

TOLLYGUNGE TO TOLLYWOOD: The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined by Anugyan Nag and Spandan Bhattacharya. Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad/Delhi, 2021.

Tollygunge to Tollywood deals with the changes in the Bengali film industry, over the last forty years. The authors largely rely on press reports, interviews, articles and books. They identify important trends, focus on individual contributions and the increasing corporatisation of film culture. Thus, eventually, it becomes the story of regional cinema in most parts of the country, particularly in areas which have a thriving history of films being viewed, acclaimed and made in the local language.

Bengal was something of a pioneer in film production. Unlike Bombay films, there was no patented formula for box office success. They relied largely on literary adaptations, so much so that the films were popularly referred to as 'boi' or book. The bhadralok preferred to entertain themselves with this superior fare and Hindi films were disdained as melodramatic and predictable in their story line and characterisation.

By the seventies however, Bengali films became mediocre and technically shoddy. Films made by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen or Ritwik Ghatak were in a class by themselves; others like Tapan Sinha, Ajay Kar and Tarun Majumdar struggled to maintain a fine balance between commerce and art.

Then, in 1980, Uttam Kumar, the iconic megastar of the Bengali film industry, died tragically of a heart attack. Tollygunje was struck by thunder. Not a single film was produced for the entire year after Uttam Kumar's death, taking the industry almost to the verge of collapse.

This is the point at which the authors step in to trace the fightback process, ranging from individual filmmakers to the evolution of Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF), founded by Shrikant Mehta and Mahendra Soni, in 1995.

In 1984, a young scriptwriter, Anjan Chowdhury pulled the industry out of despondent failure. *Shatru* ran to housefull boards and black market tickets. The story revolved around the eternal battle between good and evil, but Chowdhury brought in issues like class conflict and vendetta, put together in a heavily theatrical jatra style. Prabhat Roy, who had been assistant to Shakti Samanta and had worked on stage, returned to the literary format with Bani Basu's, *Swet Pathorer Thala*. The film was adjudged the best family film at the National Awards.

Simultaneously, technicians and actors began to work for television productions; this ensured regular work and increased pay. In 1991, Sushma Swaraj officially recognised the Bombay film business as an industry. Earnings were now extended to overseas markets. The Bengali film industry, in contrast, was struggling to survive, working with Bangladeshi actors, exploring folk and jatra themes in films like *Beder Meye Josna* (Josna, Daughter of a Snake Charmer).

Bhattacharya and Nag make case studies of successful filmmakers during this bleak period. They analyse how demand shaped content and then how content subtly influenced audience taste. They study the careers of two prolific filmmakers, Haranath Chakraborty and Swapan Saha. It is from this point that the book picks up pace. Chakraborty never took a gap of more than a few weeks between two films and his crew always kept busy. Saha could make three films at a time on paltry budgets and he completed most of his films within two months. The thoroughness with which the authors explore their maverick styles is admirable, but they fail to devote dedicated space and insight to filmmakers like Aparna Sen, who experimented with both language and content and drew mainstream audiences.

The chapter on the 'consolidation' of Tollywood and the 'logic' of corporatisation of SVF Films, is painstakingly researched and follows their trajectory from unabashedly commercial ventures to riskier projects like Srijit Mukherjee's *Autograph*. SVF launched the first twenty four hour Bangla film music channel, Sangeet Bangla, which largely played songs from their films. Raj Chakraborty polished the formula films and Jeet Ganguly produced a steady stream of chartbusters. Foreign locations became standard staple. Jeet and Dev became the new superstars, equally adept at action and romance. Successful South Indian films were adapted to the Bengali screen.

Autograph was a turning point in SVF's chequered career, as a marketing blitz supported a different kind of talent and sensibility. This was also entertainment, but for a more thinking audience and by an auteur, who would experiment with every new film he made. At the same time, mega budget films like *Dui Prithibi* (2010) earned five crore in the first week of its release. Srijit's next, *Baishe Srabon*, broke all records at the box office and satisfied the critics. By then, SVF had digitised more than 50 lakh halls across W. Bengal.

The most interesting chapter in the book is the third one, which marks the emergence of a 'new parallel' Bengali cinema, which reinvented nostalgia as its central theme. In this context, the authors study the brief but remarkable career of Rituporno Ghosh who was as good at marketing, strategy and brand creation, as he was in telling stories on screen.

The chapter on nostalgia starts with Ghosh's *Utsab*, where an extended family gathers for the annual Durga Puja celebrations. Satyajit Ray's actress, Madhabi Mukherjee, plays the matriarch and the opening sequence contains references to Ray's films, *Debi and Jai Baba Felunath*. In *Chokher Bali*, Aishwarya Rai uses an opera glass like Madhabi in *Charulata*. Ghosh also re-filmed Tagore's *Noukadubi*; the authors refer to Raima Sen as playing the same role as her grandmother, Suchitra Sen in an earlier version of the film. That, perhaps, was not the case. Suchitra did, however, play Sarayu in *Chandranath*, set in Benares, like much of the former film.

Gautam Ghose's *Abar Aranya*, started with visuals of *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Even the development of a romantic relationship between Snehamoy and Miyagi, in Aparna Sen's, *The Japanese Wife*, took shape through letters which the authors explain, had become a rather 'obsolete art of romantic expression.' The theme of nostalgia was also explored in films which dwelled on the isolation of an older generation, whose values clashed with those of their children. These films explicitly dealt with the 'inner crisis' within the bhadralok community and the anxiety story of relationships.

The book makes a detailed examination of the relationship between music channels, FM radio, the print media and even jewellery stores like Anjali, as they buoyed up and profited from the film industry.

Tollygunge to Tollywood provides insights which are equally applicable to the general story of the regional film industry in India. The ingenuity of adaptability, the quest to establish viable financial models through media management and commercial sponsorship; the restructuring of the traditional formulae to create a new sensibility; the restless and sometimes harmonious coexistence of individualist and the more popular cinema – these trends have been scrutinised and displayed in the book. It is clearly a labour of love and provides an overview of the alleys and high roads of contemporary Bengali cinema.

Behula Chowdhury
Former Senior History Teacher
La Martiniere for Girls, Kolkata