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Locating the Cultural Geography of Kolkata's *Cinema Para*: From Single-Screen Film Theatres to Cinemallisation

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural geography of Kolkata's *Cinema Para*, a historic neighborhood of single-screen cinemas, to examine how these spaces have been transformed from vibrant public arenas into marginalized sites within the neoliberal urban landscape. Through ethnographic fieldwork, oral histories, and archival research, the study theorizes the concept of 'cinemallisation', the displacement of traditional theatres by mall-based multiplexes, as a manifestation of spatial dispossession. Drawing on frameworks of spatial justice (Soja), cultural memory (Assmann), and neoliberal urbanism (Harvey), the analysis reveals that the decline of single-screen cinemas constitutes more than infrastructural obsolescence; it represents the systematic erasure of affordable, collective cultural infrastructures. This research positions *Cinema Para* as a contested site where memory, class, and cultural citizenship intersect, and argues that the loss of these theatres signals a broader erosion of democratic urban life and of subaltern access to public space.

Keywords: Cinema Para; cultural memory; Kolkata; subaltern spectatorship; single-screen theatres

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Introduction

Kolkata, the capital city of India's West Bengal state, was also the former capital of British India from 1772 to 1911 (Rajadhyaksha, 1997; Athique, 2011). Due to its history as a city being at the heart of the 19th and 20th century Bengal Renaissance, producing figures like Rabindranath Tagore, it came to be known by the moniker 'the Cultural Capital of India,' increasingly used by historians, travelers and residents for a city that became renowned for its literature, cinema, music, theatre (Gooptu, 2011), political activism and a space where deep-rooted traditions and *avant garde* ideas existed and survived and even flourished, side by side (Sarkar, 1981; Dasgupta, 2006). Although Kolkata is not formally divided into official 'divisions,' the city is commonly understood in both geographical and administrative terms as comprising its North, Central, South, and East sections (Roy, 2003). One such municipal locality in North Kolkata is Hatibagan, popularly known as *Cinema Para* among locals. The Hatibagan locality once had 12 single-screen cinema theatres in a 1-km stretch. From the 1970s till the late 1990s, particularly on weekends, the place wore a festive look, with cinegoers

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milling around the cinema theatres to catch the latest releases. Over time, such recurring cultural practices and dense congregations gave Hatibagan a distinct cultural identity, and the place became popular as *Cinema Para*.

According to film archivist Hemant Chaturvedi, who is spearheading the Single-Screen Cinemas Project, there were over 25,000 single-screen cinemas in India in 1990. That number dwindled to just about 6,000 by 2022, a sharp drop of 76 percent. Therefore, the 1990s, marked by India's economic liberalization, saw the gradual disappearance of single-screen cinema theatres.

During the 1990s, West Bengal had between 800 and 900 single-screen cinema halls operating in its 23 districts (Abbasuddin, 2025). However, in 2010, the number of active single-screen theatres in the state shrank to 330 (Film Federation of India report). Field investigation by the researchers across all 23 districts of West Bengal has revealed that, from 2010 to 2025, the number further dwindled to 171 active single-screen cinema theatres and 79 multiplexes in 2025. Records retrieved from the West Bengal Department of Information and Cultural Affairs show that, as of 2022, there were only 131 active single-screen cinema theatres and 33 multiplexes in the state. The Bengal Film Archive (BFA), a bilingual digital archive of Bengali cinema history, states on its website that there are 117 single-screen theatres in Kolkata, either

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operating or closed. A thorough investigation by the researchers adds 6 more single-screen theatres to the BFA figure, bringing the final tally to 123. Over the years, Kolkata has witnessed the closure, demolition, redevelopment, or lockdown of over 97 single-screen cinema theatres. Today, Kolkata, with an estimated population of 14 million in the broader metropolitan area, has only 26 active single-screen cinema theatres and 24 multiplexes.

Four of Kolkata's historic single-screen cinemas have been converted into multiplexes: *Metro Cinema (now Inox Metro), Ajanta Cinema (now SSR Ajanta), Globe Cinema (now SSR Globe), and Nandan*. Two prominent theatres, *Nandan* and *Radha Studio*, are administered directly by the West Bengal government's Department of Information and Cultural Affairs. Another single-screen theatre, *Binodini,* although restored in 2004 by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), has been leased out to a private company, and is known as *Star Cinema*. In 2022, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) accorded heritage status to 8 of Kolkata's single-screen theatres, 3 of which were located at *Cinema Para* (kmcgov.in, 2022). These three theatres were *Binodini, Rupabani,* and *Uttara*.

The obliteration of single-screen cinema theatres to make way for mall infrastructure is a global phenomenon of restructuring. In the United States, too, the popular 1950s movie palace theatres witnessed widespread closure as suburban multiplexes embedded in shopping malls

became the dominant exhibition form (Gomery, 1992). Similar patterns emerged across Europe in the 1990s, where small, independent theatres, particularly in eastern Europe, were shuttered or repurposed, while new mall-based multiplexes proliferated (Dumbrava, 2025). Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico in Latin America also saw an analogous transformation, as malls integrated multiplexes to attract middle-class consumers, displacing traditional downtown cinemas (Falicov, 2010). Across Africa, South Africa provides a striking case: iconic single-screens like Johannesburg's Colosseum were demolished and converted, and mall-based chains such as Ster-Kinekor became dominant (Tomaselli, 2006). In the Southeast Asian context, countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines demonstrate the collapse of independent cinema houses in favor of mall cinema complexes (Khoo, 2009). Australia too has witnessed the disappearance of suburban picture houses, supplanted by megaplexes operated by Hoyts and Event Cinemas within retail complexes (Aveyard, 2009). The global restructuring of cinema exhibition infrastructure reflects broader shifts in urban leisure economies, a phenomenon gaining currency as '*Cinemallisation*,' a term coined by the researchers to describe a characteristic of late capitalism, manifested through neoliberal urban planning. However, this 'global restructuring' is not a finished story but an ongoing process, one in which the spatial organization of cinema continues to shape and be shaped by deeper transformations in economics, technology, and social life.

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Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, multi-method research design, combining ethnographic fieldwork, oral history, and archival research. The purpose of this approach was to examine the cultural geography of Kolkata's *Cinema Para* neighborhood. By integrating oral narratives, participant observation, and historical documents, the multi-method methodology sought to capture both the spatial transformation and the affective dimensions of these disappearing institutions.

Between July 2024 and April 2025, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse set of participants, including residents of the Hatibagan neighborhood, ticket clerks, theatre employees, food vendors, local shopkeepers, cinephiles, and film historians. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit respondents across different age groups, genders, occupations, and social locations, and in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit their responses regarding their relationship to this place, *Cinema Para*.

Fieldwork was carried out in both functioning and defunct theatres, such as *Mitra, Minar, Rupabani, Binodini, Uttara,* and others. Participant observation involved repeated visits to these places, attending screenings, observing audiences, and documenting everyday practices. Oral histories were collected through semi-structured interviews in Bengali. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The researchers

translated the transcripts from Bengali into English to maintain fidelity to the original expressions and cultural nuances. Translation choices were cross-checked with field notes to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Archival research complemented the fieldwork by consulting records from the Bengal Film Archive, annual reports of the Film Federation of India, Kolkata Municipal Corporation heritage listings, and local newspapers of the time. These archival materials provided contextual depth, particularly in understanding policy changes, urban restructuring, and the historical decline of single-screen cinema theatres. Archival sources were triangulated with oral testimonies and observations to strengthen validity.

All qualitative data collected through long-form interviews were subjected to thematic coding. The transcripts and field notes were coded inductively to identify recurring themes such as nostalgia, displacement, cultural intimacy, and subaltern agency. Archival sources were consulted to historically situate these themes, while cross-comparison of interviews, observations, and documents ensured triangulation. This analytical process helped reveal the interplay between memory, space, and cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1996) with respect to *Cinema Para*.

While Kolkata's *Cinema Para* constitutes the primary empirical case, the study also

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situates its findings within a global comparative framework. A comparison between the major cities of South Asia would have lent value to this study. However, the lack of literature in the South Asian context has prevented researchers from doing so. Secondary scholarly sources, archival reports, and trade publications were consulted to trace similar patterns of decline and transformation of single-screen theatres in the United States, England, Australia, and the Philippines. These comparative cases were not part of the primary ethnographic fieldwork. However, they were incorporated analytically to contextualize the concept of *Cinemallisation,* the absorption of theatres into mall infrastructure as a transnational phenomenon. This allowed the research to embed Kolkata's local histories within wider circuits of neoliberal urban restructuring, highlighting both convergences and divergences across Global South and Global North contexts.

Historical Emergence of *Cinema Para*

Historically, Kolkata's *Cinema Para* emerged as a distinctive cultural hub housing 12 prominent single-screen cinema theatres: *Binodini, Khanna*, *Uttara, Sree, Mitra, Talkie Show House, Rupabani, Minar, Darpana, Radha, Bidhushree,* and *Purnashree.*

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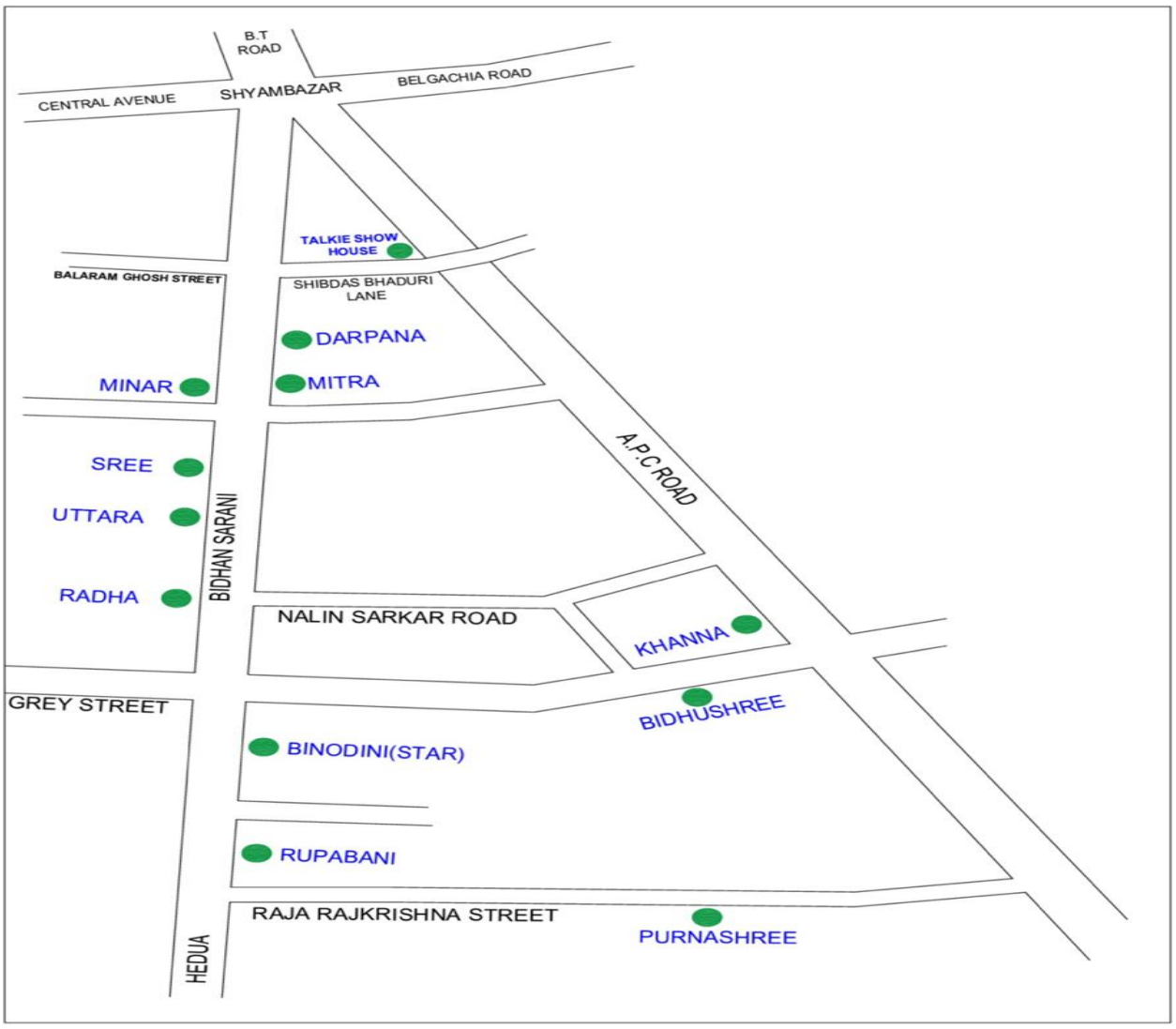

Figure 1: Cinema Para, Hatibagan, Kolkata.

The emergence of urban leisure spaces in postcolonial India often followed patterns of contested modernity, in which colonial infrastructures were adapted to new civic imaginaries (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001; Chatterjee, 2004; Liang, 2005). *Cinema Para,* in the Bidhan Sarani area in North Kolkata, is an example of that argument. Bidhan Sarani, formerly Cornwallis

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Street, was a key north-south arterial road connecting the intellectual elites of the famous College Street with the working-class populace of Shyambazar and Bagbazar in North Kolkata. By the 1950s and 1960s, the area had already become synonymous with cinema (Mukherjee, 2017).

A senior academic who now teaches at a central university in Assam was born in Hatibagan and grew up there. In an interaction with her, the professor of education recalls the carnivalesque atmosphere of Hatibagan during her school days in the 1970s. Crowds would swell particularly on Thursday evenings, as well as on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and evenings, when most screenings used to take place, she recalls. When a film premiered on a Friday, long queues for advance tickets would form as early as Wednesday. The anticipation was especially intense whenever films featuring Uttam Kumar with Suchitra Sen or Supriya Devi were released, she recalls. The fervor of watching a freshly-released film 'first-day-first-show' often escalated to such an extent that police intervention became necessary to control the crowds. During the 1960s and 1970s, front-row tickets, priced as low as 65 or 75 paise (a unit of currency in India), frequently provoked frenzied scrambles among young cinegoers. Women of the household, particularly wives and daughters-in-law, often sent younger male relatives to purchase tickets in advance. Srinivas (2000) notes that cinema halls in India were not only

spaces of cultural consumption but also of social ordering, where class, caste, and gender norms played out in tangible ways, from seat segregation to public behavior.

At the same time, theatres frequently came under the control of local strongmen. Once the 'House-Full' sign was displayed, ticket scalpers, popularly known as *blackers,* emerged as the last resort for eager audiences. The carefully demarcated seating hierarchy, front rows, middle rows, rear stalls, dress circle, balcony, and private boxes, now survives only as a vestige of historical memory. Today, large crowds still assemble in the same neighborhoods, though not for films but for shopping in the malls that have supplanted the cinema halls, a senior citizen from the Hatibagan area told the researchers.

The Film Theatres of *Cinema Para*: The Past and the Present

Binodini Theatre, originally known as *Star*, was founded in 1883. Funded by theatre artist Binodini Dasi, it started as a theatre venue and later became a cinema exhibition center on Bidhan Sarani. The hall is one of the few operational film exhibition venues from the colonial era in Kolkata (Mukherjee, 2009). Since its inception, the theatre has functioned as a crucial node in the Bengali renaissance, serving as a hybrid cultural institution where theatre and cinema intersect (Mukherjee, 2009; Majumdar, 2009). Archival records indicate that bioscope screenings were organized as early as 1898, situating the theatre at the forefront of cinema projection experiments (Bengal Film Archive, 2020).

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The cinema theatre's institutional identity is inseparable from the life and legacy of Binodini Dasi, one of 19th-century Bengal's pioneering theatre artistes. Despite her central role in popularising modern Bengali theatre, she became a victim of patriarchal erasure. Historical accounts reveal that she rejected a remarkable offer of ₹50,000 from merchant Gurmukh Roy, an extraordinary amount at the time, choosing instead to invest in the creation of a new theatre. Her expressed wish was for the venue to be named 'Binodini Theatre' (Dasgupta, 2024). However, due to the influence of her mentor, Girish Chandra Ghosh and other associates, the theatre was ultimately christened 'Star Theatre.' Feeling betrayed, Binodini permanently retired from the stage by 1886 at the age of only 22–23. In her autobiography, Binodini Dasi articulates the anguish of her wishes not being honored by the hall owners in naming the hall after her, revealing the gendered exclusions that characterized cultural spaces in colonial Bengal (Dasi, 1998).

The theatre was destroyed in a fire in the 1990s. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation restored it in the early 2000s, and the theatre regained its place in the city's cultural landscape. The renovated structure retains its colonial exterior while accommodating modern facilities. In December 2024, after 141 years, West Bengal's Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee (Bhaumik, 2024), finally renamed the theatre *Binodini,* as if to make amends for the historical exclusion caused by naming the hall *Star.* This renaming constitutes both symbolic restitution and the

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institutional acknowledgment of women's contribution to Bengal's cultural ecosystem.

During field visits, a younger respondent said that young people call the theatre *Binodini,* while his grandfather and others from the older generation refer to the same hall as *Star.* (Fieldnote + interview, 2024). Today, *Binodini* Theatre remains a vital heritage site for film screenings and a venue for the occasional hosting of important public events. As a 'remediated space' (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), *Binodini* stands as a structure of resilience and adaptive reuse, reflecting how cultural memory (Assmann, 1992; Assmann, 1999; Marschall, 2012) persists through reinvention.

Talkie Show House, founded in 1930, was one of the first cinema theatres to open in Hatibagan. The theatre was known for screening only Hollywood and European films. It therefore became North Kolkata's equivalent of Central Kolkata's Metro Cinema (Ghosh, 1982), which had earned a reputation for screening only Hollywood blockbusters of the time. *T*he Art Deco style of the Metro Cinema theatre at Esplanade in Central Kolkata also inspired Talkie Show House. Old respondents from the Hatibagan area remember watching iconic films like *Ben-Hur*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *Ivan the Terrible* on Friday nights at the packed *Talkie Showhouse*. "It was our English university," said a 78-year-old respondent. However, the theatre's elitist aura faded in the 1990s, giving way to occasional screenings of Hindi films as

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well. The *Talkie Show House* was closed down in 2020, with the front portion repurposed as a jewelry showroom and a few apparel stores, while the interior space became a kite-making unit.

In 1930, another cinema theatre, *Chitra,* opened in Hatibagan*,* built by B. N. Sircar, one of the pioneers of the Indian film industry. He built the theatre to screen the films made under his banner, 'New Theatres Venture.' The theatre was inaugurated on 20 December 1930 by freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose asked the proprietors of New Theatres to privilege Bengali-language films over American and English-language films. Heeding his appeal, *Chitra* began printing its tickets in Bengali from the outset. The inaugural screening was *Srikanta*, a ten-reel film produced by Radha Films and based on the celebrated novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (Ghosh, 2021).

Chitra had earned a distinct reputation for catering to the cinematic tastes of the Bengali *bhadralok*. The term *bhadralok* refers to a socio-economic middle class, a historically produced cultural formation marked by upper-caste respectability, education, and normative ideals of civility (Basu, 2010). The *bhadralok* imaginary has long functioned as a regime of taste and moral authority through which legitimate public conduct, gendered propriety, and 'refined' cultural participation are defined (Mukherjee & Bhaumik, 2025). Victorian morality was central to the making of the bhadralok culture in Bengal, shaping notions of discipline, domestic virtue,

and respectable leisure, thereby influencing how cinema halls and their audiences were socially evaluated (Basu, 2010).

Therefore, *Chitra* was the favorite destination for cinephiles interested in Bengali art cinema. Films by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak were frequently screened at *Chitra,* and the audience profile remained largely educated, intellectual, and middle-class. However, a legal battle for ownership of the theatre led to its renaming in 1963. It was rechristened, *Mitra*. With the renaming, the film portfolio and cultural orientation of the hall shifted to accommodate broader working-class audiences, embracing popular Hindi cinema and even English action films like *The Mummy* and *Titanic* in its later years (Majumder, 2021). A retired schoolteacher recalls that *Mitra's* transformation became visible not only through the films but also through altered hall behavior.

Dwipen Mitra, who took charge of the theatre in 1976, was instrumental in refurbishing it with emerging screening technologies such as Dolby sound and digital projection, yet kept ticket prices affordable and the ambiance familiar, resisting the '*multiplexification'* of the experience (Bhattacharya, 2019).

Rupabani, inaugurated in December 1932, by noted Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who had described the theatre as the 'crown jewel' of *Cinema Para.* It was Tagore who had

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named the theatre *Rupabani* (Ghosh, 1982). Founded by the Naan Brothers, the theatre had its interior decorated by students from Visva-Bharati, Shantiniketan, and was equipped with the latest projection technology of the time (Mukhopadhyay, 1963). With contributions from British-trained engineers, Indian specialists, artists, and local artisans, *Rupabani* emerged as a venue admired for both its architectural sophistication and its technological innovations (Ghosh, 2021). Its grand gateway and courtyard were reminiscent of the *thakur dalan (temple hall)* of elite Bengali households, projecting both familiarity and grandeur. The auditorium's ergonomics, with separate entry and exit points, facilitated efficient patron movement and vehicular access. Female audience members were accorded special privileges through a dedicated staircase and rest chamber, a rare instance of gender-sensitive design in cinema theatres of the period.

The expansive stage, intended for both cinematic screenings and live performances, reinforced *Rupabani's* dual function as a hybrid cultural space. Aesthetic refinements included murals by Ardhendu Prasad Bandyopadhyay, an early student of Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts) at Visva-Bharati University, Shantiniketan, founded by Tagore in 1920, while D. D. Robinson oversaw the chromatic schemes. Distinctive palm-tree-shaped stage lights enhanced the visual experience until their removal in later renovations (Chattopadhyay, 2023).

Technologically, *Rupabani* was a pioneer. It was among the first cinemas in Kolkata to introduce a gradual light-dimming system, enhancing the transition from social illumination to cinematic immersion. Its advanced ventilation mechanism, capable of circulating fresh outdoor air every few minutes, preceded the air-conditioned theatres that later defined urban cinema houses (Ghosh, 1982).

The premiere of Tagore's *Natir Puja* positioned *Rupabani* within a literary-aesthetic genealogy closely associated with Bengali modernity, where cinema, theatre, and elite cultural performances could intersect in publicly legible ways. Contemporary periodicals and entertainment magazines, including *Varieties Weekly*, further amplified this status by framing *Rupabani's* visual design and ambiance as markers of refinement, discipline, and modern urban leisure. In this sense, 'respectability' was not an inherent quality of the theatre but a socially produced label, sustained through media discourse, behavioral expectations, and the hall's alignment with elite cultural taste. However, *Rupabani's* subsequent trajectory mirrored Hatibagan's socio-urban shifts, revealing how quickly such cultural legitimacy could become unstable as exhibition genres and audience composition changed. According to residents and eyewitnesses, *Rupabani* fell into hard times by the turn of the century. While dubbed thrillers and erotic films drew a large number of working-class audiences into the theatre, this survival

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strategy by the hall owners also reconfigured *Rupabani's* symbolic identity within Kolkata's cultural hierarchy in an emerging era of a free-market economy. The gradual withdrawal of the *bhadralok* audiences exposed how respectability itself operates as a spatial and classed boundary.

Rupabani's fall from grace complicates any uncontested claims that single-screen cinemas functioned uniformly as 'socially inclusive' spaces. The very moment that facilitated access to subaltern and precariat publics also became the moment when elite audiences began to mark the theatre as culturally 'diminished,' thereby transforming inclusion into a stigma-driven narrative of decline. *Rupabani* reveals a paradox of urban cinema culture. The theatre could be materially open to multiple publics while remaining socially policed through reputational codes, moral anxieties, and classed judgments about legitimate leisure.

This transformation resonates with the concept of the 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994), where demographic inclusivity does not always generate harmony but instead produces contested meanings and uneven power dynamics. *Rupabani's* decline and eventual conversion into an eye clinic predict the inevitability of technological obsolescence. However, it also reinforces something more disquieting: the unalterable loss of a cultural geography in which modernity, class distinction, and popular desire continuously negotiated with one another in the darkness

of the theatre. Its history, celebratory and tragic, demonstrates that cinema halls in Bengal were not neutral public institutions. They were fragile cultural experiments, always vulnerable to shifts in urban demography, moral regulations, technological innovation, and the politics of respectability through which some audiences were made visible as legitimate. In contrast, others were dismissed and invisibilized as morally deviant and socially disruptive.

Khanna Cinema Hall, established in 1917 by the proprietor of Khanna Motors, operated for several decades as a prominent venue for urban cultural entertainment in Kolkata (Ray, 2025). Although currently abandoned and structurally dilapidated, it retains symbolic significance within the city's cultural geography, as evidenced by the continued use of "Khanna" as a neighborhood bus stop. This spatial naming demonstrates how defunct cinema infrastructures remain embedded within the collective urban memory. Similarly, *Sree* Theatre, founded in 1921 as Cornwallis Theatre and renamed in 1936, reflects the broader historical transition from theatrical performance to cinematic exhibition in early twentieth-century India (Chatterjee, 2011). Its programming of early Bengali films and continued association with the term "Natya Mandir" illustrate layered cultural identities shaped by shifting entertainment practices. The eventual conversion of *Sree* into multinational fast-food outlets symbolizes the neoliberal reconfiguration of shared cultural spaces into sites of commodified consumption.

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Uttara Theatre, inaugurated in 1936 by the Madan Company, occupied a distinctive position within the *Uttara–Purabi–Ujjala* exhibition network, catering primarily to Bengali-speaking lower-middle-class audiences through melodramatic and folklore-based narratives (Ghosh, 2021). Oral histories suggest that, beyond film exhibition, the architectural spaces of single-screen cinemas served as informal civic arenas for neighborhood gatherings, political mobilization, and festive events, highlighting the socio-spatial multifunctionality of these cinemas. Following its demolition in the mid-2000s, it was replaced by commercial infrastructure, which signals a broader pattern of urban restructuring. *Minar,* founded in 1942 by Haripriya Paul, is still in operation, although with declining footfalls. *Minar* eventually became part of a famous single-screen cinema chain, *Minar-Bijoli-Chhabighar,* which pioneered synchronized screenings across venues, long before digital multiplexes adopted this business strategy.

Renowned for Bengali romantic melodramas and mythological cinema, the theatre became emblematic of the Uttam Kumar–Suchitra Sen era, hosting successful runs of films such as *Harano Sur* and *Sagarika*. Beyond exhibition, *Minar* also functioned as a socio-cultural and nationalist memory site, with commemorative screenings linked to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Ethnographic accounts suggest it continues to provide affective escape and participatory spectatorship for precariat audiences. *Purnashree* (1948), *Darpana* (1954), *Radha* (1954), and

Bidhushree collectively represent diverse trajectories of exhibition culture, audience segmentation, and decline. *Darpana*'s gendered seating arrangements and matinee culture attracted middle-class women, while *Bidhushree* catered to working-class audiences with low-budget, dubbed films that challenged elite taste hierarchies. Over time, economic liberalization, technological shifts, and changing consumption patterns led to the closure, abandonment, or redevelopment of these single-screen halls into malls and residential complexes. Together, these sites demonstrate how the erosion and erasure of single-screen theatres reflect processes of spatial transformation, cultural displacement, and the restructuring of urban leisure practices in contemporary Kolkata.

Cinemallisation: *Cinema Para*'s Descent from a Cinephile Collective to a Commercial Center

Kolkata's *Cinema Para* has today transformed into a busy commercial area replete with rows of retail stores and street vendors jostling for space in the crowded streets and bylanes of this neighborhood. The cinema-loving crowd is gone. The old-world charm of the landscape has changed, for good. It has been replaced by a *"mall-cum-cinema"* geography. Theatres like *Mitra, Uttara, Bidhusree,* and *Radha* have all been redeveloped into multi-brand retail malls such as *Bazaar Kolkata*, *Citi Mart, Pantaloons,* and *Bazaar Kolkata,* catering to the middle-class population. Young residents of *Cinema Para* are oblivious to the place's rich heritage and cinematic legacy. Young college students visiting the area, admitted to the researchers, were

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unaware that prominent figures like Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, and J. F. Madan were associated with cinema theatres of *Cinema Para*. A senior resident described the shift in the demography of visitors to the area as "from a cinephile collective to a consumerist crowd," and added, "People still crowd the same crossing, but their direction has changed." He stated that earlier people often stared at cinema posters, whereas now they stare only at store windows and discount sale boards.

Cinemallisation is a term coined by researchers to describe the global urban-cultural process in which traditional single-screen theatres are displaced, demolished, or reconfigured within shopping-mall infrastructure, such as multiplexes. The process is particularly evident in Kolkata, where historic film theatres such as Metro and Globe have been absorbed into mall complexes like *Inox Metro* and *SSR Globe*. The conversion of theatres into malls embodies an urban process whereby spaces once accessible to the working classes are appropriated into the circuits of globalized retail capital (Harvey, 2008). More than an architectural transition, this process signifies the relocation of cinema into retail-centric environments, transforming spectatorship into a commodified and consumerist practice (Arcland, 2003).

Cinemallisation is neoliberal urban restructuring in which cultural infrastructures are reconfigured to intensify capital accumulation through retail-driven spatial logics. However,

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what is being displaced is an uneven and contested sphere of affordable public leisure, one historically shaped by hierarchies of class, gender, and morality. *Cinemallisation*, therefore, not only modernizes film exhibition; it reorganizes the very terms of access and legitimacy, producing cinematic consumption through pricing, surveillance, and aspirational norms that systematically marginalize working-class and lower-middle-class publics from collective cultural participation.

Read in this light, the scaling-up of single-screen theatres into multiplexes in malls marks a transition from inclusion to exclusion, as it signals a reconfiguration of urban leisure, from an imperfect and contested public sphere to a consumerist spatial regime that secures order through pricing, surveillance, and class-coded access, often displacing working-class and lower-middle-class audiences from collective cultural participation.

Social and Cultural Dimensions: Gender, Class, Affect, and Memory

The cultural geography of *Cinema Para*, anchored in a culture of film entertainment, is gradually being erased. What was once a space of cultural participation and community interaction has now been subsumed by a homogenized consumerist order that privileges the logic of capital accumulation over the sustenance of shared cultural memory. *Cinema Para* was once a popular site for passionate cinegoers that led to a shared sociality and intermingling among them, engaging in ritualistic practices of *adda*, an informal and casual conversation

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among friends or even strangers, before queueing up to enter the dim-lit theatre, ushered in by a torch-wielding hall employee.

Such congregations and intermingling exceeded the boundaries of mere entertainment, functioning as provisional social assemblies in which heterogeneous urban identities of gender, caste, occupation, and mobility status entered a shared affective and sensory field. However, the "intermingling" produced in single-screen theatres cannot be read as an unqualified equality among cinematic publics. The theatre's apparent openness was continually mediated by elite cultural authority and regimes of respectability that governed who entered the cinema theatre, and how certain bodies, pleasures, and modes of spectatorship were rendered legitimate or suspect. Manishita Dass (2016) extends this argument by reframing cinema's public sphere as unevenly constituted through urban hierarchies of literacy, morality, and civility. Consequently, the cinema theatre emerges as a field of struggle over who can legitimately occupy public space (Dass, 2016).

The entry of women into the cinematic public sphere was never simply a matter of access; it depended on the production of the "cultured" female spectator as a sign of refinement and moral respectability (Majumdar, 2009). The cinema hall's inclusivity often operated through conditional permission. Women's presence was encouraged when it could stabilize cinema's

reputation, while other forms of female visibility and desire were treated as socially risky or improper. Such logic also shaped exhibition cultures through timing, spatial organization, and theatre reputations, in which the "family hall," the balcony, or the matinee show could serve as informal mechanisms of gendered discipline (Majumdar, 2009). Archival discussions in Bengali-language film and cultural journals such as *Rup-O-Kotha* indicate that cinema halls were also sites of gendered vulnerability, where women frequently encountered harassment and where anxieties about crowd behavior and moral regulation shaped the terms of respectable spectatorship.

Theatres such as the now-closed down *Darpana, Rupabani,* and *Radha* at *Cinema Para* had separate designated seating arrangements for women audiences. As one middle-aged lady recalled, "Afternoon shows felt safer; there were always families and other women. We could watch a film without feeling stared at." These institutional mechanisms to promote women's entry into the halls enabled female spectators to inhabit urban leisure spaces otherwise constrained by patriarchal norms. Within a city where women's public participation was often circumscribed by social regulation, the cinema hall emerged as a rare urban enclave of relative safety and affective belonging. Matinee screenings and women-oriented arrangements foreground the gendered politics of safety and respectability. Affluent women from *bhadralok*

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*f*amilies frequently attended screenings with their families, particularly during festive seasons or premiere weeks. Stay-at-home homemakers often frequented afternoon matinee shows as a reprieve from domestic routines. For these women, the 'matinee show' was a 'rare space' that facilitated collective female spectatorship within the anonymity of the urban crowd, thereby enabling the articulation of shared cultural identities (Ghosh, 2010; Mazumdar, 2007).

Subhajit Chatterjee (2019) illuminates the symbolic power through which elite cine-culture policed boundaries of value by showing how non-elite film cultures were frequently marked as illegitimate. By the late nineties and the early 2000s, cinema theatres like *Rupabani, Uttara, Radha,* and *Bidushree* at *Cinema Para* had started screening crass commercial B-grade films for their survival, desperate to regain the footfalls in the theatres, fighting a losing battle with new home entertainment technology like the VCR and the early onset of VCDs. The middle-class Bengali *Bhadralok* and *Bhadramahila* members of the audience renounced these cinema theatres and moved on to more respectable sites of exhibition. *Cinema Para* was going through a period of transition, torn, as it were, between two worlds, one dead, and the other powerless to be born. Together, these perspectives suggest that the cinema hall's congregation was real yet fragile, and reveal how popular genres were culturally marginalized through moral panic, taste hierarchies, genre stigma, and reputational coding (Chatterjee, 2019).

Cinema Para as a Site of Cultural Memory

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For many, *Cinema Para* is today a nostalgic remnant of the past. It represents a site of cultural memory of a particular era in India's movie-going history. Following Jan Assmann's conceptualization, cultural memory is not confined to individual recollection; rather, it is sustained through repeated social practices, symbolic forms, and spatial anchors that enable remembering across generations (Assmann, 1995, 2008). In the ethnographic accounts collected during this study, respondents repeatedly described *Cinema Para* as a leisure and recreational destination and as a familiar, socially textured environment, one where routine itself became a mode of remembering. As one older spectator recalled, *"I don't even need to look at the signboards, my feet knew the lane. Every Sunday, it felt like the same journey again."* Another respondent stated how the theatre experience was inseparable from the neighborhood's sensory and social rhythms. *"The queue, the shouting, the tea at the corner, these were all part of the whole film experience. Without them, the cinema felt incomplete"*, the middle-aged respondent added.

Nevertheless, the memories and historical meanings associated with these neighborhood theatres remain invaluable, sustained through lived recollections, oral narratives, and spatial traces embedded in the everyday life of the city. In this context, Marschall's emphasis on memory as embodied, affective, and materially mediated is particularly relevant, since

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remembering persists through everyday attachments even when monumental or officially preserved sites disappear (Marschall, 2012). This persistence was evident in respondents' reflections on closure and displacement: one frequent viewer lamented, *"Now the hall is gone, but when I cross that road, I still feel the interval bell in my body."* Another described the mall space as emotionally alienating despite technological comfort: *"In the multiplex, everything is clean, but nobody speaks to anyone. In the old hall, even strangers felt known."*

Cinema Para: Spatial Mapping, Spatial Justice and the Question of Urban Dispossession

The mapping of single-screen theatre sites alongside patterns of urban redevelopment reveals a systematic displacement of cinema halls by malls, diagnostic centers, and hypermarkets, clear markers of intensified gentrification. These transformations signify the restructuring of cultural space, in which working-class neighborhoods that once enjoyed affordable access to cinema are increasingly overwritten by commercial infrastructure. The disappearance or repurposing of such theatres amounts to a form of cultural eviction, displacing communities from arenas that historically operated as democratic and socially inclusive, in contrast to multiplexes, concentrated in affluent districts and often priced beyond the reach of lower-income groups. Single-screen halls embodied accessibility, collective memory, and community participation. Their closure, therefore, represents far more than the loss of entertainment venues; it entails the erasure of decades of social interaction, emotional

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investment, and cultural heritage. Employing Soja's (2010) *Theory of Spatial Justice*, this study reframes single-screen theatres as socio-spatial rights rather than only entertainment venues. These halls, historically embedded in working-class neighborhoods, offered affordable access and a vital sense of place for underserved communities. From this perspective, the vanishing single-screen theatres across wide swathes of India exemplify a deeper exclusion from cultural citizenship. The rapid expansion of dominant digital platforms has further displaced public cinematic spaces, eroding the collective rituals and shared experiences that once defined traditional cine-going practices.

What emerges, therefore, is a new regime of privatized spectatorship with the advent of streaming platforms like Netflix and Prime, in which cinema gradually shifts from a collective neighborhood practice to an individualized, domesticated, and platform-mediated mode of viewing. In this reconfigured landscape, the shared rituals of cine-going, queueing at the box-office counter, familiar social encounters, and intergenerational companionship are increasingly displaced by personalized screens and segmented viewing habits. Cultural memory, once produced through repeated visits to familiar neighborhood cinema halls and the affective continuity of shared spaces, becomes reorganized through private consumption, algorithmic curation, and subscription-based access. This transformation restructures the sociality of cinema

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by weakening the forms of community presence and public belonging sustained by these neighborhood theatres. Consequently, cultural participation becomes more tightly tethered to purchasing capacity, digital connectivity, and individualized consumption rather than to affordability, proximity, and collective habit.

Cinema Para's four major cinema halls, *Sree, Uttara, Radha*, and *Talkie Showhouse,* have been demolished and converted into shopping complexes, retail showrooms, or residential towers. These transformations represent the "spatial fix," the capitalist tendency to reorganize urban geography for financial gain, often at the cost of the social commons. This process results in the conversion of use-value into exchange-value (Harvey, 2008); cinema theatres, once valued as social and cultural gathering places, are redefined as real estate. For the working class, the gradual obliteration of once-affordable single-screen cinema theatres also represents the erasure of lived spatial memory, a disruption of the material and emotional architecture of everyday life. Extending Soja's (2010) notion of spatial justice to this context, this study frames the decline of single-screen theatres as a crisis of cultural dispossession, the loss of heritage, and the systematic exclusion of subaltern publics from affordable cultural infrastructures and rights of cultural citizenship.

With the closure of a majority of single-screen cinemas at *Cinema Para*, a form of loss

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emerges within the local community, and Brian Massumi (2002) explains that emotional attachment to places forms a vital part of identity. Single-screen cinemas have long served as affective social spaces, sites of emotional intensity, intergenerational continuity, and communal storytelling. These spaces created what Lefebvre (1991) calls "lived spaces," a realm where personal and collective memories intersect. The closure or conversion of these theatres breaks this cycle of emotional familiarity. Spaces that once anchored residents' identities now vanish or morph into anonymous consumption zones. This loss is especially acute for elderly residents who return to find not the hall where they saw *Saptapadi (1961)* with their spouse, but a mobile retail outlet or a deserted parking lot. The absence of place becomes the absence of memory, and thus the disappearance of cultural citizenship. Film historian Soumik Kanti Ghosh (2025), in an interaction with the researchers, states, "When a hall shuts down, it is not just a building gone. It is our memories, our space, our right to culture that disappears."

Conclusion

Kolkata's *Cinema Para* today transcends its identity as a residual cluster of single-screen theatres, emerging as a cultural formation deeply embedded in the city's affective, spatial, and social histories. Its decline, therefore, cannot be solely attributed to technological change or industrial restructuring; rather, it reflects broader processes of neoliberal urbanism,

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gentrification, and spatial exclusion that have systematically displaced subaltern publics from accessible cultural infrastructures.

This study contributes to ongoing debates in cinema studies, urban cultural geography, and subaltern theory, particularly those advanced within New Cinema History (Biltereyst, Maltby, & Meers, 2019), and the HoMER (History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception) network, which foregrounds cinema as a lived social practice shaped by local exhibition cultures, audience memories, and everyday spatial experience. The disappearance of single-screen theatres reflects the dismantling of participatory infrastructures through which neighborhood publics historically assembled, negotiated belonging, and accessed affordable collective leisure, signaling an erosion of democratic urban life itself. Future scholarship must therefore approach single-screen cinemas not as obsolete relics, but as sites of contested modernity, where questions of memory, cultural citizenship, and spatial justice remain urgently at stake.

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