



(Class)ifying the Queer in India: Reading the Intersection of Class with Sexuality in the Bengali Film *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010)

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Abstract

This article examines how class structures queer visibility in Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010). Building on scholarship that has already identified the film's classed contrast between the urban filmmaker Abhiroop and the materially precarious former female impersonator Chapal Bhaduri, it places that inequality within a longer history of bhadralok representation in Bengali cinema. Through close textual analysis, the article considers space, English-language cultural capital, consumer culture, documentary authorship, and hierarchies of masculinity and effeminacy. It argues that queer visibility is unevenly distributed: Abhiroop's mobility, education, and control of the documentary apparatus provide representational authority that remains less available to Chapal. The film's parallel temporal structure therefore reveals how class, caste-coded respectability, gender expression, and sexuality intersect, shifting the analytical question from who becomes visible to who controls the conditions of visibility.

Keywords: *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010); Bengali cinema; queer representation; class and sexuality; bhadralok; Rituparno Ghosh; neoliberalism



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Introduction

Centering on Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (*Just Another Love Story*) (hereafter *APG*), this article examines the classed organization of queer visibility in Bengali cinema. Intersectional scholarship has long shown that sexuality is shaped by simultaneous hierarchies of class, caste, gender, race, and nationality (Crenshaw, 1991; Ferguson, 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Reddy, 2005). Existing scholarship has also already established that *APG* cannot be read apart from class and cultural privilege. Bakshi (2014) analyzes the contrast between the urban, consumer-oriented Abhiroop and the materially precarious Chapal Bhaduri, while Dutta (2015) situates the film's gender narratives within class- and caste-restricted access to bourgeois modernity. Dasgupta and Bakshi (2018) further connect Rituparno Ghosh's queer stardom to the Bengali middle-class public sphere. Accordingly, this article does not claim to discover the film's class divide. Its contribution is to place that divide within a longer genealogy of *bhadralok* representation and to develop two further lines of close reading: how language, space, consumption, and documentary authorship determine who can speak for queer

experience; and how class intersects with hierarchies of masculinity and effeminacy in the film's paired relationships.

Produced in the immediate aftermath of the Delhi High Court's 2009 reading down of Section 377, *APG* became an important early post-judgment Bengali queer feature; it premiered at the 60th Berlin International Film Festival and received a Silver Peacock Special Jury Award at the International Film Festival of India (Bakshi, 2014; Pahwa, 2010). The film developed from themes Ganguly had explored in the telefilm *Ushnotar Jonno (For Warmth)*, 2003) and belongs to a body of work concerned with socially marginalized lives (Mandal & Mondal, 2023). *APG* also marked Rituparno Ghosh's acting debut. Ghosh's established public persona as an acclaimed filmmaker, editor, television host, and increasingly visible queer cultural figure shaped the film's reception before and after release. Majumdar's account of Indian stardom is useful here because it shows how a star persona can function as a powerful principle of audience identification and generic expectation (Majumdar, 2009, pp. 11, 131). Casting Ghosh therefore did more than attach celebrity value to *APG*: it brought the meanings attached to Ghosh's public image into the film's representation of Abhiroop, making the boundary between star persona, character, and queer public discourse unusually porous.

The bhadralok is not a fixed economic class but a historically changing formation associated with respectability, education, cultural capital, and, particularly in its colonial genealogy, upper-caste Hindu privilege. Parimal Ghosh (2004) traces the shifting social location of the bhadralok across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Anindita Ghosh (2002) emphasizes the role of Western education and Bengali Renaissance culture in the production of elite distinction. Barun De (1993) similarly situates the colonial middle strata between British rule and wider Bengali society, and Sarkar (2001) demonstrates how reformist claims could coexist with durable hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. These histories matter to Bengali cinema because bhadralok taste became closely associated with literary prestige, film-society culture, and the distinction between respectable art cinema and supposedly vulgar popular forms. By the late twentieth century, however, changing production conditions, television, Hindi popular cinema, and shifts in exhibition unsettled that older audience formation (Bhowmik, 1981; Gooptu, 2010; Nag & Bhattacharya, 2021). Rituparno Ghosh's emergence in the 1990s can therefore be understood within an industrial and cultural moment in which Bengali cinema was renegotiating its relationship with the urban middle-class audience.

Ghosh re-established the urban middle-class domestic sphere as a central site of Bengali cinema while drawing heavily on literary culture, family melodrama, and the intertextual

memory of earlier Bengali auteurs. His films repeatedly returned to canonical literature and to recognizable *bhadralok* spaces, practices, and rituals, helping reconnect cinematic prestige with a culturally literate middle-class audience (Biswas, 2006; Gooptu, 2010; Mandal, 2002). Works such as *Hirer Angti* (1992), *Dahan* (1997), *Chokher Bali* (2003), and *Antarmahal* (2005) exemplify this engagement with literary and cultural inheritance, while films such as *Utsab* (2000) and *Bariwali* (2000) revisit domestic spaces associated with Bengali modernity. Ghosh's editorial work in the Bengali press and his television presence further extended this cultural authority beyond cinema. His later public experimentation with gender presentation did not replace that *bhadralok* persona; rather, it created a visible tension between cultural respectability and gender nonconformity that became central to the reception of his queer screen roles (Dey, 2015; Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2018).

Dasgupta and Bakshi (2018) describe a trajectory in Ghosh's career from films addressed primarily to an imagined Bengali middle-class audience, through productions with larger corporate and pan-Indian reach, to the period in which queer performance became central to his public stardom. *APG*, *Memories in March* (2011), and *Chitrangada* (2012) are often discussed together because Ghosh appeared in all three and because each makes queer desire and gender variance explicit (Dey, 2015). *APG* is especially important to the present argument because it

places Ghosh's cosmopolitan screen persona beside Chapal Bhaduri's history in jatra, allowing the film to stage two unequal forms of queer visibility within the same narrative structure.

Articulating Queerness in the Indian Context

In a socially stratified context such as India, queerness cannot be analyzed in isolation from class, caste, religion, language, and regional belonging (Ross, 2014; Sircar & Jain, 2012). Menon (2009) argues that sexual politics in India is inseparable from these overlapping social formations, while Kapur's (2010) concept of the sexual subaltern stresses the heterogeneity of counter-heteronormative identities that cannot be reduced to a single LGBT model. Khubchandani (2019), Kumar (2022), and Tellis (2012) likewise caution against treating queer citizenship as socially uniform. *APG* is productive precisely because its two central queer figures are not simply different generations of the same identity: they occupy different relations to education, work, language, urbanity, cultural capital, and gendered respectability.

Methodologically, the article combines a historical account of bhadralok representation with close textual analysis of *APG*. The bhadralok is treated not merely as an income group but as a caste- and class-inflected formation shaped by colonial modernity, education, language, and cultural capital. The close reading then focuses on the film's parallel temporal structure, mise-en-scene, spatial contrasts, language use, documentary-within-the-film, consumer objects, and the paired relationships of Abhiroop/Chapal and Basu/Kumar. This emphasis differentiates

the present study from prior analyses that have already established the importance of class and consumer culture in *APG* (Bakshi, 2014) and the class/caste limits of the film's models of gender identification (Dutta, 2015). The article asks instead how those inequalities become formalized as differences in representational authority: who can initiate a film, ask questions, frame another person's story, move between spaces, and circulate queer experience as cultural knowledge. It also examines how material inequality interacts with masculinity and effeminacy within the film's intimate relationships. Gender-neutral they/them pronouns are used for characters whose gender positions are non-normative or deliberately unsettled by the film.

The Bhadrakok on Screen: A Historical Genealogy

Within Bengali cultural discourse, Rituparno Ghosh occupied an ambivalent position: he was celebrated as an award-winning filmmaker associated with the prestige of Bengali art cinema while also attracting hostility for increasingly public gender nonconformity (Dey, 2015; Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2018). This tension is especially important in *APG*, where Ghosh plays Abhiroop Sen, an urban, English-speaking documentary filmmaker whose professional authority is inseparable from bhadrakok cultural capital. Historians of the category emphasize that bhadrakok respectability was historically linked not only to income but also to education, bureaucratic employment, caste location, and recognized forms of cultural refinement (Banerjee, 2006; Cronin, 1975; Ghosh, 2004). *APG* mobilizes that history by making Abhiroop

socially legible as modern and professionally authoritative even when their gender presentation troubles conventional norms.

The representation of the *bhadralok* in Bengali cinema has shifted with the social history of the middle class itself. Mukherjee and Bakshi (2017) identify *bhadralok* cultural practices as central to public understandings of prestigious Bengali cinema from the studio era onward. New Theatres, for example, built an influential model of respectable Bengali film culture through literary adaptation, music, and star performance during the 1930s and 1940s (Gooptu, 2003). The Bengal Famine of 1943, Partition in 1947, and the refugee crisis then reshaped middle-class experience, while the 1950s brought both Ray's modernist realism and the popular Suchitra Sen-Uttam Kumar romantic cycle, two very different cinematic forms through which *bhadralok* aspiration and anxiety were negotiated (Banerjee, 2023; Biswas, 2002; Gooptu, 2013).

The optimism of the 1950s Bengali films was followed by two subsequent decades marked by growing disillusionment over the failure of Nehruvian modernity, rising inflation, unemployment, the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, and a dilapidated civic structure in Bengal, resulting in lockouts, strikes, and political unrest (Chatterjee, 1990). These turbulent times found their reflection in Ritwik Ghatak's 'Partition Trilogy' (1960-65), which depicts the

post-partition hollowness of the Bengali bhadralok, riddled with casteism, classism, and a migration crisis (Sarkar, 2010). Similarly, Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta-'71* (1972), Satyajit Ray's 'Calcutta Trilogy' (1970-76), and Tapan Sinha's *Apanjan* (One's Own People, 1968) represented the Bengali bhadralok middle-class society as being struck by the spectre of unemployment, political agitation, and wayward youths (Banerjee, 2023). Yet in such politically charged films, the unemployed protagonist is always already a bhadralok, middle-class graduate. Lower-caste and lower-class aspirants to education and employment remain invisible within this urban, politically inflected narrative(s).

The 1980s and early 1990s brought another shift in Bengali cinema's audience and industrial structure. The death of Uttam Kumar in 1980, the growth of television, competition from Hindi popular cinema, and deteriorating exhibition conditions contributed to the retreat of sections of the urban bhadralok audience from mainstream Bengali film (Nag & Bhattacharya, 2021). Directors such as Anjan Chowdhury, Swapan Saha, and Haranath Chakraborty developed commercially successful forms aimed at broader provincial and working-class audiences, drawing on action, melodrama, music, and other conventions associated with mass-market Hindi cinema (Gooptu, 2013; Nag & Bhattacharya, 2021). The change is important here

because it sharpened the cultural distinction through which later 'quality' Bengali cinema would again address the urban middle class.

At the same time, filmmakers including Aparna Sen, Goutam Ghosh, Buddhadev Dasgupta, and Utpalendu Chakraborty continued traditions of politically and aesthetically ambitious cinema. Films such as *Paroma* (1985), *Yugant* (1995), *Tahader Katha* (1992), and *Charachar* (1993) foregrounded gender, domesticity, memory, and the failures of postcolonial modernity, often through middle-class interiors. In the new millennium, a further group of films mobilized nostalgia, remake, tribute, and cinephilic quotation to revisit Ray, Ghatak, Uttam Kumar, and other icons of Bengali screen culture. Biswas (2011) describes this reorientation toward revised middle-class consumption as a neo-bhadralok formation. The result is not a simple return to an older audience but a re-commercialization of cultural distinction within contemporary consumer capitalism.

A parallel strand of contemporary Bengali cinema has scrutinized the self-image of the bhadralok itself, including its claims to refinement, progressivism, and cultural superiority. *APG* belongs productively within this tendency, but its particular intervention lies in showing that queer inclusion does not automatically dissolve class hierarchy. Abhiroop's project to make a documentary on Chapal Bhaduri appears restorative: it returns a largely forgotten jatra

performer to public attention. Yet the film simultaneously makes visible an unequal relation between filmmaker and subject. Abhiroop possesses the money, mobility, crew, language, and institutional access required to transform Chapal's life into a cultural object. The issue, therefore, is not whether Abhiroop's intention is simply noble or exploitative; it is how the film exposes the unequal conditions under which one queer subject acquires the authority to represent another.

Class, Queerness, and Documentary Authority in APG

APG joins two temporal registers: Abhiroop's contemporary documentary production and dramatized episodes from Chapal Bhaduri's earlier life as the celebrated female impersonator Chapal Rani. The parallel casting encourages comparison between the two periods, but comparison should not be mistaken for equivalence. The opening voice-over places Chapal's jatra stardom beside the canonical history of Bengali cinema, signaling an attempt to recover a performance tradition and queer life that sit outside the dominant bhadralok archive (Ganguly, 2010). The structure therefore invites a subaltern reading, but it also demonstrates the limits of that recovery because the contemporary documentary apparatus remains controlled by Abhiroop. The central question is not whether Chapal can 'speak' in an absolute sense; it is how their testimony is solicited, recorded, edited, and circulated through another person's

professional project. This shift from identity alone to representational authority provides a way of extending earlier accounts of the film's class politics (Bakshi, 2014; Dutta, 2015).

The opening establishes class through space and transaction rather than exposition. The camera moves between Abhiroop and Basu's hotel room, the English-speaking production milieu, and Chapal's modest domestic environment; the early question of payment and the signing of the production agreement make the economic conditions of representation visible (Ganguly, 2010). Bakshi (2014) has already identified unequal consumer power as central to the Abhiroop-Chapal relationship. Building on that insight, the present reading emphasizes the scene's staging of documentary authorship: the person with money, mobility, English, and a crew controls the apparatus through which the other person becomes publicly legible. The film's movement between present and past consequently makes class not merely a biographical difference but a difference in access to representational power.

Bakshi (2014) has also discussed the early exchange in which a journalist presses Abhiroop to identify whether Chapal's career or sexuality is the documentary's selling point. Rather than treating the scene as new evidence of class difference, it can be reframed as an ethics-of-authorship problem. Abhiroop challenges the journalist's assumption that Chapal's sexuality requires special explanation, yet the documentary itself depends on eliciting intimate

testimony. Foucault's account of confession is useful here because it treats truth-telling about sexuality as a practice structured by relations of power rather than as simple voluntary self-disclosure (1990, pp. 58-63). The contradiction is formal as much as ideological: Abhiroop resists an outsider's voyeurism while occupying the privileged position of interviewer, director, and eventual editor. Documentary representation thus becomes part of the class relation between Abhiroop and Chapal.

Dutta (2015) has already shown that the film's movement between binary and ternary or liminal models of gender is inseparable from class- and caste-restricted access to bourgeois modernity. The present reading therefore treats the Chaitanya and Ma Shitala imagery not as a newly discovered typology but as a formal mechanism through which *APG* differentiates the cultural resources available to its two protagonists. Abhiroop's invocation of Chaitanya and a 'third' position is articulated through educated, cosmopolitan discourse; Chapal's feminine stage performance is embedded in jatra, devotional iconography, and labor. The recurring song *Bonomali Tumi Poro Jonome Hoyo Radha* and the head-shaving sequence also blur the boundary between Ghosh's public star persona and Abhiroop's character. The contrast is therefore more complicated than modernity versus tradition: it shows how different class locations authorize different vocabularies for making gender variance intelligible.

Classed Queer Identity in Post-Liberalization India

By the early twenty-first century, legal visibility and consumer visibility had become increasingly intertwined in Indian queer public culture. Altman (1996) links the expansion of public gay and lesbian identities to consumer society, while Duggan's (2002, 2003) critique of homonormativity shows how recognition can be folded into market-compatible forms of citizenship. In India, these processes cannot be treated as uniformly emancipatory because access to urban queer spaces, media visibility, consumption, and legal resources remains unevenly distributed across caste and class (Gupta, 2005; Rao, 2020; Roy, 2022). *APG* translates that broader unevenness into a contrast between two queer lives positioned very differently in relation to metropolitan mobility and consumer culture.

Corporate Pride campaigns provide one visible example of the distinction between symbolic inclusion and material redistribution. Champlin and Li (2020) show how advertising can communicate support for LGBTQ communities while the depth of that support varies considerably. The point is not that queer consumption is inherently inauthentic, but that commercial recognition should not be confused with equal political or economic power. Duggan's (2002) concept of homonormativity is useful precisely because it identifies forms of inclusion that leave dominant institutions and material inequalities largely undisturbed. In *APG*, the same tension appears at the level of character: visible self-fashioning and professional

mobility provide Abhiroop with forms of recognition that Chapal's economic precarity does not permit.

Bakshi (2014) has already read Abhiroop's clothing, cosmetics, hairstyle, and access to global queer discourse as signs of consumer power, contrasting them with Chapal's material precarity. The present article extends that point through *mise-en-scene* and language. The hotel room, production equipment, contractual payment, English-speaking exchanges, and Abhiroop's ability to commission and direct a film cluster economic and cultural capital around the filmmaker (Ganguly, 2010). Chapal is not merely poorer; they enter Abhiroop's project as its subject. This distinction matters because visibility is produced inside an unequal representational economy: Abhiroop can convert queer experience into professional authorship, while Chapal's history is made newly visible through an apparatus Chapal does not control.

Roy (2022) situates feminist and queer politics in the ambivalent terrain of neoliberal India, where new forms of visibility coexist with marketization and uneven access. India's 1991 economic reforms expanded consumer capitalism, but the legal history of Section 377 followed its own contested trajectory; the 2018 decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations did not erase material inequality. Rao (2020) similarly cautions against reading legal recognition as a uniformly distributed form of freedom. Urban, upper-caste, middle-class queer subjects may

have greater access to bars, clubs, professional networks, media platforms, and legal resources than working-class kothis and other gender-variant people (Gupta, 2005). *APG*'s class contrast should therefore be understood as part of a broader politics of unequal access rather than as evidence that neoliberalization simply 'caused' queer liberation.

Economic liberalization nevertheless intensified global mobility, consumerism, and the social significance of cultural capital for sections of the Indian middle class (Biswas et al., 2023; Roy, 2022). Ghosh's later queer-centered screen work often locates non-normative desire within educated, culturally privileged households, a tendency Bakshi and Sen (2016) connect to the classed aesthetics of his cinema. Abhiroop is a particularly clear example: they are professionally mobile, conversant with transnational queer discourse, and speak much of their dialogue in English. Ahmad (2008) emphasizes English's role in class formation and social privilege in India; Gupta (2005) similarly reflects on how English fluency could mark class distance even inside queer spaces. In *APG*, language therefore operates not simply as a communicative choice but as part of the cultural capital that distinguishes Abhiroop from Chapal.

Momo's criticism that Abhiroop is using Chapal's life to carry Abhiroop's own story makes the representational hierarchy explicit (Ganguly, 2010). The issue is not that a queer

filmmaker cannot document another queer life; it is that authorship, remuneration, editing, publicity, and interpretive authority are unevenly distributed. Roy's account of neoliberal visibility helps explain why this matters: recognition can expand while the terms of recognition remain shaped by classed institutions and markets (Roy, 2022). *APG* therefore presents visibility as ambivalent. The documentary can restore Chapal to public memory, yet it can also convert a precarious life into cultural capital for a better-resourced filmmaker. The film's reflexivity prevents this contradiction from being reduced to a simple moral judgment on Abhiroop; instead, it asks how queer solidarity is complicated by unequal control over representation.

Marginalizing the Marginalized: Queer Effeminacy

Bakshi (2014) has already compared the film's paired relationships and noted different degrees of dependency across its historical periods. The present article shifts the emphasis from narrative parallelism to the interaction of class with gendered expectations of masculinity. Abhiroop/Basu and Chapal/Kumar are structured as echoes, but the consequences of separation are not equivalent. Both Basu and Kumar retain access to heterosexual marriage and the social legitimacy attached to it, whereas Abhiroop and Chapal occupy more precarious positions in relation to intimate recognition (Ganguly, 2010). The film therefore links queer vulnerability

not simply to sexual difference but to the unequal resources through which people can survive the loss or withdrawal of a partner.

Research on antifemininity among men suggests that feminine gay men are often evaluated more negatively than masculine gay men, including by heterosexual and gay male respondents (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009, 2012; Glick et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2016; Salvati et al., 2016). These studies do not map directly onto Bengali social life, but they provide a useful vocabulary for analyzing how *APG* associates relative masculinity with relational mobility and social legibility. The film does not present femininity itself as deviant. Rather, it shows how feminine gender expression can become a site of vulnerability when it intersects with economic dependence, social stigma, and unequal access to recognized forms of masculinity.

The recurrent folk song *Tomar Ghore Bosot Kore Koyjona* frames the ending through imagery of a 'house' inhabited by multiple presences; within the film, this becomes a suggestive motif for layered selfhood rather than a fixed identity (Ganguly, 2010). The song links the two timelines without erasing their unequal outcomes. Abhiroop retains professional autonomy and economic independence when Basu returns to his marital family, whereas Chapal's past relationships are tied to prolonged domestic dependence, care labor, and exposure to violence. The later relationship with Tushar likewise underscores housing and economic precarity. Read

through the masculinity/effeminacy axis, the asymmetry is not that Chapal is insufficiently modern or that femininity is inherently vulnerable; it is that feminine gender expression becomes especially exposed when combined with poverty and dependence. This intersection is where the present article extends previous class-based interpretations: class structures material options, while gendered hierarchies within queer relations shape whose needs and autonomy are treated as negotiable.

Conclusion

This article has not treated class as a previously unnoticed feature of *APG*. Bakshi (2014) established the film's consumer and class divide, and Dutta (2015) demonstrated how its gender narratives are conditioned by class- and caste-restricted access to bourgeois modernity. The contribution here has been to relocate those insights within a longer history of *bhadralok* representation and to show how class becomes formalized through space, language, documentary authorship, and relational power. *APG*'s two timelines do more than contrast a prosperous present with a deprived past: they allocate unequal authority to name, record, and circulate queer experience. Abhiroop's English fluency, mobility, consumer access, and control of the documentary apparatus give them interpretive power that Chapal does not possess. At the same time, the film's intimate relationships show how material inequality can be compounded by hierarchies of masculinity and effeminacy. The closing return from Chapal's

memories to Abhiroop's present makes this structure narratively visible: Chapal's history has been recovered, but the contemporary filmmaker's story retains the final framing position (Ganguly, 2010). The point is not that collective queer identity is impossible, but that solidarity remains mediated by class, language, education, caste-coded respectability, and gendered norms. For queer and regional film studies, *APG* consequently demonstrates why visibility should be analyzed not only as presence on screen but also as a question of who controls the terms on which that presence becomes visible.

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