

Review: Tollygunge to Tollywood by Anugyan Nag and Spandan Bhattacharya

Books

Updated on Aug 19, 2022 04:53 PM IST

A book that looks at the financing, distribution and marketing of Bengali films and their evolution from the era immediately after the death of Uttam Kumar to the present

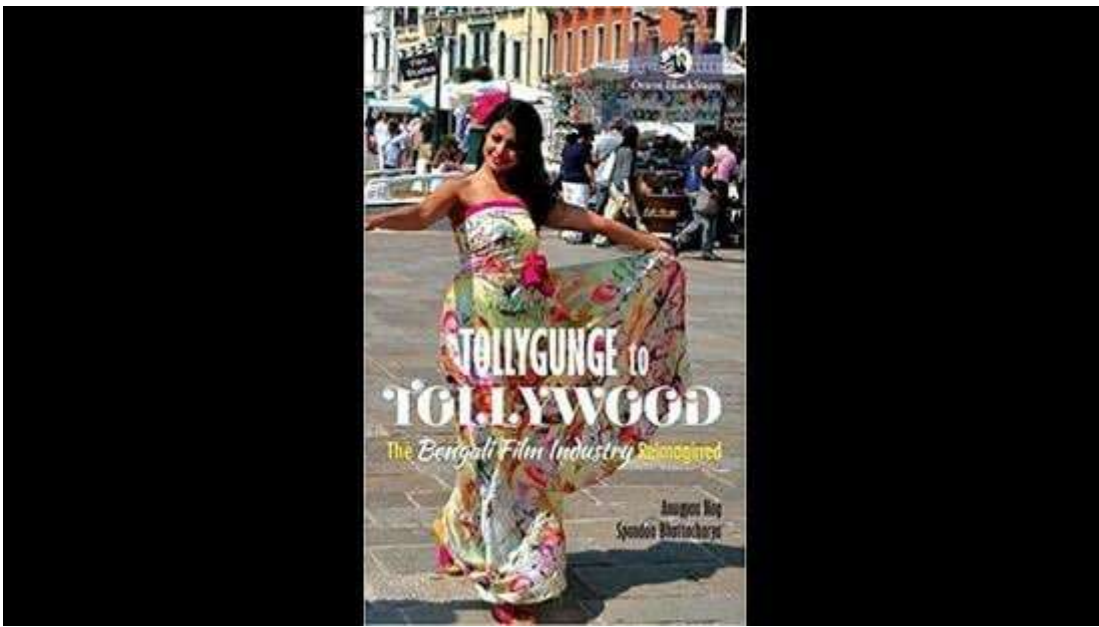


Film posters in Kolkata (Shutterstock)

By Shoma A Chatterji

Books on Bengali films rarely analyse the financial and social back story of the industry. *Tollygunge to Tollywood – The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined* is perhaps the first to do so in English.

One of its most significant features is the authors' investigation of the terrible financial disaster that faced Bengali cinema immediately after the untimely death of Uttam Kumar on July 24 1981. The disaster was imminent considering he was a one-man industry. Taking this as a starting point, the authors examine what actually happened before they graduate to a sociological and financial analysis of the situation followed by a study of what finally changed the nature, characteristics and features of the film industry and led it to morph from "Tollygunge" to "Tollywood". Many did not like this organic change but it is what finally pumped new life into the dying enterprise.



228pp, ₹699; Orient Blackswan

The audience originally comprised the *bhadralok*, with the hero especially defined as the epitome of its values. Though the concept and image of the *bhadralok*, an exclusively Bengali identity, referred to the new class of ‘gentlefolk’ who arose in Bengal during British Rule, the term is still loaded with meaning. The schism between the *bhadralok*-centric cinema and audience and mainstream cinema that honestly focused on making a profit at the box office came later.

The first chapter, *The Transition of the Bengali Film Industry: The Post-Uttam Kumar Era* describes the situation in the early 1980s and the attempts to revive the business. That eventually happened through mainstream entertainment filled with loud music and storylines that moved away from adaptations of serious Bengali literature. Anjan Chowdhury, Haranath Chakraborty, Swapan Saha and Prabhat Roy infused new life into the scene. Anjan Chowdhury’s *Shatru* was the turning point in many ways. Strangely, these directors gained little respect and were accused of “playing to the gallery” with “cheap entertainment” even though they churned out one super hit after another at a time when only about 25 films were being released per year. At this point, the very definition of “good cinema” was changing and films made by these directors became successful.



Uttam Kumar (HT Photo)

In the second chapter, *The Consolidation of Tollywood and the Logic of Corporatisation: A Case Study of Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF)*, the authors carefully chart the emergence of a completely new “school” of filmmakers and films. They also look at the economics and sociology of exhibition, distribution and the making of films, which changed completely with the slow but sure shift from single screen theatres to multiplexes. The move towards a monopoly in the economics of exhibition came with the entry of Shree Venkatesh Films, which has, over the past 25 years, become the largest film-producing company in West Bengal. Film premieres also began to follow the Bollywood trend of being star-studded and hyped by the media. Today, SVF dominates a film industry now performing a balancing act between purely mainstream cinema and off-mainstream cinema.



Co author Anugyan Nag (Courtesy the subject)

Situating the “New Parallel Cinema” begins with a mention of the late Bappaditya Banerjee, who made a mark with his debut film *Sampradaan* (1999). It could get a theatrical release only in one theatre and was therefore premiered on a satellite channel. Banerjee’s journey was littered with awards but his films failed commercially though each one had a distinct social agenda. After looking at some out-of-the-box films with very marketable stars made by the likes of the late Anjan Das (*Saanjbaatir Rookkathara*), and by already established filmmakers like Mrinal Sen (*Antareen*) Aparna Sen (*The Japanese Wife*), Buddhadeb Dasgupta (*Lal Darja*) and Goutam Ghose (*Dekha, Abar Aranye*), the authors zero in on Rituparno Ghosh.



Co author Spandan Bhattacharya (Courtesy the subject)

Indeed, the best part of this book is the section entitled *The Poster-Boy of Post-Liberalisation Bengali "Parallel Cinema" – A Study of Rituparno Ghosh's Stardom*. With its very distinctive flavour, it could have been a completely new book unto itself. Never in the history of Bengali cinema has a director been transformed into a marketable star through well-crafted films, his way of presenting himself as a distinctively individualistic personality, and his ability to walk across every media. Rituparno Ghosh (31 August 1963 – 30 May 2013) made films, was a television talk-show host, who often courted controversy, and a journalist and editor of two famous magazines – *Anandalok*, a fortnightly on cinema, and *Robbar*, a brilliant Sunday supplement. Audiences were drawn to his alternate sexuality, which he portrayed in his later films. This section of the book also touches on the slanging match between Ghosh and cinema-scholar Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay over the latter's allegations that the film *Dosar* had brazenly plagiarised Kryztoff Kieslowski's *Three Colours Blue*.



Rituparno Ghosh (Salil Bera)

The final chapter *Media Convergence and the Discursive Proliferation and Consolidation of Tollywood* is theory-heavy and readers might find it a little difficult to read. However, the convergence of Tollywood, television and online streaming sites is detailed well.

The language and style is straightforward and simple but the sudden shifting of streams from finance, distribution and marketing to a comprehensive study of a single personality, Rituparno Ghosh, to whom the book is dedicated, comes as a jerk. However, it works out quite well in the end.

This is a must-buy for students of film studies across the world.

Shoma A Chatterji is an independent journalist. She lives in Kolkata.