

# The Middle-class Bhadrakok and the Suchitra-Uttam Phenomenon

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The scholarly literature on Bengal is dominated by the concept of bhadrakok. The word however takes on different meanings in academic usage and colloquial practice. In Bengali, bhadrakok means a “respectable gentleman.” On the other hand, in scholarly literature, it is frequently used to refer to the “elite”—an allusion which cannot be understood through the lens of class or caste alone. Scholars like Broomfield (1968), Mukherjee (1970), Sarkar (1992), Chatterji (1994), Ghosh (2004), Bhattacharya (2005) and many others have contributed to the literature on this concept, either theoretically or through historical empirical analyses. Bhadrakok, in this sense, refers to a section of the Bengali society that was/is characterised by a certain set of values, sentiments, and code of behaviour which were more important than their religious (usually Hindu), caste (usually upper caste) or class background. The bhadrakok, in other words, cannot quite be comprehended through the usual sociological lenses with which we try to understand Indian society.

What is sometimes missed in this discussion is that the bhadrakok is also an evolving concept. Under colonial rule, the bhadrakok society was dominated by wealthy zamindar families such as the Tagores. But by the 1950s, we see a major societal change in Bengal. The zamindari system was abolished and there were very few rich industrialist Bengalis. The bhadrakoks thus became overwhelmingly middle class, and often found themselves in financial distress. Bengali literature from the 1950s to 1980s is frequented by stories of this middle-class bhadrakok, who are very different from the “elite” that Broomfield or Mukherjee had in mind. They are also different from the *kerani* or clerk of Sumit Sarkar. In the cinema of Satyajit Ray, one can see the old bhadrakok zamindar in *Jalsaghar*,

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*Charulata* and *Ghare Baire*, and the new middle-class bhadrakok in *Mahanagar*, *Jana Aranya*, *Semabadhya*, *Aranyer Din Ratri*, and *Pratidwandi*. The older zamindar bhadrakoks were typically rich and were patrons of high culture, whereas the new middle-class bhadrakoks faced economic hardships, valued education, and hoped to survive in a tough world.

This transformation of the Bengali society is perhaps crucial for an understanding of the significance of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen as icons of Bengali cinema. Beyond their box office popularity, the duo emerged to become cultural icons of middle-class bhadrakok society. They are highly respected today, to the extent that any public criticism of them is generally avoided in Bengali society. They are central to the nostalgia about the *swarna-yug* (golden age), the *mahanayak* (great hero) and *mahanayika* (great heroine) of Bengali cinema.

Smita Banerjee, in her book under discussion, has tried to map this phenomenon. The book is not a biographical study (although there are insights), nor is it a history of Bengali cinema of a particular era (although there are some interesting references), but an in-depth reading of the two “stars” and the movies they acted in.

## Middle-class Bhadrakok and Cinema

The middle-class bhadrakok had a mixed response to cinema as a cultural phenomenon. On the one hand, a Western technology and an art form were adopted with enthusiasm by a colonial society. Several directors, actors and a studio system in Calcutta emerged before independence, showing that a section of the Bengali society was keen on understanding the technology and adapting the art form to the local context. But there was

also a more conservative section, who had a low opinion of cinema as a corrupting Western influence, and imposed restrictions on acting or going to the movies.

We do not have much data on who the moviegoers were, except for a survey on the city of Calcutta done in the 1950s by S N Sen (1960), a professor of economics at Calcutta University. Sen observed that the popularity of cinema was on the increase at the time, but only four out of 10 adults surveyed said that they had been to the cinema. About 44% of men and 32% of women went to the cinema. Fifty-one percent of moviegoers were young men in their 20s, and 42% were in their 30s. In other words, moviegoers were usually quite young, with more men than women making up their composition. Forty-five percent of moviegoers were unemployed. Although Sen did not reveal the class of the moviegoers, I am assuming that they belonged to the middle-class bhadrakok, rather than the labouring poor of the city, based on the content of the movies screened. A large section of the urban population and much of the rural population did not watch cinema in the 1950s. Hence, we need to exercise caution while using the word “popular” in the context of cinema, which Banerjee diligently does in her book. Hence, the Suchitra-Uttam star couple was more a middle-class bhadrakok phenomenon, rather than a “popular” phenomenon in the sense that Amitabh Bachchan was in later years. Their popularity prevailed largely among certain sections of the young middle-class bhadrakok population of Calcutta, who, one can perhaps say, had less interest in mythological stories, and wanted to see movies which had a contemporary feel to them.

Hence, we see the making of movies like *Sarey Chuattor* (74 and a half) about a male working population hostel, which for the first time brought Uttam and Suchitra together on screen. The relatively young composition of moviegoers also explains the demand for romantic movies.

## The Chapters

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 maps the romantic movies of the duo. Three films—*Sagarika* (1956),

*Suryotoron* (1958), and *Saptapadi* (1961)—have been analysed in detail. Banerjee has correctly observed that *Sagarika* marks the arrival of the modern educated heroine. Suchitra is a medical student who takes care of her blind lover, played by Uttam. In *Suryotoron*, the actors portray a couple trying to fulfil their dream of a community housing project for the poor. In *Saptapadi*, we find Suchitra as Rina Brown, a Christian woman, who is in love with a Hindu man played by Uttam. All three films show how the romantic on-screen couple were destabilising a conservative society, mainly through the new kinds of characters played by Suchitra.

In Chapter 2, Banerjee has once again picked three films that are on romance, but here the couple are married. The three films analysed are *Indrani* (1958), *Grihodaho* (1967) and *Nabaraag* (1971). Through these films, the author has explored the new married *bhadramohila*, the middle-class Hindu woman who is educated, but at the same time keen on performing her role as the *laxmi* of the household. Through these and some other films, Suchitra came to symbolise the new *bhadramohila*, who is neither a traditional housewife nor a “westernised” woman (*memsahib*). It is this reformulation of the man–woman relationship on the silver screen that has made Suchitra–Uttam cultural icons, much more than simply popular entertainers. They created a new template for the middle-class *bhadralok* to be romantic and progressive without becoming “westernised” or taking on after Bollywood.

Chapter 3 focuses only on Suchitra, and the films where she is a lonely *bhadramohila*. Three films are discussed—*Dweep Jweley Jai* (1959), *Saat Paake Bandha* (1963), and *Uttar Phalguni* (1963). Through these films, Sen was presented to fashion a new Bengali *bhadramohila* who steered a middle path between the *bahu* (daughter-in-law) and the *memsahib*. In *Deep Jweleuy Jai*, she played the role of a young psychiatrist who, by mistake, fell in love with her patient. In *Saat Paakey Bandha*, she portrayed the role of a woman who married a man who is economically worse off than her, with the conflict between the two families ultimately leading to divorce. In *Uttar Phalguni*

(later made into a Hindi film, *Mamta*, also starring Suchitra), she plays the double role of a *baiji* (a courtesan, a fallen woman) and her lawyer daughter who finally saves her. Each of these movies pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable in Bengali society, but also did not subscribe to a copy of the European/American woman of the time. It is this creative adaptation, a characteristic feature of Indian/Bengali modernity, that makes the films historically significant.

The next chapter shifts the focus to Uttam Kumar’s self-fashioning in the late 1960s and 1970s—a period that Banerjee has rightly described as being characterised by a “crisis of the *Bhadralok*.” During this era, Banerjee shows, the romantic Uttam metamorphosed into an elder brother, a *dada*. Indeed, she also mentions that even within the industry, he played the role of a benevolent *dada*. I am particularly reminded of a comedy film, *Mouchak*, where Uttam plays the role of the elder brother of a much sought after bachelor played by Ranjit Mullick. The *dada* was the manager of familial conflicts, someone who kept the *bhadralok* world together. Banerjee also notes that this was also the time when the *abhadra* or “lumpen” *bhadralok* emerged on the Bengali screen.

The final chapter analyses the after-life of the Uttam–Suchitra phenomenon. This probably deserves a book rather than a chapter. But within a short space of a few pages, Banerjee has correctly observed that the image of Uttam as a popular star has been mobilised by Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress. Suchitra’s complete disappearance from public life till her death created a magical aura about her and took her beyond all forms of critical perspectives. Together they continue to represent the dominant template of the middle-class *bhadralok* romantic couple that the Bengali film industry has failed to dislodge.

### Conclusions

The strength of Banerjee’s book lies in her textual reading of the films starring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. She has observed in the introductory chapter that the book is not a “grand story of popular Bengali cinema in these two

decades; it attempts to recover traces, sediments, and fragments of Bengali modernities of these two decades, via the films starring Suchitra and Uttam” (p 2). The book certainly gives many interesting insights regarding the films, their narrative structures, their ideologies, and the technical aspects of film-making. Banerjee has also argued that there is a lack of archival material on the era, as printed materials related to popular cinema (magazines, newspaper articles, reviews) are not carefully preserved in any archive. This is a genuine problem for those who want to study Bengal’s history. However, I wonder whether the author did adequate justice to the material she collected through her research. Banerjee has mentioned criticisms of the “unprincipled modernity” of romantic movies, especially targeting Suchitra.

The author could have devoted more space in the book to the reception of the films in the 1950s and 1960s. I am sure that the readers would have loved to read more about how the society of the 1950s–1970s reacted to the star couple and their films. This is not just juicy gossip, since there is a distinction between how the stars were seen in those days and how they are remembered today. The discussion would have been enriched had the book dealt in more detail with the critical review of the stars during the 1950s and 1960s.

Finally, at times, the author has written sentences that are unnecessarily complex, and the book could have been more reader-friendly.

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