

South Asia

Anugyan Nag and Spandan Bhattacharya, eds.

Tollygunge to Tollywood: The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined

Hyderabad and Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2021. 228 pages. Paperback, INR760.00. ISBN 9789354420344.

Tollygunge to Tollywood: The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined, as explained in the introduction, attempts to address the evolution of the Bengali film industry in the post-liberalization period known as “Tollywood.” The clear and precise explication of the larger changes taking place within the Bengali film industry and how it underwent a radical transformation emerging from the former “Tollygunge” to “Tollywood” is certainly the strength of this book. The book’s content is primarily collated from press, industry reports, and conversations with industry insiders, including producers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors. This content is then methodically analyzed to

look into the Bengali film industry's evolution as an entertainment and culture industry. The convergence of media together with the role played by the industrial landscape of the Bengali film industry, including corporatization of film production, as well as the emergence of celebrity culture, innovative marketing, and promotional strategies, played a crucial role in its reshaping.

The structure of the book is clear, starting with the transition of the Bengali film industry in the 1970s and then situating it in the larger context of the post-resurgence in the 2000s. Each chapter covers multiple aspects of this transition, unfolding various layers operating within and outside the film industry that ultimately resulted in the establishment of Tollywood. Nag and Bhattacharya begin their analysis by demonstrating the "crisis narrative" of Bengali cinema and how the industry—which had been struggling since the death of actor-superstar Uttam Kumar—was commercially revived by "masala" ("spicy" commercial elements) films or "formula" films, which comprised elements borrowed from Hindi cinema aesthetics. The Bengali film industry was at an all-time low when Anjan Chowdhury released his film *Shatru* ("Adversary") in 1984. A standout example of formula films, *Shatru* borrowed elements from Bombay films, overturning the industry's *bhadralok* (the educated Bengali middle class) orientation to generate an entirely new audience base connected to the more subaltern groups. The authors highlight the whole process of this reemergence, extending from individual filmmakers to the evolution of Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF), founded in 1995 by Shrikant Mehta and Mahendra Soni, which gradually established itself as one of the most powerful corporatized production houses of Tollywood, and how Tollywood began to change gradually as the system of production and exhibition of films transformed.

Nag and Bhattacharya's approach provides a blueprint for how other film historians could use this highly specific historical and cinematic source to engage in broader arguments about cinematic studies in other regional film industries in India. The authors deftly examine the relation between the culturally, socially, and politically evolving Calcutta of the mid-1900s and the television industry's rising popularity, discussing its impact on the Tollygunge film industry. While the distinction between art/parallel and mainstream/commercial cinema is often debated, Nag and Bhattacharya critically discuss how this binary unfolded differently in the post-liberalization period. The period from the 1980s to 1990s witnessed intense public discourse about the differences between the Bengali *bhadralok* class and mainstream commercial cinema. This discourse became further complicated during the post-liberalization period, when the dividing lines between rural and urban locales were gradually blurring in Bengal and elsewhere in India. Tracing further, the book discusses how Bengali cinema saw a resurgence with the advent of multiplex theater in the 2000s, which not only changed the appearance of film viewing but also created a space for films that were experimental and catered to a niche audience. Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* in 2003 was the first Bengali film that was screened at the Inox multiplex, which met with critical reviews and a positive box office reception.

Nag and Bhattacharya lay out a persuasive argument about how the film industry went through further changes following newer groups of producers and directors, and new types of film production, distribution, and exhibition. The rise of new stardom was now conceived and circulated through TV, radio, and the print media, and later, through new media boosted by the internet and the cyber world. Satellite TV boosted the Bengali film industry in the mid-1990s after *Zee Bangla* was launched. Privately owned Bengali-

language satellite TV channels, including *ETV Bangla*, *Akash Bangla*, *Tara Muzic*, *Sangeet Bangla*, *Str Jalsha*, *Sony Aath*, and *Ruposhi Bangla*, were broadcasting into Bengali homes; among these, almost all incorporated film-based content in their TV programming in West Bengal. This was followed by the entry of FM broadcasting in Kolkata. Unlike public service providers, stations like *Amar FM*, *Friends FM*, *Big FM*, *Red FM*, and so on did not merely air *Rabindra Sangeet* (songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore) but also provided a new range of programs, including contemporary hit music from the Bengali film and entertainment industry. Furthermore, digital media such as the launch of film websites, fan club webpages, individual websites, Facebook pages, Twitter handles, and Instagram accounts of actors resulted in wide presence in the public discourse; more recently, the rise of OTT (over-the-top) and application-based digital platforms for content production and dissemination played a significant role. Gradually, the press discourse and discussions related to the post-1980s “crisis narrative” began to shift toward a more celebratory discourse regarding the overall improvement of the Bengali film industry. Thus, what this book does is delve into how the media—both old media (TV, radio, and press) and new media (internet and online platforms)—allied with the Tollywood fraternity and symbolically formed a nexus that overlapped and converged to aid Bengali cinema’s resurgence.

The book’s analytical thrust provides a refreshing outlook into the widely studied industrial changes and dynamics that enable the construction of Tollywood in the public sphere and in media discourses and paves the way for further future research—for example, an even more systematic study of political and social implications of this cinematic transformation, or bringing the analysis to include more recent work on the Bengali film industry alongside the geo-televisual aesthetic in the age of new media.

Nilakshi Goswami
Girijananda Chowdhury University