resisted by Bengali cinema. This was possible due to its middle-class (although with a different and nebulous boundary) patronage who flocked to experience cinematically stories with incidents and emotions it could believe without much effort and vicariously experienced. And there was no dearth of stories, novels or literary activity to draw upon such themes. Added to this was Bengal’s own culture specific star phenomenon of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen—the quintessential romantic pair to rise in Bengali Cinema in the 1950s. A star pair with such a popular pull happened with Bengali popular cinema never before, nor since.
The Trials of Modernity

The celebration of modernity – the chase of modernity in the post-independence period, its strifes and successes were virtually emblematic on the real-life personae of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Uttam Kumar possibly represented the “other” of the emergent modernity. Not Anglicised. He represented/belonged to a tradition bound middle-class background, not really urbane sophisticated mouthed. Yet the hero was suave, soft, embodying a typical emotion-ridden, innocent Bengali youth. On the other hand, Suchitra Sen, notwithstanding all her ‘mystic’ real life, could well be located as coming from a newly modernised, English educated familial background. Although such an inference/observation may not be far away from objective historical fact; but one can convincingly say that, in popular public imagination such is their real life identity. And there had been successful transference of this popular public imagination in the reel-life stories involving the star pair of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. The success story of this star pair in terms of innumerable hit films may well be researched along this line of argument. But our case is to see/locate the place of Bengali cinema in Bengali society how it has evolved a character, how or whether at all it has undergone any thematic shift and so forth. This way we would be indulging in the crucial aspect of meanings as generated by Bengali cinema and as meaningfully cinema is being held in the Bengali society.

With the emergence and importance of new classes during the post-independence period, we observe that that there had been attempts to extend the thematic boundaries in Bengali films. The habitual ground of city-bred middle class familial stories remained; still there was a shift of focus on the neglected and the obscure. Quite naturally, the first cognizable shift was the focus on the interface of modernity and tradition. The
widespread experience of the encounter between a tradition bound society and unleashing modern values captured the imagination of film-makers. This meta-problem found narrative treatment in familial stories; more so, conjugality was problemlised around this grand question.

Invoking the encounter between modernity and tradition, conjugal relations were explored and in the genre of romantic melodrama, the denouements were all in line with domestication of modernity. That is, a reconciliatory mood effectively captured the imagination of its viewers: where everyone embraces modernity within the confines of tradition. Nothing could be more topical for an audience/viewers who were grappling with the issue of modernity, yet were thoroughly entrenched in societal codes, mores and norms – all that are dictated by traditional values.

Modernity has had it inner contradictions. Bengali cinema responded to it logically. Crises affected ‘modern’ lives has had strong emotive representations in Bengali cinema. Such was the thematic focus of post-independence cinema. Added to this was a growing awareness amongst a vanguard of film-makers as well as film-critics in cinema’s world-wide progress and its artistic possibilities.\(^\text{12}\)

With the opening up of the chapter of International Film Festival in India in 1952, Kolkata responded enthusiastically. European films as well as films from Japan could capture the imagination of a sizeable section of cine-goers. This event shaped and altered not only the quality of receptivity

\(^{12}\) The formation of Calcutta Film Society, led by eminent cine analyst/viewers like Chidananda Das Gupta, Harisadhan Dasgupta, Satyajit Ray, Nemai Ghosh et al in 1947, was the first of its kind in India. This on one hand indicated the cinematic taste and temper of the emergent intelligentsia and on the other, through its activities could inculcate a cinema-culture of high standard amongst a sizeable section of cinema-viewers.
of ordinary viewers but allowed young, enthusiastic film-makers to venture into new ways – essentially, neo-realism\(^\text{13}\) had its first shot in the arm.

"Meanwhile, some young intellectuals of Calcutta were dreaming of a different path for Indian Cinema. Through the study of aesthetics of cinema and through some occasional screenings of good films from other countries, they were gradually becoming aware of the finest specimens of world cinema. This awareness led to dissatisfaction with the indigenous products and the dissatisfaction led to a craving for better films."\(^\text{14}\)

The Satyajit Ray Phenomenon

The most important event which to a large extent metamorphosed Bengali cinema and its audience was the arrival of Satyajit Ray with his path breaking *Pather Panchali*, 1955. (An Ode to the folkways, tr. mine). It was arguably the most important cinematice experience which was going to have a lasting impact on the Bengali cultural scene. The unsung, unnoticed, unplayed lives of the marginals – the rural poor’s lives found cinematic expression. A new, different, modern cinematic language arrived in Bengali Cinema through Ray’s maiden film *Pather Panchali*. To quote Chidananda Das Gupta, an outstanding film critic/analyst,

"To see *Pather Panchali* again today, close to four decades after it was released, its still (in Lindsay Anderson’s phrase) to go down on one’s

\(^{13}\) Neo-realism is an art form which had its origin in the war devasted Italy. It was an Italy brutalised by food-shortage, poverty, unemployment and above all an erosion of human values. The founder of this art movement was C. Zavattini, a novelist, critic and journalist. The film-makers who introduced neo-realism into cinema were Roberto Rossellini, Lucion Visconti and De Sica. The characteristic features of neo-realist film are, (1) True to life – the story telling style would be like a documentary, (2) Normally, professional actors/actresses do not figure in these films, (3) There is no spectacular sets or makeups used, (4) There is no melodrama in the film-narrative. Instead its tight-knit style indicates a social reality. Without indulging in political propaganda it points out contemporary social issues/problems. It had its peak in the period 1943-1952.

\(^{14}\) Ray, Mriganka Sekhar, idid – pp. 172.
knees in the dust, into the heart of Indian reality, and the human condition.  

It's not that the obscure landscape/stories came to be established in Bengali cinema. *Pather Panchali* was essentially a story of displacement of the rural folk on the face of modernity. Ultimately, in combination with the other two films of the trilogy\(^\text{16}\) *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished) and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), Ray sets up a chronicle of the new emergent classes settling in urbane locals.

Not overlooking the intellectual political contribution of Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen (almost Ray's contemporaries) to Bengali cinema, we can assert that Satyajit Ray had a special role in Bengali cinema movement. In nearly four decades of film making Ray indulged in such thematic and stylistic diversity that he remains an illustrator and chronicler of the awakening and ferment of a traditional society in the throes of change.\(^\text{17}\)

Cinema does not remain or perform an act of reflection of society only. Its imageries become real too, which in turn shapes society. Overall speaking the Satyajit Ray phenomenon has been a part and parcel of Bengali Cinema's legacy since 1950s.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{15}\) Dasgupta, Chidananda : The Cinema of Satyajit Ray (National Book Trust, Delhi 1994) introduction XI. Dasgupta also claims that gradually the film audience started learning a new language of cinema through Ray.

\(^{16}\) It is based on novelist Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhaya's writing.


\(^{18}\) Ray has made thirty-two feature including two short films for Television, apart from a few documentaries. Revealed in a variety of situations in different time and space, the films show an abiding interest in human beings, their relationships and reactions. The web of
Having indicated the impact and legacy of Ray, it will be useful for us to appreciate the legacy with which Ray was endowed with. Basically to trace down the ideological valuational/normative map of Ray’s cinema, we look for the inspirations he drew from. Tagore, Brahmoism and Bengali enlightenment had a direct bearing on Ray’s intellectual frame. Subsequently his love for American narrative cinema, Italian neo-realist films and humanism of Renoir – all amalgamated into a non-exclusivist humanist, rationalist bent. This allowed Ray to question established codes of Hindu traditional life or problematise the success of modernity, probe the interior of conjugal life and so forth. Such a probing mind was not surely an anathema to the concurrent/emergent popularity of left-ideology in Bengal.

**Bringing the Political to the Fore**

The cultural temper and ambience within which Bengali Cinema flourished, following 50s, is to a large extent impacted upon by Ray. Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen brought the political to the fore in Bengali cinema. If the socio-historical problem faced by the partition - ridden industrialisation affected people of Bengal occupied Ghatak’s cinematic imagination, Sen’s cinema initially bordered on didactic left activism.

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19 Led by Raja Rammohan Ray it was the ideology of Brahmo Samaj, a quasi-religious movement aimed at the reformation of Hindu Society. The movement was inspired by the egalitarian principles of the Colonial English Rule to invoke the ideas of equality in a Caste-bound rigid hierarchical Hindu Society.

20 The popular film-magazine Anandolok in its May, 1998 commemorative issue on Ray, carried Jyoti Basu, the quintessential Marxist chief-minister’s observation that Ray might not be a leftfist but definitely was a progressive.

21 Banerjee, Shampa ed : Ritwik Ghatak (Directorate of Film Festivals, New Delhi, 1982).

Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen belonged to the left – cultural movement spearheaded by Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). It is interesting to note that IPTA had already played a vital role in launching a kind of peoples’ cinema in *Dharti-ke-lal*, a screen adaptation of the trail-blazing plays *Nabanna* and *Jabanbandi* by Bijan Bhattacharya, where the activists of the movement participated. The stirrings of cinematic consciousness in Bengal were planted thereby, with two streams flowing side by side. If one was that of the rational humanist tradition of Ray, the other was more rebellious leftist tradition. From 1960s onwards, films started demonstrating immediate social realities.

Ghatak with his strong sense of rootedness explored the human dilemma/agony of Bengal Partition in most of his films. With strong, at times melodramatic, story lines Ghatak’s appeal remained with the intellectual and middle-class audience. A large section of the middle-class could easily identify itself with the social themes explored cinematically by Ghatak, eg. *Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar, Subarnorekha* et al.

Mrinal Sen’s initial films in the sixties *Baishey Sravan, Punascha* and *Akash Kusum* essentially conformed to the Bengali taste for intense human stories. However, Sen responded to the tempestuous 1970s with *Interview, Calcutta – 71, Chorus and Padatik* – all influenced by agit-prop methods in cinema. Although the films could appeal to left-activists/sympathisers, Sen had to shed his pronounced activist’s posture to revert to the individual from the collective, without losing the social
perspective. In Sen’s admission, it was a self-introspective mood that could best explain his late seventies’ *Ek Din Pratidin*.²³

**The Contradictions of 1970s**

The period between 1955 to 1964 could be termed as the golden era of Bengali cinema culture. Amongst the urbane educated section filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha, Rajen Tarafdar, Asit Sen, Parthopratim Chowdhury and Barin Saha held a high esteem as they helped the audience learn the language of cinema. The educated and the sensible section of the audience gradually were getting acquainted with good cinema. With Bengali cinema scaling new heights in 1950s and 1960s, aesthetically and thematically an enhanced public taste in Bengal got consolidated. An audience for good cinema was almost tailor-made. Such an ambience was a fruitful stimulus for even the commercial film-making circuit. A number of film-makers came to capture audience’s appreciation, each experimenting in their own way meaningful wish-fulfilling films.²⁴

The process continued in the next phase, i.e. from 1965-1974. A number of films were produced which attracted the taste of the intelligent audience. However in the 1970s one could sense a change of taste amongst the audience. This was largely caused by the extravagance of Hindi commercial films. These films, courtesy the powerful distributors, could even cross the boundaries of cities and towns to penetrate the suburbs as well as rural areas. The irony is that although the decade of 70s was a very turbulent phase in West Bengal’s socio-political history, yet the Bengali

²³ Wood, N. John: Ibid.
²⁴ Possibly the golden period of successful box office hits, yet cinematically qualified sans cheap vulgarity, were the contributions from Ajoy Kar, Tapan Sinha, Asit Sen, Tarun Mazumdar, Agragami, Rajen Tarafdar et al.
audience flocked mostly to watch mythologically tinged family drama, *Baba Taraknath*. In fact, in this decade only there appeared a clear distinction in the film-audience. A major section of if went for irrational obscurantist or fatalistic films, and a minority section were left loyal to creative good films which were socially relevant and theoretically realist. The film-society movement picked up momentum around the same time, thereby creating an ambience for cinema study. The duality was that, the average Bengalee audience gradually lost its taste to the spectacle and irrationality of commercial coloured movies of Mumbai. Here we can investigate the role of Doordarshan (in Bengal started full-fledged telecasting from 1975) in showcasing and televising Hindi movies in its prime slots, which might have had promoted/popularised Hindi movies across caste/class lines. Nevertheless, film-society movement steadily reached the suburbs of Bengal. Journals and periodicals regularly started appearing on news-stand dealing with serious cinema studies. Also a number of quasi-academic books arrived dealing with the aesthetics and sociological aspects of important films. In the Bengali vernacular a number of thought – provoking writings came up to enrich the cinema culture of its people.

A unique contradiction marks the decade 1970-1980. The same decade witnessed a growing penchant to emulate the unreal spectacular world of Hindi movies in Bengal (supported by a large audience) on one hand, while on the other a constructive effort from various film-societies as well as state government to prop up socially meaningful films. Importantly

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25 It is interesting to note that, around the same time (1975) in the all India circuit the mythological grounded film *Jai Santoshi Ma* created a new brand of devotees and the film ran for more than a year.

26 A few important books are (a) Ghosh Soumendra : Chalachitra Chinta O Chetana (Kolkata, Jatiya Sahitya Parishad, 1976), (b) Sen, Mrinal : Ami Ebong Chalachitra (Kolkata, Bengal Publishers, 1972), (c) Chattopadhyay, Amitabha : Chalachitra Samaj, Satyajit Roy (Part I & II) (Asansol, Film Study Centre, 1980), (d) Ray, Satyajit : Bishoy Chalachitra (Calcutta, Ananda, 1976)
the mantle of the standard bearers of Bengali Cinema, passed on to young talents in the late seventies and early eighties. The disaster, defeat and agony of a dream-like revolution\(^{27}\) coupled with the anger against the atrocities of the State Machinery\(^{28}\) shaped to a large extent the intellectual landscape of Bengal in this period. The political events stirred the collective cultural consciousness of Bengal, so much so, that all art forms, whether it is theatre, literature or cinema, indulged in a kind of self-reflection and introspection.\(^{29}\) From the exterior to the interior life a search began in every form of cultural activities. Intense, self-probing, debunking middle-class, elite facades human life problems were attended to by filmmakers like Buddhadev Dasgupta, Goutam Ghosh, Utpalendu Chakraborty and Aparna Sen. There were others too, not so prominent yet with bold ideas. Sporadically films were made by these film-enthusiasts like Purnendu Patri, Nabyendu Chatterjee, Raja Mitra, Asoke Viswanathan, Sandip Ray. And they have gained attention in the festival-circuit as well.

A palpable change one can make out in the politico-cultural field of Bengal with the establishment/installation of the left front Government in 1977 and its continuous run since. The decades of crusading against tyrannical tradition/administration were over by then. With the Left at the mantle of power, the struggle or the protest vis-à-vis a real determinate oppressor possibly appeared irrelevant. In a milieu of apparent tranquillity human crises and its stories remained, but the focus now effectively turned inwards. On the other side of the coin, there have been ominous attempts of bringing in the Hindi film formula for commercial success. But with a few

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\(^{27}\) The left radical naxalite movement is being indicated here.

\(^{28}\) The Emergency of 1975 as well as the brutal state repression on radical leftists which continued even after the lifting of Emergency left many a young mind in Bengal maimed.

\(^{29}\) In the field of cinema, Ritwik Ghatak's Jukti Takko Aar Gappo (1974), Buddhadev Dasgupta's Grihajuddha (1984), and a host of Mrinal Sen's later films bear testimony to this.
exceptions most of the attempts failed even in commercial terms and none of them could draw the cinematic attention of the intelligentsia or the middle-class audience. In the period 1985 onwards a qualitative change affected the cinema viewer’s standard and taste. This was due to television, video-technology and subsequently satellite televisions. Slowly, viewers started preferring their drawing rooms instead of the theatre-halls to seek pleasure in cinema. A kind of ‘captive audience’ is created, forced to watch whatever is being beamed onto them. And films which are being televised are essentially those entertainment bloc-buster which could garner advertisements and sponsors. So, a homogenisation of liking/taste for films are essentially being created by this new technology, which has made the audience virtually passive.  

Good Audience For Good Films

Yet, we cannot wind up the story of Bengali cinema of the last two decades of the 20th century on a cynical note. Amidst the dwindling standards, from 1980s onwards, even a handful of meaningful films could draw maximum public-attention. The middle-class, the erstwhile cine-loving class of Bengal almost waits for a long period to throng the theatre-halls as and when aesthetically and cinematically nuanced films are being relased. Simply put, with the Ray-Ghatak-Sen trio no longer remaining a spectre over Bengali cinema, there has been no steady flow of good cinema. There have been off-beat attempts at it, but quite a number of them remained too “Intellectualised” to reach the wide appreciation or attention of the wider class of viewers. But this class, the patrons of Bengali cinema

30 A kind of Bengali films resting on Hindi film-hits, thematically and stylistically, have drawn a good audience but it saw the emergence of a new breed of viewers. Clearly there has been a disappearance of the erstwhile middle-class/intellectual viewers from the theatre-halls. This phenomenon requires a separate research probing altogether.

31 Box-office records of some apparently ‘high-brow’ films like Parama, Dahan or Unishe April confirm this.
historically, remain alert to que up and crowd the cinema-halls as and when their standards are being met. The wide intellectual acclaim as well as public response to films like *Paroma, Unishe April, or Paromitar Ed Din* bear testimony to our observation.

Important for our research purpose to underscore three points, that, in the absence of a steady flow of good cinema in the last 10/15 years in Bengal:

(a) there has been successful attempts by distributors to re-run old hits in theatre-halls.

(b) every time there is a cine-festival by any of the cine-clubs of Bengal almost the same package of meaningful cinema were screened and re-screened with ever growing viewers’ interest, and

(c) apart from Doordarshan India, many private Bengali television channels profitably telecast these set of films quite regularly.

Therefore, these films sustain themselves, continue to attract public attention and finally become a part of cultural archive of Bengal.

The strong cinema-tradition in Bengal is amply reflected in the efforts of the State Government to promote good cinema. The financing and support to promising film-makers, venturing into productions for films of both veteran and young directors, setting up of a unique film-complex (Nandan), exclusively organising annually an International Film Festival since 1995, setting up of the first colour film laboratory (Rupayan) are all examples of the response of the State Government towards a very sensitive stirrings of the people of Bengal. Introducing degree courses in media and film studies in important universities has given a fillip to strengthen and broaden cinema sensitivities of Bengal. Bengal film industry may not
reflect all the efforts by the State Government, groups and individuals in creating good cinema, nevertheless, even in the bleak decade of 1990s the consistent flow of cine-viewers for all the films made by Rituparno Ghosh and Aparna Sen speak of the strong sublime desire for cinema, meaningful for social existence. And definitely it assures us of the existence of a cinema-loving class. This class meaningfully negotiates during 1960s the platonic ‘extra-marital’ love of Charu of Charulata, almost resents the ‘extra-marital’ physical relation of Paroma in the 80s and empathises with 90s Paromita when she debunks and walks out of the meaninglessness of a conservative marital relation/practice.32

The Meaning of Womanhood in Bengal

Having discussed the meaning of Cinema in Bengal, we will now make an attempt to see the prominent socio-cultural issues and sources that give meaning to the idea of womanhood in Bengal. This is related to the notion of personhood held by any society. In this case, since our research work is concerned with the images and idolisation of woman in Bengal (in particular the changing iconography in films), we would be interested to locate the way Bengali society understands woman as a person in social relations.

We are drawn to an understanding of the ideals of womanhood. Femininity - the characteristics claimed to constitute femaleness in a particular society can be best explored by looking at not only the civilisational and cultural ideals but also the historical reality of women's lot. The interplay–correspondence as well as contradiction, between the images and the reality of women in Bengali society holds the key to our

32 The three leading woman protagonists of the distinct phases of Bengali cinema are being indicated here. Charu is from Satajit Ray’s Charulata (1964), Paroma is the lead character in Apasna Sen’s film of the same name (1984) and Paromita is Sen’s heroine of Paromitar Ek Din (One day in the life of Paromita, tr. mine, 1999).
purpose of understanding the meaning of womanhood in Bengal. The reality varies with the ideas, but the ideal remains as a strong motivator. Before we check the way Bengali woman has had participated in the real world, we can briefly observe how she has been perceived culturally in Bengal. This brings us to the notion of Gender Roles held in any particular society.

Gender Roles are behaviours and attributes expected of individuals on the basis on being born either female or male. Whereas "Sex" is a biological term based on an individual's reproductive organs and genes, "gender", is a psychological and cultural term. Gender is a cultural construct: the distinction in roles, behaviours, and mental/emotional characteristics between females and males developed by a society.

The gender role for females is quite distinct from the gender role for males. In Western Society, to be "feminine" is to be nurturant, expressive, cooperative and sensitive to the needs of others. To be "masculine" is to be active, aggressive, dominant and ambitious. Although "masculinity" and "feminimity" and their related tracts are regarded as opposites, researchers clearly indicate that people possess both sets of traits in varying degrees, regardless of their biological sex. Furthermore, individual differences are far greater than gender difference with respect to all personality traits and human abilities.

Personality traits assigned to each gender role generally, stem from traditional division of labour. Because of their maternal possibilities, women are supposed to develop qualities that would enhance the maternal role, such as empathy and nurturance. Because of their role as breadwiners, warriors or hunters, men are supposed to develop qualities that would

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enhance performance in these roles, such as aggressiveness and competitiveness.

The traits of maleness or femaleness can be examined through various genres like: characterisation in fiction/various art form (Women's sensibilities), prescriptions for appropriate social and moral arrangements (the idea of separate spheres), and research on the biological bases for such characteristics (sex difference in cranial size, special functions of the reproductive organs). These genres of knowing can contribute to refined conceptions of male and female and particularly to a discursive sense of the attributes of masculinity and femininity. However, images of women and the feminine historically reflected in popular cultural practices remain an important scope for exploration.

Classical Ideals of Womanhood in India

The Judeo-Christian ideology in the West is patriarchal as is the predominantly Hindu ideology in India. But the context is different. The problems are identical, but the responses have had to be different and culture specific. The cry for liberation is universal, but its substance is different. Within India, again, regional variations abound. Some of the most prominent India ideas about women and the feminine are to be found in the classical literature of the Sanskrit tradition, as well as in English-

Patriarchy could be understood at two levels, institutional and discursive. There are debates with respect to institutional explanation of patriarchy mainly in terms of universality and specificity. For our research purpose, we use patriarchy on the level of discourse. We apply the concept as one that reflects on exclusively masculine view of the world and for rendering women's experiences and women's perspectives invisible. Discursively it imposes dualisms and oppositions onto the disparate flow of experience: reason versus emotion; mind versus body; subject versus object and above all known versus known. Patriarchy then favours one side of each pair over the other, establishing a hierarchy of classifications in which that which is associated with the male is given priority to that which represents the female. Thus patriarchy establishes male dominance in its basic accounts of the world, its standards of knowledge and judgement, as well as in its concrete institutions and practices. But women's experiences as marginalised within patriarchy can evoke a more determined articulation of their points of view, thus giving rise to a set of feminist discourses that attempt to challenge the dominant patriarchal view.
language materials. Important though these sources are for an understanding of Indian views of women and the feminine, our interest is however on regional levels of the tradition, particularly Bengal. In order to do this, first we can outline the meta ideals of Indian womanhood. So we can refer to the great classical texts to map out the grand ideals, subsequently in the following section we can focus on the regional Bengali response to it. Essentially, while focussing on the Bengali language materials and its socio historical context we will be developing how in modern Bengal the prominent Indian traditions of looking at womanhood were being negotiated. That is, the social construction of the 'new' woman in Bengal would be deliberated upon in the next section.

It is often being held that all the tragedies and degradation of women's lot in India are rooted in its cultural tradition and its institutional practices. Women are 'idealized' in a way that it runs counter to the egalitarian principles of modern times. Thereby, a dualism between tradition and modernity is invoked. So, for women's emancipation the classical tradition is being held as the chief barrier.

Many scholars are interested to emphasize the uniquiness of Indian tradition and counter the peoplar conception that Indian Women's oppression stems from the traditional classical prescriptions and ideals. Asha Jayant and Indira Rothermund have quoted noted sociologist Radha Kamal Mukherjee to substantiate their favourable disposition towards classical view India Womanhood. They quote,

".... There is a widespread ignorance about the original Sanskrit Literature, both the Vedic and classical and of the Dharmashastra (law books) in which are to be found the laws, customs and traditions which define the true status of women in early times. It is pointed out that in the vedic period highest place was accorded to women in India ...."^{35}

The contention is that in the Vedic Society the status of women was not at all that degraded as claimed by modernists. Often it is being cited that there were great women who were among the composer of the Rig Vedic hymns (e.g. Gargi, Lopamudra, Atreyi et al.). That, women were allowed to the highest education like Vedic Studies and were entitled to all the šaṃskaaras or religious sacraments like men. Admitting that the vedic society was not free from patriarchal elements, yet within the system the position of women was much better than popularly conceived.\(^{36}\)

However, the Vedic ideals lost their edge in the post-Vedic times. The downgrading of women is best exemplified in Manu Smriti. Not only womanhood was given a negative connotation, women were conceived of being dependent and to be shackled by husbands.\(^{37}\)

It is important for us to note that India has passed through many stages and it has had encounters with many a foreign cultural system. So, the ideals of womanhood have gone through metamorphosis socio-historically. Nevertheless an 'ideal' emerged with the idealisation of the learned Gargi, of the spiritual Maitreyi, of the suffering yet faithful Sita, the loyal. Saviri - all rolled into one. The ideals that go into the making of this womanhood in traditional India are that of purity, devotion, tenderness, chastity, patience and endurance. Efflorescence of these ideals one finds in the great women of ancient India, be it Sita, Damayanti or Savitri.\(^{38}\)

All these ideals make up the much glorified and valorised notion of motherhood in India. Motherhood is the ultimate ideal for the Indian


\(^{38}\) Bhattacharya, Shivaprasad "Great Women in Sanskrit Classics" in Madhavananda, Swami and Mazumdar, R.C. (eds) ibid, pp.238-52.
women. The overwhelming importance accorded to motherhood explains the significance of Matrishakti or Matrigun in the life of a Hindu woman. The ability to become a good mother with all the scripted virtues of chastity, faithfulness, nurturance and endurance elevates the status of a Hindu woman. To quote social-psychologist Sudhir Kakar,

"For an Indian woman, imminent motherhood is not only the personal fulfilment of an old wish and the biological consummation of a lifelong promise, but an event in which the culture confirms her status as a renewer of the race, and extends to her a respect and consideration which were not accorded to her as a mere wife." 39

Now the important question is whether womanhood has always been accorded positive values? In the Hindu psyche, according to Kakar, there simmers the sexual presence of the bad mother40 That is, on one hand - at the conscious level there remains the ideal of womanliness with all the positive values of tenderness, nurturance and endurance. On the other there is the unconscious belief in the potential destructiveness and uncontrolled passion of the woman. This causes insecurity and anxiety amongst men, who then resolve to control this anxiety by controlling (by implication, oppressing) women.

So, what we find is a dual concept of womanhood. On the one hand she is the bestower, on the other she is the destroyer. Susan Wadley41 explains that the Hindu female is Shakti (energy/ power) and Prakriti (nature) rolled into one. As Prakriti, she is uncontrolled. Obviously uncontrolled power generates fear and anxiety which could be satiated if she loses control of her power (sexuality) either voluntarily or being forced (thereby, oppressed) to do so. It is then quite expected that we find a

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40 Kakar, Sudhir ibid.
plethora of both benevolent as well as malevolent goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Basically, what we tried to figure out is that the Indian Cultural ideal of womanhood does not present us with a monolithic image of the woman. The ideals of chastity, fidelity, nurturance, endurance etc. are often used as tools to restrict her spontaneous self-fulfilling agency. Even the idea of motherhood is not free from dualism. That, women, if uncultured/uncontrolled would break free. Alongside her benevolent character, she has a potential for destruction. These ambiguities allow multiple interpretation of the religions scriptures and prescriptions while imaging a 'new' woman. When modernity had to encounter this tradition, if could react in various ways. The religious and cultural ideals of womanhood could be seen as a source of bondage. The ideals could be re-interpreted to discover the potency of motherhood, the spiritual strength of the fearless women of great tradition to enrich emancipatory new ideals of womanhood.

Having dealt with the classical ideals of womanhood in India, we would be in a position to observe how these ideals were articulated in Bengali society mainly in the light of its modern history. That is, while imagining a 'new' woman, how Bengal socio-culturally shaped its notion of womanhood, given the imposed ideals of Indian womanhood.

**Womanhood in Modern Bengal - the Prominent Traditions**

Orthodoxy in any form had a very restricted entry into the social-cultural history of Bengal. Beyond 8th century A.D. it is difficult to record/reconstruct Bengal's cultural history. The tradition of Sanskrit school of poetry which spread from Magadha, was the scholarly centre of Jainism and Budhism—which possibly arrested Brahmanic orthodoxy. Subsequently in Vaisnavism and other local medieval religions cults such as Sahajiya, Tantrism - which followed the decline of Budhism in Bengal, an anti-orthodox influence continued.
The flexible and emotional quality of these cults allowed new ideas to be deliberated upon. The radicalism and liberalism in the context of the colonial encounter in the 19th century had the imprints of this anti-orthodox cultural history.

The redefinition of woman was an important cultural process of modern Bengal. Imagining a 'New' woman has been an exclusive project of modernity. 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. There exists a growing body of social-scientific literature probing into the emergence of a 'new' identity of woman in the context of the 'age of Reform' in Bengal. The social-cultural context of late 19th century and early 20th century Bengal has been the focus of most of social-scientific endeavours to examine how the 'colonial encounter' instilled egalitarian values and cultural innovations so crucial for an emancipatory milieu for women.42

Any Renaissance movement inevitably gives rise to both conservative as well as radical ideas.43 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. Such an interpretation substantiates the celebrated notion of motherhood getting entangled with the notion of nationhood as required by a crisis-ridden nation.


Motherhood, the idealized cultural legacy for womanhood in India, can be conceived as one of the most controversial sites of representation for women within nationalist discourse in Bengal. Motherhood premises the most desirable way of being a woman within the imagined nation - Bharat. Yet, it consistently circumvented a woman-centred definition for motherhood because like all other issues of female sexuality vis-à-vis Indian women, motherhood was often the site on which the contest between coloniser and the colonised was played out.

Indira Chowdhury has used popular write-ups, songs, magazines and journals of the 19th century Bengal to scrutinize the colonial stereotypes/ imposed forms of Bengali male identity as frail and weak. She has elaborated on the foil the icon of heroic motherhood provided for the colonially enslaved male nationalist. Also, motherhood was hardly a monolithic formation. Two identifiable, yet related, constructions of motherhood was that, it created the icon of the motherland on one side and also, generated the image of the mother within the family. The second construction emphasizes on the nurturing role (therefore, responsibilities) of the woman.

The icon of the motherland amalgamated various symbols especially from the Shakta tradition and styled its own symbol of resistance in the

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45 Pradip Kumar Bose uses various vernacular materials (woman's journal like Bamabodhini, numerous tracts and pamphlets) to figure out the ideology of the family in colonial Bengal. See Bose, P.K. 'Sons of the Nation : Child Rearing in the New Family' in Partha Chatterjee (ed.) Texts of Power : Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal, (Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1996).

46 The Shakta tradition of Bengal emphasises the worship of Shakti - the feminine principle of strength and fortitude - symbolised in the worship of several mother goddesses.
image of a motherland 'greater than heaven itself. Ideologically, these constructions indicate the desirable forms of behaviour among women and above all of focussing on the cultural superiority of Hindu Women.

The icon of the glorious mother allowed an articulation of a nationalist identity through feminine foils. This was powerful during the 19th century but did not exhaust the possibility of indigenous discourses that were about the deviances of the maternal instinct, e.g., the discourses on infanticide, abortion and the abandoning of children. Against any simplistic nationalist understanding of womanhood in the 19th century Bengal, Indira Chowdhury posits three novels of 20th century writer, Ashapurna Devi to explore historically specific resonances of Bengal. That there were dimensions outside the accepted normative principles of motherhood qualifies the idealising and naturalising accounts of it. Through her 19th century characters Ashapurna Devi offers a discourse on deviant motherhood, eg. infanticide. She, thereby, problematises the very concept of ideal motherhood, instead focusses on the issue of female subjectivity.

"The act of becoming a mother within patriarchy signifies the loss of one's own mother – the fulfilment of a girl's social destiny condemns her to the state of mother lessness. In turning away from notions of glorified motherhood, Ashapurna rejects the ways in which, first nationalism, and then, the Nehruvian optimism in the infancy of the Indian nation-state envisaged Indian womanhood. The complex nature of maternity that


Ashapurna sets out to depict, therefore, cannot be understood through the grid of the paradigmatic good mother but through its opposite.49

Such a discourse inevitably provide an entry point to reconceptualise the ways in which the ideal of womanhood and by implication, motherhood can be represented. In turn, it explores the anxieties and contradiction of modernity and the persistence of oppressive traditions.

The Problem of Deification

The celebrated respect that supposedly characterises Bengali attitude towards womanhood is essentially an expression of deification of the woman as a mother-figure who attains her highest possibilities as the Motherland. Deification is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishization. Motherhood is not so much biological, as a characterological trait, a potential for nurture, for self-sacrifice, for unquestioning giving.

Motherhood and nurture are, indeed, figures and ideals worth celebrating. The problem lies partly with the gendering of nurture and the collapsing of womanhood entirely and exclusively within this single frame. Certain earlier possibilities that had complicated this figure of pure nurture were gradually evacuated from it. Bengali Vaishnavism had also imagined Radha as an arrogant, resentful, even angry woman, refusing to accept Krishna's faithfulness. The rages of Kali, the militancy of Durga, the slayer of Demons, too lost their earlier vitality and power and settled down as purely iconic devices and tropes, adorning an essentially benevolent mother. Another problem with this flat image lies in the absence of any adventure, of the trials and tribulations that involve the lived human relationship involving the woman.

Finally, the problem rests with equating womanhood in any positive affirmative sense with the mother-woman. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's novelistic heroines like *Devi_Chaudhurani*, Tagore's *Charu* or Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's women's construction in *Charitraheen* or *Shesh Prashna* are some of the attempts at alternative figurations which are highly dialogised. Yet the pull of the other ideal is too strong for the development of autonomous alternatives that might escape its confines. The experiments remain interesting precisely because they are incomplete and abrupt.

The deification has had other dimensions too. By looking at songs, poems, plays, short stories of the local presses of Kolkata, district towns, even villages, historian Tanika Sarkar opines that within a subaltern domain of politics, women created a separate and problematic space for themselves. The figure of the woman dominates such literary/cultural works. The principle cultural artifact is the concept of the Motherland – *Deshmata*. The country is abstracted and personified as the Mother Goddess, the most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon. The people are sons of the Mother, detached from the imagined entity and put in a subordinate relation to it. Such a sustained cultural construct has led to the deification of the image of mother. In a similar way, the country was sacralised as well as feminised. The colonial Empire had been represented in strong male terms. The common British sneer against Bengali gentlemen was that, unlike the 'manly' virile English administrator, or the Indian martial races, they were weak effeminate creature. Bengali nationalism, as an oppositional ideology, therefore, defiantly worshipped and glorified in the

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female principle. Feminisation also marked a point of departure in political consciousness.

Importantly, Bengalis are accustomed to the worship of a variety of female cults. The emotional resonances connected with an enslaved mother figure tended to be particularly powerful. Both the principles of abject victimhood and the possibility of triumphant strength is curiously blended in the polysemic iconography deployed around the matter. Such researches tend to balance our understanding of how in modern bengal a 'new' image of woman has been visualised. Because in the period of nationalism and that of 'reawakening' in Bengal, it is being held by some scholars that 'new' image was caught in the family reform-nation triad. Also that, such attempts were mainly men's construction. The reforms of the family and of the women's condition amounted to a remoulding of patriarchy. On the other hand, it is being concluded that nationalist thought subsumed the women's question : thereby the women's 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 mentally of the literate class in Bengal.

51 Feminine cults represent power, an image of resurgent and fearful strength, irrevocably associated in the Bengali Hindu mind with the concept of Shakti on whose grace the success of the patriotic enterprise depends.


Using novels, journals, tracts, women's magazines, recordings of their own experiences by women as source materials, 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 hitherto absent. Alongside the literate in the middle-class, a moral or discursive portrait of the ideal feminine 'bhadramahila' (the gentle-women) emerged. This aesthetic-ideological model has an overwhelming impact in the subsequent shaping of modern Bengal. For different strata of society the impact is bound to have different consequences.

So, what we observe is that the ideal of womanhood in modern Bengal is not a monolith. Bengal has had unique responses to received ideals from the Great tradition. Historically Bengali women have provided certain distinct categories of feminist responses. 19th century social reforms had a selective impact on women's status. Male social reformers' initiatives in women's issues was mainly a problematic of cultural nationalism. The nationalist struggle made it difficult for women to fight directly against patriarchy. The limited success of the pre-independence reforms and the upper-class/ caste bias of the endeavour have given rise a range of possibilities with respect to the notion of ideal womanhood. The ambivalence with which even the modern Bengali woman finds herself in social positioning also result from such inconclusive endeavours. Often it is

56 See. Liddle, J. and Joshi, Rama : Daughters of Independence Gender, Caste and Class in India, (New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986).
being probed that nationalist patriarchy faced a dilemma in placing women within its own confines. The educated woman occupied a culturally ambiguous position of embodying both masculinity and femininity in her dual capacity as a participant in a public sphere (generally controlled by the spirit of masculinity) and as repository of cultural authenticity (where the ideology of the family and the feminine spirit were to be protected).

What we see is that the collective self-image in Bengal with respect to its relation with women is dominantly marked by a pervasive concept of a deep respect for women. The vulnerability of womanhood results in a state of male attitude of deification. Yet, there are areas of abundance of female subjectivities. Certain features of female agency allow multiple portrayals of female characters in various cultural/art forms. The ambivalence, the duality that we have indicated above in the idealisation of womanhood in Bengal allow creative cultural personnels (novelists, painters, musicians, poets, film-makers et al.) to experiment with the 'new' image of Bengali woman. Probing this emergence of a 'new' woman through various art forms remains a fascinating area of study. We will be studying not so much actual women as ideas – the ways Bengali Cinema (a particular stream of it) have viewed femininity and power, status, and potential of women.