

Calcutta in films: Representing the South Asian City

Sukanya Mitra

Loreto College, Kolkata

This paper is divided into two parts. The first studies the representation of the city of Calcutta in the Bengali cinema of the 1950s and 1960s through certain representative films. These films depict the city in its various hues and the representation of different sections of the population and their life stories make for an interesting study. Cinema is a powerful medium and a very important source for the study of social history. The urban narratives that unfold in the Bengali films of this era depict everyday problems of housing, homelessness, class conflict, unemployment, migration, urban alienation as well as show various ways of coping with these issues. Through these visual narratives the everyday lives of urban dwellers come alive. An important and recurring issue depicted in the films of this period is the problem of housing. In the post-independence period, Calcutta was overburdened with a large population as result of the partition as well as continuous migration from the hinterlands to the city proper in search of employment. As a result, the crisis of accommodation was extremely acute. This is aptly reflected in several films of this period. The spatial transformation that the city underwent at this time with refugee colonies coming up in several places, houses being built on the fringes of the city, mess houses and rented accommodation being in great demand---all of this and more find a place in the black and white films of this period. However, there are certain absences which also need to be mentioned and the reasons behind them examined. For instance, there are hardly any depictions of the Muslim ghettoization following the partition that Joya Chatterji has spoken about or portrayal of other non-Hindu Bengali communities that lived in Calcutta at that time such as the Anglo-Indians (*Saptapadi* (1961) being an exception), Jews, Parsis, Marwaris and so on. This may be due to the limited interaction that the Bengali middle-class Hindus had with them. The second part of the paper studies the representation of Calcutta in the Bengali films of the 1990s onwards. It discusses how the city has changed visually during this time and what are the issues that come up in these films. The change in the urban landscape as well as the everyday lives of the people of Calcutta depict the larger changes that have swept across this port city which has now become a node in the global network of capitalism. The representative films of this period focus on the changing lifestyle of the urban middle class, depict new urban spaces such as the New Town in Rajarhat, shopping malls, highways and so on. What do these representative films from the two time periods say about Calcutta as a South Asian city? What are the continuities and changes that we find in these narratives and how do they problematise the city as the southern question? This is what the paper seeks to explore.