

# UNDERSTANDING THE FILM PRODUCTION CULTURE IN KOLKATA: A STUDY OF WINDOWS PRODUCTION HOUSE AND PURPLE MOVIE TOWN

**Rajeshwari Ghosh**

*Department of Media Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University)*

**Dr. Nirmala MN**

*Department of Media Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University)*

## ABSTRACT

Kolkata holds a rich culture of cinema. The changes in the ways of production create an impact on the films produced. This research paper attempts to understand the transition in film production, shift from film studios to film production houses. The paper uses ethnographic approach, through interviews, fieldwork, review of archival work, observation and focus group interview and emphasizes the film production culture of cinema. The paper also tries to trace the developments of these production spaces and assess the reasons for the shift. It provides a scope for further research in the related dimensions.

**Keywords:** Film, Film production, film studios, film production houses/companies, production culture, filmmaking.

## Introduction

Film production culture matters because it embodies and conveys the values and beliefs of the culture within which and for which it is made. (Intellect). Kolkata is a focal point, having a potential for various kinds of cinema, in the entire eastern region of the country. The films produced have evolved with the changing times and changing needs, especially in the filmmaking and film production aspect. The studio era began in the 1920s and filmmaking started. Calcutta (then) depicted a neo-capitalist film culture, similar to Bombay. The culture of talkies and cinema/chabi (meaning picture) ghar slowly gained momentum in the 1930s and became extremely successful, to such an extent that it continues till today. Currently, Kolkata is a hub of approximately 150 (yellow pages) cinema halls (including multiplexes and single screen theatres), over 50 (approx) running film studios and over 160 (approx) production houses. The expansiveness and developments in this field

have allowed the film industry, and the film culture to grow, explore and experiment in Kolkata.

## Research Objective

Attempt to understand the film production culture in Kolkata.

## Research Question

How can we understand the contemporary film production culture, transition in film production, a shift from film city to film production house?

## Review of Literature

To trace the beginnings and early history of film studios and studio engineering, a transnational starting point can be seen in France and the US around 1915. The patterns of partnership from that era make it clear how the film space has grown to such modern and realistic heights. (R J. B., 2011) Since the beginning of the twentieth century, French cinema had dominated the

world markets through the efforts of famous inventors such as the Lumiere brothers, who patented an early form of motion-picture camera. (M, 2011) The impact of world wars had led to the growth of studios and the concept of films in the aftermath of war. Movies began to build the entire concept of cinemas, sets, props music, light, and sound, which could be seen and studied in the movie- City of Brass. (Hisham M. Bizri Source: Leonardo, (2003)). The concept of studios and in relation to it - the knowledge-based and property based resources took an important and unavoidable shape in the 1930s when the world war just began. The changing social environment influenced the cinema making both positively and negatively. (Didier Pomerleau Source: The Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005), (Feb., 1997)) In India, the beginnings in the movie industry were made by Parsees, who had the capital for investment. This was centered in the Bombay area and till today this region has a lead in film production. Statistics confirm that in 1949, just after independence, 65% of films made in India were made in and around Bombay, 20% in Calcutta and 15% in Madras. (The Film in India Author(s): Jack Howard Source: The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television, 1952) Calcutta (then), and the present day Kolkata holds a rich culture of cinema. Entertainment districts emerged in the rapidly urbanizing Calcutta. The European center of entertainment developed along Chowringhee Road, south of Dalhousie Square. Several European playhouses were established around Chowringhee Road, including the Calcutta Theater in 1775, the Chowringhee Theater (1813-1839), the Sans Souci in 1839 and the Opera House (which last was converted into Calcutta's premiere cinema in the 1910s). Local theater companies were also formed which opened doors for the masses to enjoy the taste of cinema. This led to the emergence of New Theatres in the 1930s made it possible for the song to be recorded as a playback track for the very first time, unlike before when all recording happened before the camera. This studio became a prominent landmark in the history of Bengali film industry. (R, 2012) Film studios and film production houses in India and in Kolkata have come a long way. The developments in VFX, SFX and ever-changing graphics and technologies have shaped the films of today extravagantly. In recent times, a number of independent production houses have also mushroomed, which specialize in telling a story. International production houses might be becoming a preferred option when it comes to videos high on visual effects and other technical details, but when it comes to getting the sentiments right, there is no replacement for the Indian counterparts. The A

list production houses have now started to merge with amateur as well as independent production houses and thus taken the Indian cinema to a new level. (Krishnan, 2015) Studio-filmmaking, which was the dominant mode of film production until about the 1950s in India provides for its own periodization. A close-reading of film magazines of the period it shows how such transformations, at the level of film cultures and practices, were taking place and the manner in which certain houses were investing in sound systems, which activated the consolidation of the studios. (Mukherjee, 2019)

## Methodology

Methodology refers to the systematic methods and principles for conducting research. The present research paper is focusing on the qualitative research method. The research paper has an ethnographic approach, through the use of interviews, fieldwork, review of archival work, observation and focus group interview. Ethnographic research is a qualitative method where the researcher observes and/or interacts with a study's participants in their real-life environment. (spotless). The researcher chooses this method to get a deeper understanding of the production culture and the various aspects related to it.

**Interview:** It is a method of collecting information using a systematic pattern of questions to be asked to the concerned individual. Another form of interview can be Focus Group Interview in which the researcher interviews a small group of people, and asks specific questions to get the desired response.

**Field Work:** When the researcher goes to the place/ field of actual work and observes, interacts and tries to understand the functioning environment, it is called fieldwork.

**Review of Archival work:** The researcher in this, tries to analyze the existing literature, artifacts, papers, articles or any other form of recorded data to ensure a clearer understanding of how much information is available.

**Observation:** This method requires the researcher to observe the surroundings of the field very minutely and record the details. This can also be used while interviewing to get more clarity about the person speaking.

The researcher used the above tools to collect information, comprehend the ways and methods used in the film production culture and acquire valuable insights from the people and the film industry environment.

## Analysis

Un-layering the cinema and the way it was produced, one can mark the beginning of the studio era in the 1920s in India. The New Theatres was established in 1931 and is still known for one of the significant contributions to the film industry. New theatres brought sound to the movies, playback singing to be exact in 1935. New theatres expanded themselves and began producing movies. Between 1931 -1955 new theatres produced 150 films in its own studios. (Prem, 2009) Some of them are like Dena Paona, Natir Pujo, Chandidas etc.

Film Studios, used explicitly for film making, state two important stands which help in studying the emergence of cinema. First, the investment of creative and cultural energies into one institution (film studio) and second, the metaphysics of structures and practices which evolved with time creating newer dimensions in this field. The dominant use of studios was during the 1950s when Indian cinema and its methods were young and evolving. (Ingle, 2019)

Several peculiarities occurred at the time of studio establishment. The studios had to go through a lot of transitions and changes, especially when sound technology entered and the dynamic socio-political scenario both inside (independence) and outside (world war) the country. Hrishikesh Ingle and his findings show that filmmaking was anchored in locale-specific social contexts. E.g. the vernacular modernity of Kolhapur and Pune along with the provincial colonial structures produced the spaces for cinema to bloom. In Calcutta, the cinema was shaped by the 'bhadralok' lending credibility. Bombay and Calcutta depicted neo-capitalist film culture. (Ingle, 2019) Madhuja Mukherjee's article talks about Calcutta's artistic good taste and technical excellence in the film production culture. Just like New Theatres, Prabhat Film Co., Poona, or Ranjit Film Co., Bombay, and others, in the different parts of the country accomplished a distinguishable studio and theatre style, which was produced by channelizing their resources and talents, as well as through thoughtful publicity and marketing strategies. (Mukherjee, 2019)

The print media and filmic objects such as film magazines, journalist reports, film posters etc, all of which were important tools of mass communication and kept the people informed. They relayed strong comments on the production system, markets, studios, and talkies and acted as essential devices for tracing the production culture. People became self-taught technicians, theatre

artists, storytellers as reporters, who gave out their own opinions regarding the films, directors, filmmaking and other aspects. An occupation need or crisis has risen because people were still learning and adjusting to a newer medium – cinema. (Mukherjee, 2019)

Filmland Magazine in one of its publication of 1931, included a full-page advertisement of Swami (A silent film of that period). The advertisement used a film-still, which presented the characters in a realistic setting, (a typical scene from a Bengali (Hindu) household). The movie was praised for not using sets and because "pictures were taken at apt locations and interiors".(Mukherjee, 2019). It said that the producers will give us some really artistic productions in the future. If seen critically a new production culture had started. A slight decline in the need for studios had begun. Producing and screening a film was more profitable than shooting or providing the setup. For a long time film productions and screenings were carried out by the same organization. One such example is 'Chitra' talkies by New Theatres, which became extremely successful in Talkie scene because they were the first to build a talkie studio and they used to screen films of other production houses and a range of Hollywood hits. The silent film era prevailed for quite a long time despite the sound technology advancements as it had already cultured the people into the beauty of silence. (Mukherjee, 2019)

In the contemporary time, these institutions and their purpose in filmmaking are minimal. The craze for real locations drives the audience and hence the director, the cast, the writers and the entire production team don't indulge in the 'created sets', in order to bring the 'reality appeal' and add more originality factor.

Purple Movie Town is a studio of modern times. It is a 6.5-acre property situated in the outskirts of Kolkata near Sonarpur. It is a digitally integrated and technologically advanced studio. The studio has a huge wide open space within the boundary in which a full village set up can be created. It has 3 blocks, each containing 8 floors. On each floor, approximately four shootings can happen simultaneously. The studio also has constructed, ready to use sets for police station, hospital, airplane, train, middle-class home, old style Bengali house, and modern-luxurious villa with kitchen, bedroom, living room, dining room and even storeroom set up. The walls of the rooms are painted in designated colors, such as for hospital it is light green and white with glass windows and tags on doors like 'Operation Theatre'. The furniture for each set is rented or made when the shooting dates are finalized,

approximately 3 weeks before the shooting starts. The owner, Preetimoyee Chakraborty confirms that the studio can cater to movies comfortably, without any alteration, for coming 10 years. Taking examples, like 'Hemlock Society', 'Cockpit' and several other Bengali films which have been shot more than 85% in these studios. The Purple Movie town usually remains open 24 by 7 as at any given time the place is booked for some shooting. Maintaining studios and shooting in them is also a labor-intensive job. At a time for one shoot, approximately more than 30 people are present on set.

However, it would be wrong to say that Film studios have been discarded completely. Ad films, TV soap operas, and few movie scenes are shot almost on a daily basis. The film production especially the making has suffered a shift from the film studios to film production houses.

Film Production Houses or Production Company is an organization which provides the physical basics in the realms of new media, art, films, television, comics, websites etc. From the creation of the story, to the director, to cast, to types of equipment, to filmmaking, to promotion, to distribution, the entire process (from A To Z) is handled by a production company or sometimes two or more in collaboration. Turning the pages of history in India, the existence of film production houses could be as old as that of studios, but the concept gained huge popularity mostly after 1965. Before single hand producers or businessman used to invest in films. Such as the Parsees who gave the capital for Cinemas made in Bombay and for quite long years this became their family business. (The Film in India Author(s): Jack Howard Source: The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television, 1952)

Aurora Film Corporation is the oldest running production company. It was established in 1906 by Anadi Nath Bose and since then, has set several landmarks in the movie culture of Bengal. (hindustan times, 2018) It produced the country's first film for children - Hate Khori in 1939 and the first Bengali tax-free film - Raja RamMohan in 1965. Aurora Film Corporation was involved in the distribution work as well. Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali, Aparajito and Jalsaghar were taken care of by Aurora. During the company's initial years it was a traveling film unit and exhibited films, magic and drama shows in different parts of Bengal. Just like the production houses of today, it took up various projects outside of cinema for branching out into the society easily. The company was also known for importing feature films to India. (hindustan times, 2018)

'Bhagini Nibedita' was one of the first Bengali films to be shot abroad and Aurora produced it along with Satyajit Ray. This can be one of the starting points where Production house takes a greater leap than studios by shooting in a real and foreign location. Under the Victorian era, before independence, Hiralal Sen can be credited for opening one of the earliest production houses Royal Bioscope Company. Sen also made many local views and news films, took commissions, made advertising films and put on private shows for members of high society. He was the first one to produce a number of short newsreels, including Anti-partition demonstration (1905), Swadeshi movement (1905), and With Our King and Queen Through India (1912) and ad films. (revolv). One can easily put stock to the fact that production houses and studios in that time were an integral part of Indian freedom struggle and Bengal was the hot seat for rebellion. Slowly the transformation into production houses began. There was no "assembly line production", or a strict "division of labor" considering, that several artists and technicians delivered multiple roles, sometimes, even for the same pay. From the 1960s, unionization entered the world of cinema. Labor rights and standard pay scale guidelines had to be adopted by the studios and production companies. The production houses became more structurally organized, in this than studios and could retain more manpower. To some extent the integration in the film industry, especially considering the manpower, commenced with the labour unions.

Filmland's (1931) 18th July issue gives an account of nine new production companies, which were set up in Calcutta. These include P C Barua's company, Rupam Film Co., Films of East Co., Heera Film Co., etc. Barua's experiments with artificial lights, which signposted the transforming production conditions. Filmland described that "we were invited to a night shooting of "Aparadhi" [directed by Debaki Bose] the elaborate and splendid arrangements of electric lights encourage us to expect a better picture from the standpoint of photography." The credits and acknowledgment given by the magazine indicate the bold step taken up by Barua's company, whose success would determine a different production culture (Mukherjee, 2019). Several other experiments were carried out by different production companies to make the cinema better and more adaptable to public demands. Probably such steps pushed the film production houses further and left the studios way behind.

A major shift in the shooting process can be evidently studied in the 1952 movie 'jamai babu' by Kalipada Das. A scene-by-scene analysis of the film demonstrates how



at least two or more types of film styles were jostling with each other. The first half of the film had a documentary-style location shooting. It had shots of Sealdah Station (central Calcutta), Scott Lane (now Raj Kumar Chakrabarty Sarani), and several other places in the city like Bow Bazaar area, Wellington (now Nirmal Chandra) Street, and Governor's house. Long shots of the city—portraying cars, houses, shops, hoardings, recognizable places— as well as gestures of the period and physical movement generated a sensorial engagement with the city. The scene shifted to touristic locations, like the famed Victoria Memorial and popular sites inclusive of the (Dhakuria) Lake area (developed in the 1920s) etc.,— places where young couples met, and those which inform us about the contemporary public sphere. The second half of the film was shot in the interiors, largely through mid-shots and close-ups, and was mounted against a stage-like setting. The major portion of the film depicts the active city and somewhere brings the importance of real locations to the forefront, which is definitely enjoyed by the people. (Mukherjee, 2019)

Windows Production House was established in 2012 by Nandita Roy and Shiboprasad Mukherjee. It is comparatively a very new production house but is known for producing some of the distinguished Bengali films. It is located in the heart of the city, Ballygunje. Some of its productions are Alik Shukh, Belaseshe, Prakton, Posto etc. (revolv). In 2017, Windows launched their own music label, Windows Music with the non-film music album by Anupam Roy and Band, 'Ebar Morle Gachh Hawbo'. Their films have been appreciated for the socially relevant content and entertaining narrative structure. They indulge in original content and giving chances to new filmmakers. (windows) Mr. Atanu Raychoudhury, who was associated with windows production house for a long time, is of the opinion that the masses adopt to change very easily. Competency and content both hold the account for a film to be successful these days. The fantasy, drama, romance, love angle, all the 'masala entertainment' though have a place and rejuvenate the crowd from time to time but what the people feed on more, is the reality. Something with which they can connect at an instant.

Mr. RayChoudhury with determination says that to portray reality one needs the real location. Studios are utilized for a few shots or a dance number sequence, but these days, studios are seldom the first choice for any movie. Studios that are well equipped and at par with the technological advancements and handlers stands a better chance. There has been an immense number of increase in

the production houses in Kolkata which provide different services. Some provide only advertisement shoots while some short films and documentaries. Film production houses usually take care of the entire production process. SVF, Shree Venkatesh Films is one of the best production houses and give a tough competition to its equivalents like windows.

The filmmaking business is hard and very competitive and poses tremendous challenges. Many studios and production companies have perished, whereas many have managed to survive through all the crisis period. For example, Anjan Bose, the owner of Aurora Film Corporation, has recently demolished a profit-making studio and built a 20 storeyed structure to accommodate studios for film shoots and provide post-production facilities. Bose and his Aurora are living examples who learned to evolve with the changing times. He also plans for diversification by leasing out 10 floors of this building which will give him the funds for the movies. (hindustan times, 2018)

## Conclusion

Cinema is not a clearly demarcated field and has gone through extensive transitions caused by technological advancements and dynamic-socio-political scenario. There exists very little recorded data and evidence regarding these studios and production houses. A possible reason for the degenerating use of studios could be the lack of vertical integration and collaboration with other studios in other parts of the country. Also diversification of production companies into various businesses apart from film making, like distribution, importing feature films, branding, promotions, etc. gave a major push for these companies to take flight. The film production in Kolkata is evolving and is at par with productions in other parts of the country. Both the studios and the production houses had to go through structural reorganization and adopt codes and guides laid down by labor unions. One can trace a major shift from studios, to modern day movie producers, film production Houses. An unseen tug of war stays between the studios and the production houses but both are equally dependent on one another to make a movie come to life.

## Limitations

Historical artifacts, valuable resources from the past, and several other crucial data stand missing or not recorded. Thus, to trace the history of studios or production houses becomes a difficult task, when the

evidence lies under the shadow. The interview was conducted in the month of December, where usually the industry breaks for Christmas and New Year holidays. In the field visit the researcher could get access to the constructed sets and TV serial shoot only. Also, very less resources and information is available which focuses on the transition period, the shift from studios to production houses.

### Scope of Research

Digitization and technological advancements open lot of research opportunities in this field. One can conduct research on several new and independent production houses that are coming up and running the show with established brands, short films, documentaries, and films. A comparative analysis can be done on the ways methods used by these young companies and the established ones. Small budget films with non-mainstream content also provide a wide unexplored research base.

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