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Cinema and Society: Bengali Film and Cultural Politics

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Introduction

This book explores the intricate relationship between cinema and society in Bengal, tracing a narrative that runs from the earliest silent experiments to the multiplex era and the age of streaming. It argues that films are not merely reflections of social change but also laboratories where new social imaginaries are constructed, tested, and contested. By reading screen texts alongside the histories of studios, censorship regimes, exhibitors, unions, film societies, and festivals, the chapters that follow link cinematic form to the pressures of urbanization, the negotiation of class and labor, and the persistent undertow of political critique.

Bengali cinema has long stood at the crossroads of aesthetic ambition and popular address. The same cultural landscape that nurtured canonized auteurs also produced enduring stars, beloved genres, and a dynamic commercial industry. Rather than treating these as separate universes, the book situates art-house and mass cinema on a shared continuum of cultural politics. Melodrama, comedy, thriller, and political modernism emerge here as different modes through which filmmakers and audiences grappled with questions of belonging, development, inequality, and ethical life.

The spatial history of Bengal—and especially Kolkata—shapes this story. As the metropolis expanded, absorbed refugees, and wrestled with infrastructural strain, the city became both a setting and a character, a stage on which anxieties about work, housing, and mobility were performed. At the same time, rural imaginaries persisted and evolved, bringing the village and small-town Bengal into dialogue with metropolitan modernity. Shifts in exhibition—from tent cinemas to single screens, and then to multiplexes and platforms—reorganized who could watch, how they watched, and what kinds of films could be made, thereby reconfiguring the public sphere.

Political history, too, left a vivid trace on the screen. From colonial-era debates on modernity to post-Partition displacement and the fervor of the Naxalite years, filmmakers transformed social crisis into narrative form and aesthetic experiment. Censorship and certification constrained, but also inadvertently shaped, how dissent and desire could be articulated. The chapters track how filmmakers encoded critique through allegory, genre play, and sound design, and how audiences learned to read between the lines, making cinema a living archive of popular political intelligence.

Institutions and networks—studios and financiers, unions and guilds, cine-clubs and little magazines, festivals at home and abroad—form the connective tissue of this account. These infrastructures of practice fostered cinephilia, trained new talent, circulated ideas, and forged publics. Economic booms and busts, technological shifts from celluloid to digital, and the rise of television and video all reconfigured the

industry's risk calculus and its aesthetic possibilities. Today's regional-transnational circuits—linking Kolkata, Dhaka, and diaspora communities—further complicate questions of language, audience, and address.

Methodologically, the book brings together close readings of films with industrial and exhibition histories, paying attention to soundscapes and stardom, to labor on and off screen, and to the everyday life of moviegoing. It juxtaposes canonical works with popular hits, and places marquee names beside lesser-known practitioners and craftspeople. The aim is to produce a textured, contextual narrative that helps readers understand how specific cinematic choices—camera movement, lighting, song placement, performance style—encode and negotiate social meanings.

Finally, the book looks forward. Digital production has lowered some barriers while introducing new dependencies on platforms and algorithms; multiplexes have reshaped revenue models and audience segmentation; streaming has unsettled the borders between “regional” and “global.” Yet the central proposition endures: Bengali cinema remains a vital arena in which questions of class, gender, and political belonging are asked with urgency and imagination. By following the intertwined histories of auteurs, popular genres, and the institutions that sustain them, this study invites scholars and cinephiles alike to think of film not just as entertainment or art, but as a social practice—an evolving conversation between screens and streets.

CHAPTER ONE: Silent Beginnings: From Bioscope to Studio Experiment

The flickering images of the bioscope arrived in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1896, merely months after the Lumière brothers unveiled their Cinématographe in Bombay. This marked the dawn of moving pictures in the region, captivating audiences and laying the groundwork for what would become a vibrant film culture. The early screenings often took place in established theatre houses, where short films were shown as an exciting "added attraction" alongside live stage plays. This initial blending of cinema with existing theatrical traditions was a crucial step in acclimatizing audiences to the novel medium.

One of the earliest and most pivotal figures in Bengali cinema was Hiralal Sen. A keen photographer, Sen was inspired by the early cinematography demonstrations he witnessed in Calcutta. In 1898, with the assistance of his brother Motilal Sen, he established the Royal Bioscope Company. This venture is widely recognized as Bengal's, and possibly India's, first dedicated film exhibition and production entity. Sen reportedly invested a significant sum, around Rs 5,000, to acquire a cinematograph machine and projection equipment from England, including an Urban Bioscope from London's Warwick Trading Company.

The Royal Bioscope Company initially screened imported films, bringing the wonders of global cinema to Bengali audiences at private parties and weddings. However, Hiralal Sen's ambitions quickly moved beyond mere exhibition. He began producing his own short films, often capturing live theatrical performances at prominent Calcutta venues such as the Star Theatre, Minerva Theatre, and Classic Theatre. These early cinematic endeavors, dating from around 1900 to 1913, documented stage scenes and everyday life, effectively bridging the gap between traditional Bengali theatre and the nascent moving picture technology.

Sen's pioneering spirit extended to commercial advertising, as he created some of India's earliest known advertising films for products like Jabakusum hair oil and Edward's Tonic. He also ventured into newsreels, documenting significant local events. Notably, his 1905 film, "Anti-Partition Demonstration and Swadeshi movement at the Town Hall, Calcutta," is considered by some critics to be India's first political film, showcasing the powerful role cinema could play in reflecting contemporary social and political upheavals. The Swadeshi movement, launched in response to Lord Curzon's 1905 partition of Bengal, aimed to promote indigenous goods and national identity, and Bengali theatre of the era also reflected these strong nationalist sentiments.

Tragically, Hiralal Sen's extensive archive, comprising over 40 short films produced between 1900 and 1913, was completely destroyed in a devastating fire in a Kolkata warehouse in October 1917, just days before his death. This unfortunate event erased much of the physical evidence of his groundbreaking work, a loss that continues to be lamented by film historians. Despite this, his legacy as a self-taught filmmaker and a key figure in establishing indigenous film production in India remains undisputed.

While Hiralal Sen laid crucial groundwork, the transition from short "bioscope" actualities to full-length feature films involved other significant players. Jamshedji Framji Madan, a prominent Parsi businessman with diverse interests including theatre, emerged as another colossal figure in early Indian cinema. Madan's ventures eventually coalesced into Madan Theatres Limited, founded in 1919, which became a pioneering force in film production, distribution, and exhibition across the Indian subcontinent.

Madan's Elphinstone Bioscope Company, established around 1902, initially focused on exhibiting foreign films. However, with the onset of World War I and the resulting scarcity of imported films, Madan strategically shifted his focus towards indigenous filmmaking. His company built India's first purpose-built cinema hall, the Elphinstone Picture Palace, in Calcutta in 1907. Madan Theatres eventually controlled over 120 theatres across India and, at its peak, commanded more than half of India's box office revenue.

The silent era in Bengali cinema formally spanned from approximately 1919 to 1930. While there is some debate among historians regarding the very first Bengali feature film, *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra*, directed by Rustomji Dhoteiwala and produced by Elphinstone Bioscope Company, is often cited as a significant early production from 1917, released at the Cornwallis Theatre in Kolkata. This mythological drama adapted a Hindu legend and marked Kolkata's entry into feature-length filmmaking. However, *Billwamangal*, also directed by Rustomji Dhoteiwala and produced by Madan Theatres in 1919, is widely recognized as the first Bengali feature film. Based on a religious narrative, its release on November 8, 1919, was a landmark event, signifying a shift towards local storytelling and establishing Bengali cinema as a distinct entity.

These early silent films often drew heavily from mythological and devotional themes, a natural progression from the popular Parsi theatre which J.F. Madan himself had a strong background in. The narratives were familiar to the audience, making the new visual medium more accessible. Bengali literature, with its rich tradition of storytelling, also provided fertile ground for cinematic adaptations.

Another notable silent film was Dhirendranath Ganguly's *Bilat Ferat* (England Returned), released in 1921. This silent comedy satirized Westernized Bengalis returning from England and is considered one of the earliest "Bengali" films, with a

majority Bengali cast and crew, and even a quintessential Bengali live band accompanying the screening. *Bilat Ferat* highlighted a nascent trend towards socially relevant narratives, exploring contemporary cultural anxieties and offering a glimpse into the burgeoning genre of slapstick comedy.

The nascent film industry in Bengal, often referred to as Tollywood (a portmanteau of Tollygunge, the area in South Kolkata where the industry was based, and Hollywood), began to establish its own identity. While Dadasaheb Phalke is rightly celebrated as the "Father of Indian Cinema" for his pioneering work with *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, Bengali pioneers like Hiralal Sen and J.F. Madan were simultaneously fostering a distinct cinematic tradition in the East. Phalke's films, rooted in Indian mythology and emphasizing Swadeshi ideals, offered a sense of cultural identity during British colonial rule. Similarly, early Bengali filmmakers, by drawing on local narratives and theatrical traditions, began to carve out a unique space for their cinema.

The development of studios was crucial for the systematic production of films. Madan Theatres, with its Elphinstone Bioscope Company, had already established production facilities. These early studios in Bengal were laboratories for experimentation, where filmmakers and technicians, often self-taught, grappled with the intricacies of the new medium. The process involved adapting existing theatrical practices to the cinematic frame, learning about camera placement, lighting, and narrative construction without the benefit of established conventions.

The silent era, despite its technological limitations, laid a robust foundation for cinematic storytelling in Bengal. It fostered a visual language, attracted early audiences, and established the commercial and creative infrastructure that would prove vital for the industry's future growth. The films produced during this period, though largely lost to time, represented the bold first steps of a powerful new art form in Bengal, one that would soon embrace sound and, in doing so, radically transform its relationship with society. The groundwork laid by these pioneers, from the humble bioscope shows to the ambitious studio experiments, set the stage for the rich and diverse cinematic landscape that would follow.

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