

‘It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause...’: Interrogating Race and Caste in the Bangla film *Saptapadi*

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In India, popular cinema after Independence often explored themes of nationalist modernization and upper-caste fears of an itinerant, wayward female sexuality. In West Bengal, the growth and popularity of romantic song-based melodramas of the 1950s and 60s depicted the hero/heroine grappling with societal pressures through the carving out of an individual sphere of romantic achievements that were both normative and sometimes transgressive (in terms of caste/class/gender identity) in its moral schema. In the decade after the Partition, Bengal’s film industry delivered numerous hits with stars like Uttam Kumar, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sabitri Chattopadhyay, and Suchitra Sen, and it was a flourishing time for directors like Ajay Kar, Agradoot, Asit Sen and Tapan Sinha. In the 1960s, the Kolkata film studios were hubs of filmmaking in post-Independence India. They were based in Tollygunj, a locality in the southern part of the city, named after Major William Tolly who had dredged an arm of the river Ganga in 1775–76 and had named it Tolly’s Nullah. After 1947, the area became the centre of important film studios like the New Theatres, the Technician, and Indrapuri. The name Tollywood was given in 1932 by an American sound engineer Wilford E. Deming who coined the term in an article in the *American Cinematographer*. In the 1950s and after, the Tollygunj studios became an unparalleled centre of excellence for both art houses and popular films.¹ After 1947, as the state grappled with a food crisis, rising unemployment and housing shortages with a huge influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, the popular Tollygunj films articulated an ethos of a ‘romantic humanism’ that underpinned the breaking of the joint family and the rise of ‘secular love’ in an urbanized social setting. Aimed at the growing middle class, particularly women, who formed a majority of the matinée show audiences and who were increasingly swelling the ranks of urban labour, an important part of these romantic comedies was the figure of the heroine, representations of female modernity, who were often seen endowed with professional identities as teachers, doctors or simply as office-goers. Many of these comedies consciously consolidated star actors as the film’s catalysts who sold the film to resounding box office successes. Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen was one such star duo who had begun their spectacular run as an on-screen *romantic jooti* (romantic couple) in the 1950s. The two actors were part of a whole gamut of films that Moinak Biswas refers to as the ‘popular melodrama’ of the 1950s and 60s and that ‘lent its name to the era’ (Biswas 122). Cinema in these times heralded a new public sphere of images that circulated certain desires and aspirations of the audience at large and showcased ‘the emotive journeys of the middle-class woman in spectacular terms’ (Mitra, 41).² Thus, in many instances, the new cultural and social aspirations centered around the body of the woman who were seen to negotiate different economic and professional spaces, calibrated by caste or religion. ‘Romantic love and its various possibilities- normative and transgressive - acquire interesting resonances in the articulation of the woman’s place and space in these melodramas’ as a critic suggests (Mitra 42). Some of the well-known films that carried the trope of the ‘modern woman’ and the construction of ‘desire’ in popular imagination were (starring the Suchitra/Uttam duo) *Sharey Chuattor* (1953) *Agnipariksha* (1954), *Shaap Mochan* (1955) and *Harano Sur* (1957) to name a few. While narrating the playing out of desire and sexual love, the films

often raised conflicting social issues that contained or circumscribed such desires. 'The films fall into the melodramatic genre which as a rule emphasizes women's agency, albeit within the parameters of patriarchy,' as Dulali Nag states (Nag 779-80). These films used the star power of popular actors not only to promote these films but to extensively create an inter-textual tapestry of popular songs and romantic speculation on the private lives of the actors to construct a parallel to the film's text that throws light on the cultural politics of postcolonial Bangla film industry.³ *Saptapadi* was no exception.

This Ajoy Kar-directed black and white film, based on a novel by the noted litterateur Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, was released on 20th October 1961. It has long held a nostalgic place in the Bengali spectator's imagination and is considered a classic in the state's cinema history. It featured the matinée idols Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar as two star-crossed lovers. Rina Brown, a European (later we come to know she is an Anglo-Indian) medical student falls in love with Krishnendu, an upper-caste Brahmin and their subsequent separation and union form the narrative core of the film. The themes of caste, religion and race are intertwined in the film's narrative with a stunning dramatization of a scene from *Othello* that the protagonists perform to form a visual and moral parallel to the film's love story. Rina's Westernised femininity, modern yet circumscribed, is a cause of anxiety for Krishnendu's Brahmin father who opposes their marriage. The city of Kolkata becomes a site of this 'difficult' love and is seen as a place that transforms the traditional to the desirable modern (as when Krishnendu decides to convert to Christianity to marry Rina).⁴ The presence of an 'Other' (Rina) complicates the questions of female sexuality and agency that have other exemplars in the absence/presence of two other women in the film.

Krishnendu's Hindu mother, a staunch critic of caste practices, represents the Gandhian praxis of the banishment of untouchability. On the other hand, Rina's Hindustani mother, who had conceived her daughter by her European employer, obliquely appears as an affirmation of her class/caste position in direct contrast to the liberal gendered subjectivity of her daughter. Chaya Devi, who plays the role of Rina's mother, speaks a few lines in the film but her position in the Brown household is revealed to Rina by her father who tells Rina that the maid whom she has known all her life is actually her mother and that she 'is born of a woman whose seven generations are unaware of their fathers.' This significant line reveals the identity configuration of the woman who belongs to a caste who may have been under feudal sexual oppression or who may have belonged to a caste engaged in prostitution in colonial times. Rina's maid/mother is a stark contrast to Kishnendu's mother (played by Padma Devi) who supports her son in his forays into modernity. As Ravi Vasudevan notes, although in the context of the 1950s Bombay social films, 'the family is the remarkable symbolic, if not literal, locus of the narrative's organization of both conflict and resolution. At its centre lies the iconic presence of the mother, stable in her virtue and her place' (Vasudevan 111). The crisis in the film's narrative, exemplified by the issues of race, religion and caste that separate the two lovers, undergoes a radical transformation through the benign presence of these mother figures who represent an uncompromising humanity and who point to the formation of a new conjugality, nucleate but radical, in the abjuration of caste and religion. For example, the transformation of the upper caste Brahmin hero Krishnendu into a Christian doctor serving the poor is possible under the distant tutelage of his mother and underlies the symbiotic relationship of Indian nationalism to cinema's cultural productions. Given Indian cinema's obsession with the figure of the Mother, these two contrasting figures in the film create interesting paradigms of socially embedded caste identity and the subsequent rejection of it. Both are performed through maternal figures. In the context of gender, modernity and nation, the visual representation of the estranged lovers is calibrated to the formalization of a new citizenship in a new nation under the benevolent eye of the mother. *Saptapadi's* title invokes a Hindu marriage where the rite of seven perambulations (sapta: seven, pad: steps) underlines the theme of the film: the promise of an amended conjugality that is both 'modern' and 'equal' in terms of the abjuration of caste, race and religion. The film, although set in the generic tradition of song-infused romantic films that were box office successes in the late 1950s onwards, is

radical in its potential: it tries to redefine a new conjugality in a new familial structure. In the early years of independence, Indian nationalism's investment in modernity was carried out through the cultural projects of the cinema where a construction of a modern citizen's subjectivity could be refashioned in both the private and public spheres. This project of creating a normative citizen was mostly focused on male protagonists but often touched upon the figure of women, particularly on the projection of a 'modern' woman who was educated, fashionable and entirely desirable.

In the film, Rina Brown lives with her European father and an Indian maid in the 'white' part of the town. Although the split in civil society along racial lines in colonial Kolkata was apparent in the division of the 'white' and 'black' segments of the town, there were some spaces, like the medical college (both Krishnendu and Rina are classmates there) where the races met and interacted in some activities of the modern social and cultural life of the city. The other such spaces were the sports field and the drama clubs of educational institutions where Europeans and Indians often pursued similar hobbies. *Saptapadi* exploits all such public spaces where the races, Indians, British and Anglo Indians are seen to mingle. In the early parts of the film, these public domains mark their presence in the narrative and the elements of race are visually constructed through the passage of the protagonists through these places. The urban areas became sites of the clash of the two spheres of modernity and tradition and the new middle classes (who are also the upper castes) negotiate these spaces to which the discursive production of public and private spheres came to occupy not only within literature but also in film making practices.⁵ This dual engagement with public and public spheres particularly in films resulted in an emergence of a powerful moral discourse about love, conjugality, family set amidst the contours of a modern city life. Early on in the film's narrative, when Krishnendu first meets Rina, we see the playing out of opposition of the races: she is the supporter of the European football team who are pitched against the barefooted Indian students. Krishnendu scores a goal and when Rina accuses him of deliberating hitting her friend, their encounter takes off to a tempestuous start. The sports field then becomes 'a competitive domain.... where European and Indian teams met as rivals. It opened up a sphere of public life in the colonial city that was mixed but deeply racialized.'⁶ This negotiation of the city spaces were the new terrains of middle-class engagements with modern life, a consequence of both colonial subjection and social reform. If melodramas are 'a kind of expressionism that is driven by a hyperbolic rhetorical mode' and that are 'played out as an emotionally saturated performance of excess' (Mazumdar 8), then *Saptapadi* fits the bill to a large extent by addressing the ideological needs of a new nation coming to terms with the remnants of colonialism and a new modernity through its black and white realism liberally intermingled with melodramatic elements.

As Ashish Rajadhyaksha states, a celluloid film's narrative typically includes a 'public address' and a 'pedagogical-instructional aspect' that guides spectatorial action (Rajadhakshya 4). It is not too far-fetched to say that the spectacle of Indian barefooted players winning against a European team had its own aspects of a public address against which the transgressive love of the protagonists was to play out. Similarly, the instructional aspect of such a love is highlighted through another subtext in the film. In a college production of the murder scene in *Othello*, Krishnendu and Rina play the roles of Desdemona and Othello. The tragedy, inserted in the film's narrative of romantic love, creates a liminal inter-textual space that brings to the fore the issues of race and marginalisation. The discourse of a tragic love story is the trope that creates the space in the film, otherwise a melodramatic romance, to underpin the narrative of a new citizen of the nation-state who sacrifices personal interdictions of caste and religion to create a normative society based on love and desire. In the play, Krishnendu is a reluctant actor (he is forced to take up the part when another actor drops out) and when he comes on stage dressed as the Moor, his presence is as good as a European. Utpal Dutta speaks the part of Othello and Jennifer Kendall renders Desdemona in the film and that segment is visually a turning point in the relationship between the protagonists. The new Bengali middle-class who had smarted under the colonial accusations of being effeminate is seen to be outperforming

their European counterparts both in the sports field and in the cultural arena. Krishnendu stands for this new citizen, self-reliant and self-disciplined. Throughout the film the subtext is an arena of contestation with European masters: in medical school, Krishnendu is able to diagnose an ailment correctly when his British teacher falters. So very early on in the film, the hero is established as taking on the power of the departing colonizers by refashioning himself through intelligence and rationality. The gendered subjectivity that fashions itself to serve the poor and the downtrodden of the country is of course male. The woman can be his equal partner in conjugality, matching both his sacrifice and his dedicated work. They can then be the new agents of change that the nation needs.

The distinctions between the spatial and sartorial habitations of the protagonists emphasize their social distance and exemplify a veritable clash of civilization: Krishnendu Mukherjee is a Brahmin (who professes to be an atheist) but his clothes and demeanour suggest a Bengali, Hinduized identity. Rina is both desirable and transgressive, as a Christian and as a white woman. When Krishnendu shifts to a flat near Park Street, the European or 'white' town, his father is upset that he is in a 'firingi' neighbourhood and will be distracted from his studies. The *mise-en-scène* of the white town is presented with a catchy English song 'On the Merry Go Round' (sung by Suzi Miller) that marks the cultural construction of the 'firangi/foreigner' in the popular imagination. Throughout the film, the icons of Christian and Hindu religions are highlighted through images of churches and Hindu idols like the goddess Kali. A number of European actors who are part of the film also create this distinction of the cultural differences between the protagonists. Particularly telling is a scene in the film when the sound of late-night revelries from Rina's house disturb the studious Krishnendu and he decides to teach a lesson to the rowdy group of Europeans by singing a medley of *kirtans* and other folk numbers. The construction of the desirable 'other' is therefore both in terms of religion, race and caste, although the latter is initially subsumed in the narrative.

Rina is vivacious, high-spirited and beautiful. However, her modern educated, western-clothed persona is located outside, both spatially and culturally, of the tradition that is epitomized by Krishnendu's upper-caste Hindu father. When Rina's father agrees to their marriage on the condition that Krishnendu converts to Christianity, Rina urges Krishnendu not to give up his faith. He convinces her by saying that love is more important than religion and that he considered her his wedded wife. In this part of the film, Rina displays a traditional cultural authenticity that is at odds with her projection as the educated/modern female subject with her own agency. Rina's character is therefore contained within the parameters of caste and religion. She veers towards a recognition of the power and supremacy of religion that she acknowledges in her anxiety at Krishnendu's readiness to convert. Rina's femininity is thus both modern and contained by her identification of the role of religion in the formation of a community, an aspect that Indian nationalism was deeply mindful of. Krishnendu's *entré* to westernization is performed not under duress but under the lessons of love: he is the new citizen whose choice to reject or accept a religion is in keeping with the modernization project of Indian nationalism. It is also at one with the ideological praxis of Tarashanker Bandopadhyay, who under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, was instrumental in creating a new kind of literature that would contribute to nation building. Gandhi's influence on Tarashankar's majestic pursuit for a 'pan-Indian' literature is clearly discernable in his oeuvre; so also the radical ideals of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) whose aesthetic search for social and political justice was a distinct template for Indian writers in the 1940s and 50s. Tarashankar (1898-1971) was an enthusiastic member of the Progressive Writers Association in his early years and he wanted to overturn the canonical ideals of literature to transform it into an instrument for the masses to challenge existing hegemonic structures of caste, class and gender. Therefore, his vision of a 'national', 'vernacular' (not one but many vernaculars) literature with each language on an equal footing, encapsulates a cultural memorialization of the events around independence in the lives of people. This was also a theory for the historico-epic impetus of writing in India in the post-independence years that spoke of the nation's psychological progress from violence to non-violence. This thrust to transform the people's

individual life into the component of an epic, to transform personal destiny into the community's destiny, is a vital way in which the Bangla novel becomes 'the autobiography of the secular self' (Mukherjee, viii). The project of Tarashankar's novel was to construct a national cultural mission of a secular non-violent Indian-ness through an understanding of the violence of the anti-colonial struggle (manifested through race) by rejecting the bigotry of past hatreds of caste and religion. The film *Saptapadi* underlines an ideological symbiotic relationship to the novel that was published in 1958. This is clearly seen in the visuality and centrality of caste and race that dominate the film's narrative. Within the context of the postcolonial imaginary, the European/Anglo Indian Rina Brown and the Brahmin Krishnendu's romance takes on 'real' and 'imagined' planes of representations: Rina is an embodiment of a new India, a new nation space, where all religions find a home just as she is seen as a 'new woman' in line with the other mother figures in the film, who stand for the moral orientation of the hero to accept social change, a prerequisite for a nation grappling with the ills of prejudices and hatreds. This tacit agreement of form and content enables the film to explore the cultural and historical ideals of marriage and womanhood within a secular free nation and to accept 'personality' as the basis of a new conjugality. The trope of a journey that is used throughout the film, including the hit song *Ei path jodi na sesh hoy* (if this path never ends) sung by the romantic pair astride a motorbike underlines the voyage of discovery that the protagonists and the audience partake of.

Set in the 1940s in the background of World War II and revealed in flashbacks, the film opens with Krishnendu as a missionary doctor serving the rural poor. One night, a drunk military official is brought to his clinic who turns out to be his lost love, Rina Brown. Rina's first view of Krishnendu is a dramatic scene in the film. As a mirror reflects the hero's profile, the passing rumble of a train shattering the stillness of the night is a reminder of the concerns of cultural modernity that the filmic narrative is engaged on. The dazed Rina calls out to the 'Doctor' without realizing the ironic reversal of their roles: Krishnendu has finished his studies while she has not (this is of course left unclear in the film but she does say that she had left Kolkata when she knew the truth of her birth). As Krishnendu remembers the past, the audience is taken back in flashbacks to the initial halcyon days of their meeting and their romance. In the background of a raging war, Rina reveals her secret: she is the illegitimate daughter of the low caste *aya* (maid) and discloses the interstices of race and caste that had kept the lovers separate. As the war progresses, Krishnendu goes to work in a Red Cross hospital in Assam where he meets Rina again as she rescues an old tea garden coolie woman who had once been impregnated by a white man and whose daughter, a friend of Rina's, dies in a bombing. Rina's act of valiantly saving a mother in the midst of an aerial bombing underlines the importance of the trope of recovery of the woman within the nationalist project. The fact that the recovered woman is a coolie woman, low caste and abandoned by all, is the significant aspect of the retrieval. In postcolonial India, the lower caste woman is to be recovered and rehabilitated through the active involvement of a woman whose very illegitimacy of birth allows her the freedom and space to forge her own ideological place within the nation. In many ways, the figure of Rina Brown is not a vindication of urban middle class cinematic modernity: it is precisely because of her location outside that class/caste that creates the cinematic ethical in *Saptapadi*. The attempts of the earlier films that Suchitra had starred like *Agnipariksha* was to carve out an individual modern space of a woman within the social and the economic sphere through their journey and fulfillment of an emotional and psychological self (Nag, 781-2). *Saptapadi* in many respects undercuts these generic gestures of the melodramatic romantic films by underlying the contentious issues of caste and religion. Although Rina's birth is illegitimate, her act of rescuing a low caste coolie woman enables her to regain her ethical and moral moorings: she can be the true companion to Krishnendu now that he has dedicated his life to the amelioration of the poor. The ideological and moral boundaries of the film then subvert caste and religious doctrines to create a space that celebrates love and service as the true paradigmatic grids of conjugality. The fact that she drives an army jeep to undertake a perilous

journey to save another woman enables her illegitimacy to be re-framed: like the devoted wife of Hindu folklores, she is born anew through an act of sacrifice and bravery. The film gestures towards a modern conjugality but through the tropes of *sewa*, a powerful ingredient of Gandhian philosophy. This act then not only re-affirms Rina's agency, but also ironically enables her to be protected and reunited with Krishnendu. Ravi Vasudevan has suggested that the films of 1950's used certain techniques through which female desire could be contained to set limits to the image of modernity. In *Saptapadi*, the complex narrative uses the transgressive elements of race and caste to posit a substitute to the dominant narrative of the ideal citizen in the new nation through the figure of the heroine who earns her place through an act of selfless sacrifice.

It is the figure of Krishnendu who is of interest in the placement and embodiment of the new citizen in the film's narrative. He not only plays the role of the husband/protector but he is the active agent of modernization and cultural change in the ideal nation. He belongs to the upper caste but deliberately de-castes himself by conversion and romantic faithfulness. Krishnendu tells Rina that it is his mother, not his father, who has had a strong impact on his personality. However, it is the masculine and protective role that Krishnendu plays that takes up the most narrative space of the film. His character is a re-constitution of the inequitable power relations that encourages patriarchal patronage and that sees Rina as essentially a 'victim' (although a desired one). The drunk and rootless Rina's reconstructed identity is not therefore as a girl who loves Krishnendu but as a woman who lacks the ability or agency to act in her own self-interest. The ending of the film however belies this lack when Rina rescues the old coolie woman, abandoned by all. If she represents a gendered modernity, then that modernity is double edged. Rina's act of rescue enables her to prove to us (and to the hero) her agency and her acceptability in a companionate marriage. The cinematic text closes the gap between desire and action in the construction of gender formation in the postcolonial state through the masculine power to support, protect and care. As Rina returns with the old coolie woman to the hospital, the bombing intensifies in the area and Krishnendu saves Rina by shielding her body with his own. While she recuperates, a letter from Krishnendu's father is revealed (like a *deus ex machina*). Through the letter, Krishnendu comes to know that he was rejected by Rina at the behest of his own father who wanted to save his only son from an inter-faith marriage. However, the letter goes on to acclaim Rina's sacrifice in breaking off the relationship and the old man's respect for a girl from another religion/caste (he uses the term *bijatiyo* in his letter) who could, with so much pain to herself, undertake to uphold a promise.⁷ The twin optics of sacrifice and devotion comes full circle as the lovers understand their past, fully. The film ends with Krishnendu carrying a be-robed Rina towards a church with pealing bells. In cinematic terms, this act of protective love can be seen in the condition of patriarchal patronage that has re-shaped and given substance to Rina's desire by aligning it to the demands of a new citizenship. It is also the creation of new gendered subjectivities: those who will, in a union of equal marriage, serve the nation as agents of change by subsuming caste and religion as divisive and immoral. If the obsession with family promotes conservative social values in the 1960s Bengali films, then *Saptapadi* registers that the Hindu family, upper caste and patriarchal, are undergoing important historical changes, however minuscule.

Notes

- ¹Debjani Sengupta, 'My Father's Lenses: The Album of a Calcutta Photographer,' *Trans Asia Photography Review*, vol. 7, no.1, 2016, no pagination.
- ²See also Arup Kumar Sen, 'Suchitra Sen (1931–2014)' in *EPW*, vol. 49, no. 8 (22 February, 2014).
- ³Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 136, calls the discourses of the star lives as parallel to or set at an angle to the film's narrative. These 'star texts' offer 'a wealth of cultural politics.' Similarly, the hit songs of a particular film were published in lobby cards that became essential collectibles for the stars' fans.
- ⁴Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, (2002) quoted in Ranjini Majumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 79. Bruno's lines are in the context of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: 'a difficult love for a city and the city as site of a difficult love.'
- ⁵Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, p.10 states that 'the formation of the public and private spheres is a differential process which takes place on several levels, the discursive, the linguistic, the political and the economic, and usually in relation to other classes.' In the film under discussion the two spheres are interact through race, religion and caste.
- ⁶Partha Chatterjee, *Football and Collective Identity in Colonial Calcutta*, p. 2, Keynote paper at the conference on 'Sports and the Nation', Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 19–20 January, 2012. Reference given by Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri.
- ⁷In Bangla, the word *jaat* stands for caste and *jaati* for race but *jaat* can sometimes slide into race as well. So, the term *bijaatiyo* can mean someone of different race as well as caste. This blurring of the terms creates a rich field of semiotic resonance in the film.

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