



## **Stardust: Cultural Implications of Film Stardom**

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### **Abstract**

This paper intends to understand film-stars as religio-anthropomorphic incarnations embedded in hyperreal simulations allowing capitalism to promote the perception exemplified by economic manipulations. This paper also aims to contribute to the understanding of stardom as a popular culture by suggesting the proposition that both the notion of talent in terms of commanding the attention of the mass and ideology informing the dominant discursive practices share a mutual relationship in incarnating the 'face'/'faces' of the age (Foucault). The purpose is to bring greater precision to the understanding of the process of stardom by examining this system through the star-text of 'Uttam-Suchitra', the most celebrated couple of the film industry of West Bengal till now, which underpins the nature and circulation of fame as the constituent of the cultural meaning of acting rooted in the interdependent nature of the two basic concerns, namely sociological and semiotic.

**Keywords:** Stardom, Star culture, Religio-anthropomorphic incarnation, Hyperreal

The stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself.

(Durgant 137).

This particular observation of Durgant allows us to navigate stardom through the mutual appropriation of the individual and the society. The constitutionally spectacular nature of stars is continuously informed by the rhizomatic undercurrents of various social forces. There cannot be any single itinerary into this phenomenon. The

difficulty in handling such an unmanageably large topic doubled by its polymorphous orientation speaks volume in favour of this as a popular phenomenon. Francesco Alberoni has opined that a bunch of interesting people “whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of interest” (Alberoni 75). He contends that stars are an elite, privileged group who in spite of no real access to political powers govern over people’s mind. King is of the view that stars shape the “social roles and types and behaviour of the mass” (Dyer 12). Samuel Goldwyn has mentioned: “God makes the stars. It is up to the producers to find them” (Dyer 13). Even I.C. Jarvie comes up with the idea that stars are stars because of their “striking photogenic looks, acting ability, presence on camera, charm and personality, sex appeal, attractive voice and bearing” (Jarvie 149). As mentioned earlier, these definitions are multifaceted and it is extremely difficult to give those multifarious pointers a proper structure. Richard Dyer has observed that “within film-studies reasons for studying the stars have largely come from two rather different concerns that may be broadly categorized as the sociological and the semiotic” (Dyer 01). He asserts that stardom is “a remarkable, and probably influential or symptomatic social phenomenon, as well as an aspect of film’s ‘industrial’ nature” (Dyer 01).

This paper intends to understand film-stars as religio-anthropomorphic incarnations embedded in hyperreal simulations, while allowing capitalism to promote the perception exemplified by economic manipulations and informing the mechanics of production-consumption integral to the dynamics of mass productions that stardom is the consequence of a public acknowledgement of some unique individual qualities existing beyond the collective labour of film-making. This paper also aims to contribute to the understanding of stardom as a popular culture by suggesting the proposition that both the notion of talent in terms of commanding the attention of the mass and ideology informing the dominant discursive practices share a mutual relationship in incarnating the ‘face’/‘faces’ of the age (Foucault). The purpose is to bring greater precision to the understanding of the process of stardom by examining this system through the star-text of ‘Uttam-Suchitra’, the most celebrated couple of the film industry of West Bengal till now, which underpins the

nature and circulation of fame as the constituent of the cultural meaning of acting rooted in the interdependent nature of the two basic concerns, namely sociological and semiotic. The significations of these stars can be properly studied when the specificities of the film-texts are analysed. On the other hand, the sociological analysis of these stars is functionally conditioned by the semiotic analysis of them; to be precise, significations of stars realized as social signs and images (Dyer). With the construction of stardom, the mediation for the sociological concern for stars into that of semiotic and the semiotic concern for stars into sociological, becomes viable. This viability reflects the production consumption dialectic duly informed by the ideological and contextual undercurrents of the society.

For example, Sharmistha Gooptu, in her book, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, has shown through her historical analysis of Bengali cinema how Bengali cinema contested 'the very prevalence of Hindi language' and 'the ideological construct of a Hindi-nation' by forming a faithful Bengali viewership which exhibited the idea of a cultured Bengaliness. This understanding is indicative of Bengali cinema's endeavour in raising resistance in terms of constructing a definitive discourse of difference with respect to the 'all-India' Hindi film, against the tendency of being subsumed within the more pervasive culture of Bombay cinema. Thus, Bengali cinema though failed to compete with the Bombay cinema in terms of creating an 'all-India market', it certainly resisted the overpowering ideological construction of India as a Hindi nation by creating a space of its own<sup>1</sup>. Many scholars, while understanding the emergence of 'Uttam-Suchitra' as a star-text, have already established a theoretical paradigm of the concerned period (the mid-1950s through the 1960s) from the dichotomy of 'regionality' and an 'all-Indian' consensus. This interpretation is implemental in understanding the adopted strategies of Bengal film industry across these three decades in terms of capturing the economic viability within a certain geographical boundary remitting a specific ideological consciousness. This ideological consciousness definitely had its say on the expressions manifested through the films released throughout these decades but it had to accommodate business possibilities accounting for its 'geo-economic' expandability. The presence of this duality found a coexisting consolidation in the emergence of an overwhelming,

overarching 'star-text'; a phenomenon already prevalent in different parts of the world including Bombay. Thus, the industrial context in connection with the sociological, political and economic conditions of contemporary Bengal climaxing into an all-pervading 'star-text' reflected a "definitive discourse of difference". This understanding also emphasises how the 'film-text' of contemporary Bengali cinema could accommodate the magnetic appeal of the duo of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, magically manifested through their onscreen personas, which led to the construction of them being the most coveted matinee couple of West Bengal till date.

The paper is broadly divided into two segments. The first segment deals with the theoretical framework in connection with the concerned proposition and the second segment includes the examination of the star-text of 'Uttam-Suchitra' incorporated as sample study to substantiate the proposition. Though celebrities do not only mean the film-stars, Monaco's observation in his book, *Celebrity: The Media as Image Maker* regarding the reception of Marlon Brando as a star by the audiences points to the perception that the achievements and exploits of film-stars are understood in contexts very far removed, though formally related, from the perspective of one's expertise on the art of acting (Monaco 11); rather the 'cultural meaning of acting' informing the construction of images determined by the mechanics of production and consumption inherent in media productions has led to the development of film-stars. Monaco observes that the invention of printing presses in the mid-nineteenth century responsible for rapid distribution of printed matters to the newly literate middle classes, the invention of photography in terms of providing relevant visual images to substantiate the narrative story and lastly, the invention of moving pictures ensuring an enormous increase in numbers in terms of audience viewing allowed the stars to be born out of "the rapidly condensing media community" (Monaco 6-7).

Likewise, the advent of other digital and printed media along with the invention of moving pictures, allowing the simulation of heroism, has been instrumental in the construction of stardom due to its intrinsic properties accounting for a hyperreal condition with regards to a seamless merging of physical reality and virtual reality.

As proposed by Jean Baudrillard in matter of hyperreal condition emerging due to the inability of consciousness in differentiating reality from the simulation of reality, the complex ways of the media generate an acceptance of difference with respect to the unattainability of the stars among the viewers by making them surpassingly desirable with their privileged hyperreal existence concerning their endeavour in appropriating reality; ironically making way to the possibility of identification in terms of affective association. Thus, the possibility of stars being relatable in hyperreal terms is instrumental in inflicting on the viewers a relative state of passivity, developed due to them behaving as enforced consumers participating in endless reproductions of hyperreal simulations in place of real emotional engagement, the resultant state of which is a 'dissociative association' manifested as the acceptance of difference relating to perceiving the hyperreal existence of these stars. This relative state of passivity accounting for the inability of the viewers in differentiating experiences generated from the hyperreal sources from that of the real emotional engagement is the breeding ground of the tendency of celebrating actors embodying characters capable of producing a cathartic experience, though momentarily, rather than celebrating their art of acting.

Emile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence emblemized through 'totem' and employing a feeling of sacredness among the community members can be understood as pre-cultural conditions of star-worshipping. He, in his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* mentions that while studying the religious practices among 'Arunta' tribe of central Australia he noticed that primitive men, otherwise wanderers without having any consecrated concept of society, experienced emotional security when they occasionally assembled together. Durkheim understood this as a state of collective effervescences emerging out of their association of such feelings not only with one another but also with objects in their environment like animal or plant, eventually leading them creating 'totem', a tangible manifestation representing a sacred power; thus ascribing both human sentiments and supernatural powers to these objects. Even in case of idol-worshipping, though the devotees worship the ideas, beliefs and notions associated with that idol, the idol itself becomes the object of reverence. The ideas, beliefs and

notions are pushed into the background whereas the idol comes to the foreground and becomes 'sacred'. Its emblematic function is replaced by making it become the sacredness itself; to be precise, that very god or goddess informed by those ideas, beliefs and notions. In the same way, the audiences celebrate or even worship the actor instead of the portrayed character manifested through the performance of that actor. Or, in other words, to the audiences the portrayed character and the actor become the same person. They cannot separate the characteristics, emotions and achievements of the character from the actor.

Thus, it can be inferred that totemic representations of these tribal people are equivalent to idol-formation created out of the ideas, beliefs and notions informed by that same feeling of sacredness. Among many other issues that emerged through academic discussions on gods and goddesses, one enquiry has been concerned about finding out the relation between gods and human society. Both in polytheistic and monotheistic cultures, the conceptualization of gods and goddesses revolves around social, political, economic and cultural experiences of a particular community. The gradual evolution in assigning godly attributes to the gods and goddesses has a lot to do with the gradual changes in social living process. Likewise, the growth of these media stars in terms of virtual presence is associated with the social, political, economic and cultural experiences of a certain community. This continuous reconfiguration of images, in matter of regulating 'extra-territorialized spatial distance' embedded in hyperreal conditions from its viewers, is fundamental in assigning an overwhelming sacredness to the public appearances of these stars. Thus, these stars' 'hyperreal condition' accounting for the acceptance of difference from the part of the audiences has its 'precultural conditions' experienced in the feeling of sacredness as postulated by Durkheim.

Now, these stars' exponential growth in terms of virtual presence and consequent transcendence into sacredness happening due to the unique specificities of film-making machinery can be substantiated by Edgar Morin's concept of cinematic vision, which is rooted in the archaic vision of the world where "all metamorphoses are possible and effective within an immense fluid relationship where living or

active things are not enclosed in the prison of objectivity...metamorphosis triumphs over death and becomes renaissance” (Morin, *The Cinema* 53). Now, Morin’s cinematic vision is associated with his idea of photos which seem to be “animated with a life more intense or more profound than reality, and even on the brink of hallucination, in possession of a supernatural life...it is as if in man the need that battles against the erosion of time fixes itself in a privileged manner upon the image” (Morin, *The Cinema* 24). The extra-territorialized spatial distance prevalent among the viewers and the stars experienced in the form of ‘dissociative association’, responsible in providing a feeling of sacredness seem to be annexed with photos as postulated by Morin.

Thus, this religio-anthropomorphic incarnations of stars emerging chiefly from “projection-identification” complex inherent in the affective participation of film-viewing is indicative of the “deep anthropological needs which are expressed at the level of myth and religion” (Morin 141). Thus, these “deep anthropological needs” wanting to “express themselves on the plane of myth and religion” find expressions in the engagements concerned with the “state of collective effervescences” experienced through a “celebratory togetherness”, even when not directly associated with religious or mythical pursuits. The advent of mass culture as a means of engagement to eradicate the loneliness of men in the sixteenth century Europe as cited by Leo Lowenthal, in his book, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, to put forward one of his arguments centering on his study of intellectual debates over arts and its popular counterparts, can be understood as an example of the current cultural conditions preceded by the pre-cultural conditions exemplified here through ‘totemic representations’ (Faucault). His interpretations, taking into account the postwar disillusionments and the necessity of finding a moral solution by returning to the differences between popular culture generating spurious gratification and art considered as the source of a genuine experience remonstrate how “from the realm of beauty man walks into the realm of entertainment, which is, in turn, integrated with the necessities of society and denies the right to individual fulfillment” (Lowenthal 6).

In this context, conceptualizing entertainment is central to understanding the differences between ‘spurious gratification’ and ‘genuine experience’; the inability of which is symptomatic to hyperreal conditions leading to a relative state of passivity as mentioned earlier. The term, entertainment is used in such a commonsensical and pervasive way with a sense of finality associated with it, that anything that focuses on the primacy of pleasure can be understood as the source of entertainment. Academic discussions regarding the notion of entertainment have been largely developed from three basic concerns: primacy of pleasure, entertainment as a product functioning under the supervision of an industrial model and a pleasurable distraction from more serious engagements; the combined effect of which defines entertainment as a capitalistic tool that provides pleasurable experiences to its consumers in their leisure hours. Thus, entertainment through ‘star-system’ feeds the desires of the masses by engrafting a kind of pleasure which approximates the feeling of sacredness experienced in the state of collective effervescence in the consciousness of the masses.

The basic insight which we generally associate with stardom relating to the understanding of this system as a capitalistic tool alone does delimit the possibilities of explorations regarding the celebratory nature of stardom. This understanding involves perceptions relating to star-images through media circulations concerning the construction of the desirable version of the star-self in commanding attention from the largest possible audiences, designed on the strategies that assist in excogitating a way to measure the connection between images and the market. The pointers discussed here regarding the celebratory nature of stardom are also applicable to other types of celebrities along with film-stars. Then what are those distinctive features of the film-stars that set them apart from other types of celebrities? Ingrained in this question is the idea that film-stars “enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism) with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres” through engaging in the extraction of performance-based significations of meaning by using his/her body as a performative tool (Dyer, *Stars* 17). Thus, the idea of celebration reflects the social



relationships between the notion of talent in terms of commanding the attention of the mass and ideology informing the dominant discursive practices in incarnating the ‘face’/‘faces’ of the age (Foucault). Different critics are of different opinions regarding the notion of talent of these film-stars mainly in the lines of publicity and talent; with some of them accounting for an individual’s catapultation to a star status without achieving the highest levels of craft accomplishments (Currid, Halket), whereas others favouring the undecipherability of mapping the condition of fame whether emerging from talent or publicity (Kings). Taking cue from Jarvie’s idea of the notion of talent as specific to history and culture, it can also be proposed that contextual ideologies when understood as a formation created out of the dominant discourses among several others, the function of which is rooted in refusing the legitimacy of the alternative discursive practices and fabricating a unitarian consensus conformed and appropriated by the society as a whole play a vital role in attributing a star status to an individual who is designed to perform socially coded roles with specifically defined behaviors (Burns). Now, stars with their unique talents by embodying and dramatizing the flow of informations, promote ‘depoliticized’ modes of attachment in terms of privatization of structural determinants and individualization of collective experience to make the viewers accept the status quo (Kings). Boorstin’s claim in this regard with respect to the development of mass media accounting for a disjuncture between fame achieved through accomplishment and media circulations creating conditions for the same (Boorstin) seems to be articulating the cultural significance of stardom embedded in the proposition that the process of the centralization of the individual containing the power relations within, is connected to the dynamics of the market and the commodification of performance subject to the kind of talent that approximates the conditions informing the archaic feeling of sacredness experienced through togetherness around the totem.

Uttam Kumar, popularly known as the ‘Mahanayak’ (the great hero) of the film industry of West Bengal, appeared in the Bengali film industry when the Bengali cinema was fast losing its ground to Bombay in constituting a faithful viewership even in Bengal due to the lack of possessing a ‘full-fledged star’ who could project its

individuality and difference in terms of a distinctive Bengali sense of self, an all-pervasive ideal existed in the consciousness of Bengal. His was a 'star-text' that articulated the Bengali consensus through a naturalistic acting style, in contrast with the theatrical styles of his predecessors like Durgadas Banerjee, Sishir Bhaduri, even, to some extent, Pramathesh Barua, who though considered an exponent of naturalistic acting style by many critics, did sport a stylized speech and manner. Uttam Kumar's style suited his image of an 'ordinary middle-class man' with the highlights of middle-class morals and values revealed not only through his onscreen persona but also through his much 'talked-about' lifestyle continuously appeared in the contemporary magazines. In the star-text of Uttam Kumar, the producers, by investing in the Bengali film industry, could meet a refundable security deposit with legible chances of receiving it even manifold, the creative minds associated with the industry could witness the desired manifestations of their extreme adherence to a unique Bengaliness constantly supported and intertextually constructed by the reading public of Bengal and the general viewership of Bengal could, at last, experience the tangible embodiment of the ideas of their onscreen idol leading them to an intense emotional identification. "By contrast, Uttam Kumar's stardom was built on his ability to project the middle-class man...Uttam Kumar was the first 'hero' to make his mark through a style that was rooted in the ordinary and idiomatic" (Gooptu, ch. 4).

Gooptu's observation in citing Uttam Kumar's ability to project a domesticated middle class Bengali man as the primary reason behind his stardom in comparison with his predecessors like K.L. Saigal or Durgadas who were thought of being deviant in some sense or other, is significant to understand the emotional identification happening in part of the audiences with their most coveted star. His image as a representative of the middle-class Bengalis was not limited to his onscreen persona; rather the discourses covering his personal life circulated through contemporary film magazines consolidated his image of an ordinary middle-class man appropriating his middle-class values and moralities not only through his onscreen persona but also through his lifestyle. He himself asserted this in his serialized autobiographical account published in *Nabakallol* at the peak of his career with the caption, "Hariye Jaoa Dinguli more" (My Lost Days):

(People are) transporting me from the living world into an imaginary land...that my house is located in the middle of a garden that lights up in the night. The lights change every hour. I have apparently gotten a special clockwork bird from Switzerland which can be made to sing, and apparently I am put to sleep every night by its singing. When I get home from the studio, my car enters the house through a hanging bridge. As if I am a fairytale prince...I imagine that such stories have spread because the audience has become used to seeing me as a hero for a long time now...Believe me, I am no fairytale prince. Just a flesh and blood person like any of you.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, he took it upon himself to dispel the fairytale ideas spread about him and his lifestyle. Even his domestic photographs with his wife, mother, brother (Tarun Kumar who also happened to be a successful character actor of that time) published in contemporary film magazines like *Nabakallol* bears emblems of a middle-class domesticated life which simply did not feature in the star texts of pre-Uttam era.

In his autobiographical series, Uttam Kumar comes up as a very average Bengali boy who, despite his humble background, came up to the rank of the most celebrated matinee idol by dint of his will force and perseverance and had not forgotten his modest roots. Thus, his onscreen persona of 'man-next-door' image augmented by discourses outside film-texts wove a magic charm on the viewers to establish his star persona in a remarkably complicated way. It was this element of being a middle class domesticated man coupled with his self-proclaimed discourse of 'ordinariness' that produced such strong emotional identification on the part of the Bengali audiences, especially women. This has been very beautifully put by the eminent director, Aurabindo Mukhopadhyay: "At the peak of Uttam's career, it was not simply the girls that were in love with him. Bengali mothers wanted their sons to be like Uttam – that was Uttam's difference...He made the filmstar respectable"<sup>3</sup>.

Bengal, considered as the hub of Indian film production during the talky era of 1930, started losing its 'all-India' viewership during the second half of 1940s. This transition in matter of Bengal losing its footing from an 'all-India market' was definitely one of the

expressions of Bengal gradually getting marginalized from the mainstream nationalist politics. Joya Chatterjee, in her book, *Bengal Divided* has mentioned that “in the last decade and a half of British rule in India Bengal lost its position of preeminence in all-India politics and was edged out of the nationalist mainstream”<sup>4</sup>. During these years Bengal’s politics turned inwards investing its involvement more on its provincial worries and concerns. Due to this ‘progressive marginalization’, Bengal produced a new style of its politics that contested ‘the idea of the nation’ as noted by Joya Chatterjee in her second book, *The Spoils of Partition*<sup>5</sup>.

Bengal’s progressive relegation to being a regional film industry was definitely accentuated by a host of political and natural events across these decades. If Bengal losing its stronghold in nationalist politics is taken to be the initiation into the process of the Bengal film industry reduced to being a regional one, an unparalleled human tragedy manifested in the form of Bengal famine of 1943 definitely accentuated it and finally the partition of Bengal perceived as a ‘dystopic vision’ to the Bengal consciousness destroyed the possibility of Bengal remaining as the hub of Indian film production. However, there are other discourses concerning the presence of a distinctive Bengali sensibility even in those films released in Hindi-Urdu languages and Bengali viewers’ extreme adherence to ‘good story’ which inevitably would end up being a regional industry producing regional Bengali cinema in place of a more uniform Bengali cinema satisfying the tastes of the ‘all-India’ viewers.

At a time, when the glamour of Bombay cinema was to devour the audiences of the Bengali film industry, the Uttam-Suchitra films held the audiences for more than two decades, by creating a group of audiences of their own. At that time, Bengali cinema could not boast of any star “who could be billed at par with Bombay’s top actors of the day” (Goopu, ch. 4). During this time, Bengali audiences witnessed the emergence of the star couple of Uttam-Suchitra by whose aid Bengali film industry could produce a series of star-backed romances.

Directors of this era poured a Bengali sense of self in those romances; manifested in these two iconic figures. The audiences could identify the unfailing, idealized love essayed on screen by the

couple. They manifested the expression of a society passing through post-independent ethical crisis. Even in the throes of transition they could preserve the distinctive identity of their community. Their onscreen personas struck a convenient balance of both permanence and change. These films were more than simple love stories. Their paradigmatic association with romantic love was, to some extent, weighed down by a sense of a unique Bengali self. The core group of the audiences, known as Bengali middle class 'bhadralok', could find an efficacious space of their own; a sense of feel-good Bengaliness inundated with a profound sense of charm and grace.

Kironmoy Raha has cited two reasons behind the rebirth of Bengali cinema in the 1950s. The first reason was "the support of the Bengali middle class with its addiction to incidents and emotions it could believe without much effort" and the second one was "the star phenomenon of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen...Bengali cinema was in fumbling state of unsure direction when it discovered the potentialities of...the pair of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen" (Raha 36). Dipesh Chakrabarty has aptly explained the trauma that accompanied relocated Hindus at that time. Their psychological adaptation due to the relocations from East Bengal to the city of Calcutta created a trauma that was reflected in the onscreen lives of the couple. Hordes of refugees started filling up the vacant places of Calcutta after the exacerbation of communal tensions in 1946-47 (Chakrabarty 115-37). This incident initiated an ethical crisis, deeply rooted in moral anxiety, which led to moral disintegration. These refugees transformed the city "previously a cluster of discrete urban settlements, into a single, gigantic and chaotic megalopolis" (Chatterjee 143). This trope of ethical crises was presented in the films in terms of personal dilemmas which was melodramatically resolved within the romantic world of the couple. Peter Brooks, in his study of melodrama, explained that in melodramas, the social or political dilemmas are dealt with in terms of personal and familial problems and the stories of social transformations are simulated within the stories of individual struggle<sup>6</sup>. So, the on-screen personal world of this romantic couple duly signified by the socio-historical trajectory of post-independent Bengal became the desired space of their niche audiences.

Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen first appeared together in the film, *Sare Chuattar* (Seventy-Four and a half) in 1953 and worked together the last time in *Priyo Bandhobi* (Lady Friend) in 1975. With the films in which they appeared together between 1954 and 1961, like *Agnipariksha* (Trial by Fire, 1954), *Shapmochon* (Reversal of the Curse, 1955), *Sagarika* (1956), *Harano Sur* (The Lost Tune, 1957), *Pothe Holo Deri* (Lost on the Way, 1957), *Indrani* (1958), *Chaoa Paoa* (Desire and Attainment, 1959) and *Saptapadi* (Rituals of the Seven Steps, 1961), Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen redefined romantic love for Bengali men and women through their onscreen chemistry essayed in terms of a reformulated gender relations and a unique Bengali modernity.

In *Sare Chuattor*, they appeared as lovers in a sub-plot with Tulsi Chakraborty and Molina Devi playing the lead couple who tried to rediscover the old flame of their conjugal love after a series of comic blunders. Though, this film did not give this couple the maximum leverage, this couple was perceived as novel prototypes in terms of their screen presence; Uttam Kumar as a man-next-door and Suchitra Sen as a confident modern woman. Here, Romola was shown to be at ease with both the domestic as well as 'outer' space, otherwise inhabited by male members. She managed very gracefully in an uninvited space with her quick-minded modern persona that symbolized the orientation of the women prevalent especially refugee women in post-1947 Bengal. Joya Chatterjee in her book, *The Spoils of Partition* has shown how refugee women sought higher education to support their families which had migrated from East Bengal.

In *Agnipariksha*, the story moved around the journey of a young couple – Kirti and Tapasi; the struggle they went through to attain their love. The story of this film hinted the mythical story of Sita's trial by fire. Tapasi, like Romola in *Sare Chuattor*, was found to manage both the 'domestic' as well as 'outer' space with a feminine ease and grace. This was romantically augmented by her male counterpart, Kirti who also seemed to be a person with a strong sense of ethics and morals. He helped her maintain the balance of tradition and modernity. Thus, their shared anxieties constituted the dramatic flow of the film. The centrality of the couple complementing each other in establishing their love in the face of their loneliness, anxiety

and the hardships they went through to attain their love worked as a symbolic reordering against the backdrop of rapid social changes, especially in terms of transforming gender relations. This trope made for the powerful 'couple space' prevalent in a series of hit films like *Shapmochon*, *Sagarika*, *Harano Sur* and *Pothe Holo Deri*. It is worth mentioning in this context that Moinak Biswas has pointed out the 'feminized quality' of this genre's emotional content and 'the positively feminized quality of its male protagonist' to suggest the emblematic 'couple space' of this genre<sup>7</sup>. However, Gooptu has rightly pointed out that the uniqueness of these hit films was not limited to the portrayal of a 'feminized male protagonist' but how it was romantically complemented by the 'feminine' persona of Suchitra Sen. Both in *Sagarika* and *Harano Sur*, Suchitra Sen's character symbolized woman nurture beyond the familial space. In *Harano Sur*, she played the role of a young psychiatrist who went on to marry her amnesiac patient Alope. Thus, she played the doctor and the wife at the same time. In *Sagarika*, she played a polished, sophisticated character who was assigned with the duty to train the daughter of her uncle in the ways of urban society. In each of these portrayals, she seemed to be a self-assured and modern woman, though respectful to the tradition. She made her feminine presence felt in a space infested with the crisis of masculinity manifested in the films in terms of the anxieties of the male protagonist and other characters representing patriarchal authority. Even the narratives of the films emphasized the centrality of the couple with parental figures either missing or pushed into the periphery. Thus, their endeavour to attain their 'noble love' augmented by powerful emotional content was always encountered with the dialectic of tradition and modernity; ultimately making the couple as makers of their own destiny. The ethical choices they make to attain the fulfillment of their noble love with regard to the legitimization of their 'couple space' are of utmost significance in these hit films. *Saptapadi* (1961) directed by Ajay Kar is considered as the greatest hit of 'Uttam-Suchitra wave'.

Suchitra Sen's successful catapultation to stardom has been appropriately configured by Ashishtaru Mukhopadhyay in his book, *Mahanayika Suchitra*. He found Suchitra Sen's sexuality soothingly mediated by the middle-class moralities of Bengal when compared with the sizzling and passionate appeal of other matinee goddesses

like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Ingrid Bergman, Sophia Loren and Eva Gardner. Bengali filmmakers did poke the dormant desires of middle-class Bengalis without subverting middle-class values and ethics. They did make the viewers desire Suchitra Sen without any sense of guilt. Thus, Suchitra Sen did stoke the romantic imaginary of Bengal through her onscreen persona without unacknowledging the consciousness of the Bengali sense of self.

So, the paper propagates that understanding stardom posited at the crossroad of multiple discourses discussed here, is to find out how an individual's unique qualities are directed to a system of signification; how an over-arching individual talent manifested through the cultural significations of the medium is continuously reshaping and being reshaped by the discursive practices of a certain community at a certain era even at times across demographic spectrum especially with the advent of web platforms. Thus, multiple perspectives operating as latent forces, like that of the producers looking for making profits, an actor turned to be a star, the relatively passive audiences turned to be fans who consume and participate in the meaning making process, a critic perceiving stardom as a cultural practice which involves a political reading of power structures, are incorporated in this paper to establish the construction of the religio-anthropomorphic incarnations of stars.

#### End Notes:

1. See Gooptu, Sharmistha. *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*. E-book ed. New Delhi: Rolli Books, 2018.
2. "Hariye Jaoa Dinguli More." *Nabakallol* 1<sup>st</sup> Year, No. 1 1960. Print. p. 103. (qtd. in. Gooptu, ch. 4).
3. See Mukhopadhyay, Aurobindo. Interview by Sharmistha Gooptu. Calcutta, 23 Nov 2007. (qtd. in. Gooptu, ch. 4).
4. See Chatterji, Joya. "Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947." *Cambridge South Asian Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print. p.3.
5. See Chatterji, Joya. "The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967." *Cambridge South Asian Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.
6. For a pronounced understanding of melodrama, see Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Print.



7. See Biswas, Moinak. "The Couple and their Spaces: Harano Sur as Melodrama Now." *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan. New Delhi: OUP, 2002. Print. P. 122.

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