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*Nobility or Utility? Zamindars,
businessmen, and bhadralok as curators of
the Indian nation in Satyajit Ray's
Jalsaghar
(The Music Room)**

GAUTAM GHOSH

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, China

Email: gghosh2@gmail.com; ghoshgautam@cuhk.edu.cn

Abstract

The Bengali *bhadralok* have had an important impact on Indian nationalism in Bengal and in India more broadly. Their commitment to narratives of national progress has been noted. However, little attention has been given to how ‘earthly paradise’, ‘garden of delights’, and related ideas of refinement and nobility also informed their nationalism. This article excavates the idea of earthly paradise as it is portrayed in Satyajit Ray’s 1958 Bengali film *Jalsaghar*, usually translated as *The Music Room*. *Jalsaghar* is typically taken to depict, broadly, the decadence and decline of aristocratic ‘feudal’ landowners (*zamindars*) who were granted their holdings and, often, noble rank, such as ‘Lord’ or ‘Raja’, during Mughal or British times, representing the languid past of the nobility, and the ascendance of a

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restless business-oriented class that represents an emerging present and possible future. The *zamindars* are shown as pursuing aesthetic and spiritual delight, ecstasy, and edification through soirées. These soirées are produced for those among the nobility who are sufficiently cultivated and cosmopolitan to appreciate the finer things in life, such as the classical music and dance showcased in this film. The businessmen, too, aspire to host such exceptional events, but are too crass to do so properly and, moreover, they are motivated by a desire to accrue prestige, thus using soirées as a means to an end, rather than to experience aesthetic and spiritual elevation as an end in itself. I argue that the film calls on the *bhadralok* to value aesthetic cultivation and to actively counter its evanescence. The film thus beckons and authorizes the *bhadralok* to sustain the value of the timeless past, including nobility and refinement. Yet the *bhadralok* are also expected to embody and expand a new, progressive, and utilitarian spirit that would modernize India. With the aristocrats gone, and the entrepreneurs eager to assume authority, the film charges the *bhadralok* to construct a nationalism in which the immortal, character-building values of classical art, for example, can yet be sutured to utilitarian progressivism. I argue that the film conveys this even though it does not explicitly portray or even mention the *bhadralok*, or feature uniquely Bengali music and art. Accordingly, this article does not focus on the actual aesthetic and political practices of *bhadralok* nationalism. The aim is to shed light on one genealogy through which the *bhadralok* sanctioned themselves as India's stewards along these lines.

All improvement in the political sphere must proceed from the ennobling of character. But ... how can character be ennobled? ... [We need] for this end an instrument ... [devoid] of political corruption. This instrument is the art of the beautiful; these sources are open to us in its immortal models.¹

Bad art ... is the true *radix malorum*.²

Good travels at a snail's pace. Those who want to do good ... are not in a hurry.³

Introduction

In 2015, Sagarika Ghose, a prominent journalist writing for a prominent Indian newspaper, decried the decline and death of India. Actually, it is more accurate to say she lamented the decline and death

¹ J. C. F. Schiller, *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, Letter IX*, 1794, <http://www.blackmask.com>, [accessed 10 January 2016], p. 12. The specific 'immortal model' Schiller has in mind is classical (Athenian) Greece.

² R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1938, p. 285.

³ A. J. Parel (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 47–8.

of Bengal. However, for Ghose, as with many of the Bengali *bhadralok* class of which she is a member, it is not unfair to say that as Bengal goes, so too does India. What is more, the *bhadralok* and Bengal are taken to be almost synonymous, such that the status of the *bhadralok* is an index of Bengal, and Bengal of India.⁴

In this article, I argue that Satyajit Ray's film *Jalsaghar* provides a unique perspective on an over-looked aspect of *bhadralok* culture and, in particular, what could be called *bhadra* nationalism. *Bhadra* nationalism may be translated as 'gentlemanly nationalism' or 'refined nationalism' or 'educated nationalism'.⁵ I seek to demonstrate that the film points to a mission of sorts—one animated at least in part by notions of earthly paradise, notions the *bhadralok* interpolate into their nationalism. The aim here is to describe and analyse this mission as it emerges in *Jalsaghar*, not to show how the *bhadralok* actually do, in practice, take up the challenge and weave it into their nationalism and broader self-fashioning.⁶

I begin with some background about the *bhadralok* and Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar*, respectively. This is followed by a synopsis of the film and then an analysis of it.

The *bhadralok*

In Bengali Hindu circles, *bhadra* means 'gentlemanly, refined, educated, respectable, genteel' and *lok* means 'people'.⁷ *Bhadralok* was and is the encompassing term for both men and women—in much the same way that 'Man' has been used to include both.⁸ In the context of this article, one might take *bhadralok* to be a muted form of 'noble people'.

⁴ S. Ghose, 'Decline of Bengal, death of the *Bhadralok*', *Hindustani Times*, 3 January 2015. It must be noted that her article was catalysed by a debate surrounding a sexual assault.

⁵ Some have seen the term *bhadralok* as the counterpart to the British 'gentleman', and *zamindar* as parallel to 'gentry'. Both of these translations indicate the ways in which imperialism was as much a social and cultural project as an economic or geopolitical one. See S. Akita (ed.), *Gentlemanly Capitalism, Imperialism, and Global History*, Palgrave MacMillan, United Kingdom, 2002.

⁶ Some would view the matter as less a 'mission' for the *bhadralok* than a matter of the *bhadralok* inviting themselves to raise the issue of earthly paradise and then to rise to the occasion.

⁷ There is some debate regarding whether Muslims could be characterized as *bhadralok*, but the general consensus is that *bhadralok* means Hindu. *Zamindars* could be either Hindu or Muslim, though in Bengal there were more of the former.

⁸ The term for women only was and is *bhadramahila*.

My interest in the *bhadralok* is that they are crucial for understanding the trajectory of modern nationalism in India; Partha Chatterjee calls the *bhadralok* the ‘nationalist elite’.⁹ I suggest that they saw—and in some ways still see—themselves as the flagship and what I would call the futurity of Indian nationality. In this sense, they perceived themselves as the patrons of progress who would guide India into the currents of universal history in the form of a modern and ostensibly liberal nation-state. In his important nationalist tome, *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that a dynamic, forward-looking middle class was a prerequisite for progress and, in particular, for progress in a newly independent post-colonial country such as India.¹⁰ Nehru’s hope was that such a forward-looking class would not support either exclusivist aristocracies or self-aggrandizing industrialists but, rather, would possess sufficient education and vision to lead the country to a political revolution. The revolution would be based on rational thought, including scientific and technological thought, and lead to a dynamic, progressive India which was, in his view, the ultimate (some might say utopian) aim of national self-determination. The *bhadralok* felt that they were precisely what was required.¹¹

The *bhadralok* emerged initially as middle-level landlords and professionals, a notch below the large-scale and longer-standing aristocratic landowners, the *zamindari* class, within the British colonial hierarchy.¹² They were constituted by the three upper castes of Bengali Hindu society: *Brahman*, *Kayastha*, and *Vaidya*. They established themselves in the professions such as law and education, opportunities provided by the British colonial regime (‘the Raj’), and were, accordingly, disproportionately employed in the administrative and judicial operations of the colonial state. Above all, they defined themselves as well educated and refined—refined in relation to profession, but also in terms of the arts, character, cultivation,

⁹ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, p. 36. See also his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Zed Books, London, 1986. Interestingly, when the latter was reprinted in 1993, the question mark in the title was dropped.

¹⁰ J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Meridian Books, London, 1947.

¹¹ Of the *bhadralok* it is arguably Meghnad Saha (1893–1956), physicist and political figure, who most clearly linked the putative emancipatory power of science with the advancement of the nation.

¹² For political relations between the *bhadralok* and *zamindars* in the most pivotal years of the nationalist movement in Bengal, see J. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002. In Bengali, ‘zamindar’ is usually pronounced ‘jamidar’.

language, clothing, food, profession, etc. To undertake manual labour would be to sully their *bhadrata* (*bhadra*-ness); they did not want to get their hands muddy.

The *bhadralok* expected that they would play a leading role in Bengal and Bengal would play a leading role in an independent Indian nation.¹³ One still occasionally hears members of the *bhadralok* claiming that ‘what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow’—an adage first articulated in the early twentieth century by a (non-Bengali) leader of the Indian nationalist movement. For many *bhadralok*, Indian nationalism was indistinguishable from Bengali nationalism, with the advancements of the latter paving the way for the former.

It is within this arc of aspiration, presumption, and expectation that Sagarika Ghose’s concern and criticism may be understood. She laments that we are witnessing ‘the death of the *bhadralok* in Bengal’. She describes the *bhadralok* as ‘Bengal’s greatest resource’, pointing to their connoisseurship of classical music (which will be important in the discussion below) among other traits. She names a number of exemplary and iconic members of the *bhadralok*, including Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and *Jalsaghar* director Satyajit Ray, whom she singles out as ‘possibly Bengal’s last Renaissance man’.¹⁴

¹³ Scholars have analysed the *bhadralok* as a caste (S. Sinha and R. Bhattacharyya, ‘*Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* in a rural area of West Bengal’, *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1969), in terms of Max Weber’s notion of a status group (J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968; J. H. Broomfield, ‘The forgotten majority: the Bengali Muslims and September 18’, in D. A. Low (ed.), *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1968), and as bearing a distinct psychological profile (P. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in India*, Lumiere, Calcutta, 1990). Most scholars, however, agree that the *bhadralok* can be adequately described as a class; for some, a rentier class, for others an administrative one (T. I. Hashmi, ‘The *Bhadralok* and the peasantry of Bengal’, *Dacca University Studies*, vol. XXXIV (Part A), 1981; J. McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the *Bhadralok* of Calcutta*, Australia National University Press, Canberra, 1983). I am more inclined to see the *bhadralok* as the latter (administrative), which would align more with Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ than with ‘hydraulic’ Marxist notions of class.

¹⁴ The so-called Bengal Renaissance was a set of nineteenth-century movements that advocated widespread intellectual, cultural, and social reform in Bengal and in India. Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1883) is often seen as the ‘father’, but whether it stretches to Tagore (1861–1941) is debatable. Here, Sagarika Ghose seems to be including the even later Satyajit Ray (1921–92). Among the criticisms levelled against the Renaissance is that it was as revivalist as it was reformist, and accordingly sowed the seeds of Hindu nationalism. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), for example, is associated with what some have called ‘muscular Hinduism’.

However, in Ghose's view, the *bhadralok*, including Ray, failed to raise 'the masses' to 'higher levels of education and refinement', stating that refinement in India has never been a 'mass movement ... culture is not [has not been] used to awaken the masses to a higher level of enlightenment'. She continues, 'Bengal's famous gentility and sophistication remain restricted to the thin social strata', which demonstrates that the *bhadralok* have failed to uplift and enrich 'the greater public'. Rather than leading India to honourable refinement, she suggests, Bengal, on the whole, has instead sunk to the 'anti-modern' and vulgar level of the 'Hindi-heartland', namely Hindi-speaking states: the *bhadralok* took great pride in the Bengali language—to the extent that one could describe Bengali nationalism as linguistic nationalism.

Jalsaghar and *bhadralok*

In this article, I focus on one particular ideal of nationhood suggested in Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar*. This ideal is related to but distinct from that of progress and, especially, the utilitarian rendition of progress wherein technological innovation is the signal means to an end: the generation of the greatest good for the greatest number. This 'good' is usually understood also in material—namely economic—terms and related to the idea of popular sovereignty: rule of, by, and for 'the people' where the people are understood as a nation, the arena of the greater good. In the context of subcontinental nationalism, this utilitarianism was most famously and formidably advanced by Nehru, though he did not explicitly label his nationalism as utilitarian. Indeed, it was his vision of how India should proceed into the future that was adopted with independence and pursued for decades—decades divided into five-year plans.¹⁵

By contrast, the ideal I attend to was and is focused on aesthetic edification, with aesthetic construed broadly to encompass spiritual or perhaps religious experience. This ideal, the film shows, is one the *zamindars* claimed as their purview. My suggestion is that *Jalsaghar*

¹⁵ Nehru was a key leader of the anti-colonial nationalist movement and India's first prime minister from independence in 1947 until his death in 1964. A measure of his influence is that his daughter, Indira Gandhi, and grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, served as prime ministers from 1964 until 1989, with the exception of 1980–84. His daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi, the wife of Rajiv Gandhi, and grandson, Rahul Gandhi, continue to lead the Indian National Congress party.

asks, or tasks, the *bhadralok* to claim this purview too. *Jalsaghar* intimates to us, and its intended audience, that the long-standing ideal and practices related to earthly paradise are key to ennobling nationalism.¹⁶

In making this argument, I have chosen to translate *Jalsaghar* as ‘*The Soirée Room*’ rather than ‘*The Music Room*’ or ‘*Music Salon*’; in French, *Jalsaghar* is called ‘*Le Salon de Musique*’. *Jalsa* can be translated as ‘music’ and *ghar* as ‘room’ or ‘salon’ (or also ‘family’, as noted below). I prefer the admittedly less elegant *soirée* room because *jalsa* does not solely mean music or dance, but is associated more generally with aesthetic and spiritual edification. In this respect, it stands for cultivation and refinement, and the opportunity for blissful, ecstatic experience.

The term ‘*soirée*’ also evokes a sense of temporality. It indicates the time of day, namely, per the French *soir*, evening.¹⁷ That *jalsas* were held and hosted in the evenings is important in many ways, including the ways in which different times of day are laden with significance in Bengali culture. Dusk, the transition time to evening, was a time when temple bells would ring, and the auspicious sound of the conch shell (*shankha*) trumpeted and lamps of worship lighted (*tulsi seva*). Not unrelated, using ‘*soirée*’ serves as a temporal marker, indicating that there is a beginning and an end, as in a performance, and thereby reminds that the *soirée* is more an event than a room or a space.¹⁸

Finally, in using the term ‘*soirée*’, I also wish to underscore the idea of a gathering for convivial delight. A *soirée* is an event not for

¹⁶ In invoking the idea of earthly paradise, I follow Ron Inden and, in particular, his ‘Classics in the garden: suppers in an earthly paradise’, in S. C. Humphreys and R. G. Wagner (eds), *Modernity’s Classics*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2013. I return to his essay below.

¹⁷ In Bandyopadhyay’s original story, the first hint of competition between Lord Roy and Ganguly links sound and time: Ganguly’s clock tower gongs, and then we are told that, for centuries until then, only the Roy House had announced the hour for the area. How the hour was indicated is not stated in the story but presumably it was aural.

¹⁸ In Bengal, different times of the day and the transitions between them, especially dusk and dawn, were and are laden with significance. Although I am unable to elaborate in this article, I take ‘*soirée*’ to point to the meaning that ‘dusk’, as a threshold, has in Bengali culture. Dusk (as also dawn) is a time-zone of uncertainty with respect to what the night (or day) may bring. That these are times of uncertainty is indicated in that both dusk and dawn are *sandhya belas*, with *sandhya* meaning ‘joining’ and *bela* meaning ‘period of time of the day or night’. The former is the more dangerous one, as the sun is disappearing and night is dark and silent—a time of death. In this sense, the *soirées* hold the night at bay by filling the time with music and light. My thanks to Aditinath Sarkar and Ralph Nicholas for this information; see also R. Nicholas, *Thirteen Festivals: A Ritual Year in Bengal*, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 66–8.

an individual but for a collective—a collective defined by the shared ideal of aesthetic edification and even ecstatic experience. That is, this collective is not a meeting, in the sense that the word ‘meeting’ is associated with collective deliberation and adjudication. Similarly, I avoid using ‘salon’ to distinguish the use of time and space in *Jalsaghar* from the use of ‘salon’ in the canonical works of Jürgen Habermas and Eric Hobsbawm.¹⁹ For these scholars, the salon is a key space where deliberation occurs, and where the public sphere and even popular sovereignty emerge in modern European history. Although the *soirée* has its part to play in how popular sovereignty is imagined in the subcontinent, it is a very different role from that of the ‘meeting’ or ‘salon’ in studies of European modernity.²⁰

In this article, I use Ray’s film for three reasons. First and foremost, I take the film as pointing to one way that the ideal of noble refinement entered the *bhadralok* nationalist imaginary, even if the shape that *bhadra* nationalism ultimately assumed is not presented herein. Second, I treat the film as a sort of socio-historical document: it is a reminder of actual socio-historical dynamics and facts, such as that there was a *zamindari* class, that hosting *soirées* (as I call them) and patronizing the arts was important to the self-definition of this class, and this was at times at odds with a more utilitarian impulse toward technological agendas which were linked with anti-elitism for some Indian nationalists.²¹ Third, I believe that anthropologists and others in the human sciences continue to underestimate the role that film plays in the production of, in particular, elite plans and practices. *Jalsaghar* points, albeit implicitly, to *bhadralok* concerns and aspirations and, in doing so, it contributes to constituting them.

Soirée room: a selective synopsis

The synopsis is selective in that it points to those aspects of the film that are most relevant to the argument about earthly paradise proffered below.

¹⁹ See J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991; E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848*, Phoenix Press, London, 2010.

²⁰ The contours and contents of this different role are not elaborated on herein.

²¹ Some readers may be reassured to know that there is substantial ethnographic, archival, and other evidence supporting the claims I make with regard to these socio-historical aspects of the film and their implications. My focus here is on the film.

The film was made in 1958, 11 years after India became independent from British colonial rule—an independence that concomitantly partitioned Bengal, locating West Bengal in the republic of India and East Bengal in the republic of Pakistan as East Pakistan (which then became the independent republic of Bangladesh in 1971, well after the film was made).

Jalsaghar is set in the 1920s, on the estate and palace of the *zamindar* Lord Biswambhar Roy in Bengal. *Zamindars* were ‘feudal’ landowners who were granted their holdings and, often, noble rank, such as ‘Lord’ or ‘Raja’, during Mughal or British times.²² Their wealth came from taking a share of what the ‘peasants’ or tenants (*prajas*, *ryots*) on the land produced and/or by serving as revenue collectors for Mughal and later British rulers. Some suggest that the *zamindari* system had an abiding and even appealing ethos of *noblesse oblige*. Lord Roy certainly sees himself in such a light. But I agree with those who find the arrangement not only exclusionary, but also exploitive and oppressive—a form, arguably, of bonded labour. Indeed, the system had generated resistance of various sorts—the political career of A. K. Fazlul Huq (1873–1962) and the 1946–47 Tebagha Andolan come immediately to mind—and was already in decline when it was finally outlawed in Bengal in 1950, eight years before Ray’s film was made.

The film is structured as a prologue with two acts.²³ In the prologue, we see a bereft and life-less Lord Roy on the open rooftop terrace of his palace. He sits in an elegant but worn upholstered armchair, holding his gilded cane next to his face in a melancholy manner.²⁴ All is so still that we think it a photograph that has frozen a moment in time. Roy is roused from his lassitude when he hears music—the playing of the *shenai*, an oboe-like instrument associated with auspicious occasions

²² ‘Lord’ is my translation of *huzur* (also spelled *hozur* and *huzoor*) as Roy is referred to throughout the film, especially by his servants—a *huzuree* is one who serves and the designation implies long-term service, perhaps even over generations. There is the danger here that ‘Lord’ might be taken in the British—especially British colonial—use of the term. In some sense, ‘noble sir’ might be more apposite, though the Nawab in Ray’s comparable film, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, is also called *huzur*. It would not be an unusual honorific bestowed upon a *zamindar* during Mughal times, and Roy’s lineage in the film goes back to (at least) those times. That the Persianate-Urdu *huzur* is used instead of the Sanskritic ‘Raja’, which would be its equivalent, underscores the importance of links with Persia, and the gardens of delight and earthly paradise thereof.

²³ The use of ‘prologue’ and ‘acts’ is my own: the film itself is not demarcated in this way.

²⁴ We later see that he was sitting in this very chair when his portrait was painted, in more prosperous and auspicious times (see Figure 6).



Figure 1. *Jalsaghar*: Lord Roy on his terrace. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

(see Figure 1).²⁵ He asks his servant, Ananta, what the occasion is. Ananta informs that Roy's neighbour and nemesis, Mahim Ganguly, is holding the *upanayan* ceremony for his son—an important initiation or coming-of-age ceremony that upper-caste adolescent males did and do as a rite of passage towards adulthood.²⁶ Roy's ear is so attuned that he

²⁵ The adjective or quality 'auspicious' is fundamental in Hinduism and I will use it throughout the article. See R. Inden, 'Kings and omens', in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, J. B. Carman and F. A. Marglin (eds), Brill, Leiden, 1985, pp. 30–40; D. Ali and E. J. Flatt (eds), *Garden and Landscape Practices in Precolonial India: Histories from the Deccan*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2012; D. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002; M. Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015; G. G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998. In using 'auspicious', I distance myself from the pure/impure structuralist dichotomy advanced by Louis Dumont in *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970. However, in using 'encompass' throughout, I intimate that Dumont's notion of encompassment could possibly be helpful in a full analysis of the dynamics of the soirée, if the idea of encompassment is detached from structuralism and related, instead, to Ernesto Laclau's 'constitutive outside', which I invoke towards the end of this article.

²⁶ For some, *upanayan* would be written *upanayana*, with an 'a' at the end. But my spelling follows how the word is pronounced in Bengali and, accordingly, in the film. In Bengal, it is common to use the more plebeian *poite* in speaking of this important initiation ceremony, but this is never used in the film—perhaps to distinguish Lord Roy from the plebeian. There is some dispute and variation as to whether only Brahmins can be initiated or other upper castes as well. *Upanayans* are performed on auspicious days, as determined by astrologers.



Figure 2. *Jalsaghar*: Lord Roy arrives at his splendid palace, with fountain in front. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

identifies which specific musician is playing the *shenai*. Ganguly, we will learn, is an entrepreneurial parvenu—at least from the perspective of Lord Roy and also, arguably, from the perspective of director Ray.

The Lord asks if he himself was invited to the ceremony and whether he was invited by letter or in person; those who are to be the most honoured guests should be invited in person.²⁷ He was invited, but by letter. Still, the sounds of the *shenai* and the idea of *upanayan* make Roy smile, and this takes Roy and the viewer back four years; for the viewer, it is a flashback but, for Roy, it is his memory.

Act I, the flashback, is lengthy, at about 50 minutes. It is the *upanayan* day of Lord Roy's only son, Khoka. Roy arrives at his palace on his white steed, in a jaunty but leisurely gallop, dressed magnificently (see Figure 2). Two *shenai* players and a tabla player are filling the estate with music. He is happy. But all is not as splendid as it seems:

²⁷ In this article, I will be able to only gesture to some key themes, such as the distinction between host and guest—which also resonates with dichotomies such as citizen and refugee, which become pivotal after the 1947 partition and the migration of the *bhadralok* in its wake.

on entering the palace, the estate's manager, Prasanna, informs Roy that the bank has sent a letter declining his application for more credit. We are implicitly reminded of Ganguly's invitation by letter, rather than in person, and soon learn that Ganguly, like the bank, is rich. Still, although Lord Roy's estate is in financial trouble, the film makes clear early in the flashback that this does not much trouble him; he seems to find the mundane to be beneath him. Prasanna and Roy's wife, Mahamaya, will later say that he should have given more attention to the practical and financial aspects of running a *zami* (an estate). But the Lord's passions—Mahamaya suggests they are more addictions—are not for the practical, but for the noble, as Roy views them.

The Lord is informed that Ganguly is already at the palace, awaiting his return. Roy refers to Ganguly as a 'userer's son' (*soodkhorer beta*) with disdain. But Ganguly has a business proposition and, given the estate's financial problems, the manager cajoles the Lord into seeing him. Roy receives Ganguly in the *soirée* room, where he treats Ganguly as an inferior, not worthy of the usual hospitality: no refreshment or even a seat is offered. Nevertheless, he agrees to Ganguly's request to rent a portion of the Lord's estate for a business enterprise.²⁸ Roy reminds Ganguly that the Roy family has always been noble in its financial dealings, and intimates to Ganguly that he must treat any workers for his business accordingly. After Ganguly is dismissed, Roy instructs Prasanna that no money acquired from the family of the usurer—tainted money—can be used towards the costs of his son's all-important initiation. That night, the Lord has something of a squabble with his wife about the value of money, and the cost of costs, in which she suggests he close the *soirée* room because it is financially unfeasible and, as noted, an addiction. He does not agree.

During a *soirée* at Roy's house, the Lord and his other refined guests are enthralled, awed, mesmerized, and transported into an earthly paradise. The paradise is a sensual one, of perfume, sweets, flowers, drink, hookahs, paintings, and, above all, music and dance—the dancing including both erotic and religious elements. The guests languorously lose themselves in these exceptional, uplifting, and collective pleasures, while servants fan them: the evening is already appealing, as it is cooler than the heat of the day, but the servants'

²⁸ In Bandyopadhyay's original story, we are told that Ganguly gradually but steadily usurped much of the Roy estate's land.



Figure 3. *Jalsaghar*: the host of noble lineage—a soiree at the House of Roy. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

fanning makes the experience more regal as well as more comfortable (see Figure 3).

The businessman Ganguly has been invited (by letter) and sits among them in the ‘audience’.²⁹ In contrast to the Lord and the other guests, he seems somehow out of place—or, perhaps, from some other time. While others are transported by the delights of the event, Ganguly seems distracted and his consumption of tobacco—cigarettes and snuff, not the stately hookah—and alcohol seems to arise from a compulsive restlessness, one that may make him entrepreneurial and enterprising, but perhaps not suited for the more noble and finer things in life. At a key moment, he looks more perturbed and irked than enthralled by the music, dance, and indeed the entire sensorium (see Figure 4).

The association between the time-space of the *jalsaghar* and paradise, as an ideal to be appreciated, valued, lived, and even dreamt, is evinced in a sequence in which Roy and his wife have a disagreement over money, as mentioned above: he has pawned her jewels to pay for a soiree. Mahamaya describes a disturbing nightmare that she had about

²⁹ Audience is in quotation marks because the relationship between the performers and the patrons is different, here, from how the word is connoted in the West. For example, in *Shatranj*, there are elements of *darshan*—a visual connection with something holy or auspicious—in the soirees. See also note 33 below regarding *sahridayas*.

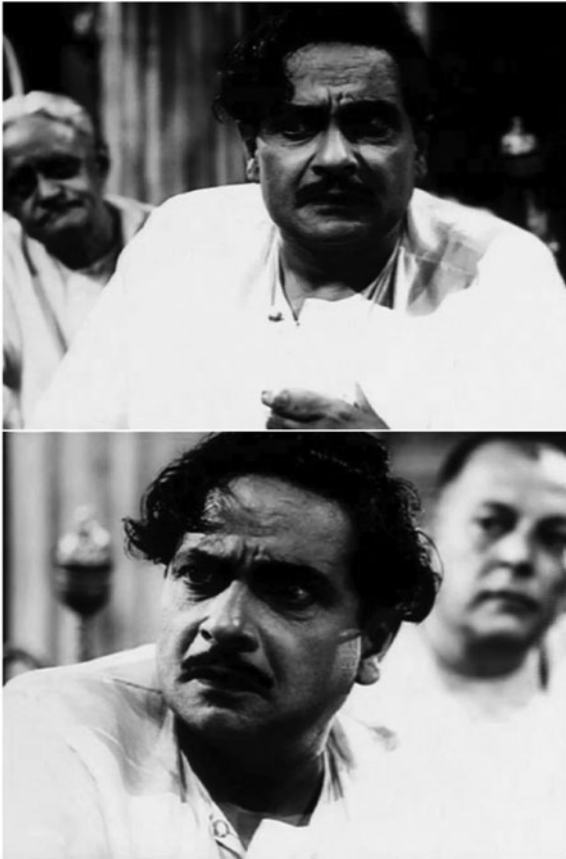


Figure 4. *Jalsaghar*: Ganguly is perturbed at a soirée. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

the estate and recalls that the estate once had a proper garden, but the river has long since washed it away. Lord Roy counters, saying that, when he dreams, it is of a *jalsaghar*: ‘... a grand soirée is occurring: Rambha sings, Urvashi dances, and Menaka ... Menaka.’ In uttering this last name, Roy falls asleep and drifts, we may presume, into this dream of delight. Rambha, Urvashi, and Menaka are the names of well-known celestial nymphs (*apsaras*) in Hindu mythology, including the Hindu classic, the *Mahabharata*. These *apsaras* are comparable to Greek muses. They dance exquisitely to the music played at the courts of Indra, the king of all deities, in godly palaces. Urvashi is beautiful and elusive, the source of much delight, and is considered a ‘dawn goddess’ (see note 18). Rambha, an unrivalled musician and dancer, and Menaka are sent by Indra to tempt the penances of the most

revered sages with their offerings of worldly pleasures. The viewer of the film is clearly expected to know these references to the classics, and the pleasures to which they are tied.

Sometime after the film's first *soirée* scene (there are three), the son Khoka and wife leave to visit her family.³⁰ To get there and back, they will have to take a boat to cross the river that bounds the estate.³¹ But Roy decides to host another *soirée*—in large measure to prevent Ganguly from hosting one. He asks his son and wife to hurry back so that they can be present at the ancestral home, though the *soirée* itself is primarily for adult males. But, as the guests arrive and the *soirée* begins and continues, the two have still not returned. A storm is raging. Roy takes leave of the *soirée* and goes outside, seeking news. Prasanna, quaking, standing in the storm, says that both son and wife have perished in the river. Khoka's corpse is brought to Roy. He steps into the storm to take his son's body and clutches it to his own. Crying 'Khoka! Khoka!' in tearful agony, the Lord falls into the mud.

³⁰ I say 'son and wife' rather than 'wife and son' because, in this historical and cultural context, the primary relation is between genitor/patriarch and male heir. The ideology of 'love marriage' or 'companionate marriage' is that the husband-wife relationship is primary, and children are reflections and extensions of it. But that would not be the case here. That said, the film shows there is genuine affection between Biswambhar and Mahamaya. Also, the names of the servants are noteworthy: Ananta can mean 'eternal' and Prasanna mean 'contentment'. But the idea of eternal contentment has an oblique relation to this film, as also to nationalism.

³¹ The protagonist, Lord Roy, is a Barendra Brahman, which would suggest that the river we see is the Padma. Director Ray confirms that the river is in fact the Padma (see note 42 below), but that does not necessarily mean the river as presented in the film is meant to be the Padma—but there are hints in the film itself that it is (and Bandyopadhyay's original story confirms that it is the Padma). For most Bengali Hindus, rivers have a divine quality, the Padma especially so for it is a tributary of the Ganges. 'Padma' is one name for the wife of Vishnu. Vaishnav and Shakta worship, respectively, were and are the key forms of religious practice among Bengali *bhadralok*. (The name of Roy's wife, Mahamaya, is an acknowledgment of the Shakta tradition—though it can also perhaps be taken as Maha-maya, meaning great illusion.) It may be added here that, insofar as the Padma is seen as a natural border demarcating West Bengal from East Bengal, one cannot help but think of the river as a metaphor for the Radcliffe Line that, in 1947, officially divided Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan, respectively. This partition had significant repercussions for the *bhadralok* and their first-among-equals claims. Further, like the Padma, the official border, too, was prone to unpredictable shifts, with, for example, Murshidabad district predicted to go to (East) Pakistan on one day and to India (West Bengal) on another; Murshidabad is mentioned in the film. In short, it is difficult to not associate and juxtapose the natural border with the political border in a film produced just a decade after independence and partition—a film made by and for the *bhadralok*; I will argue the 'by and for' below.

Here the flashback ends, but the film continues to what I am calling Act II. After the loss of his son and wife, Roy withdraws from life and secludes himself upstairs, never leaving the palace. He has the *soirée* room closed and renounces all pleasures associated with it, except the hookah. Only Ananta and Prasanna remain of his staff, whereas once there were hundreds. Many of his possessions, including silverware and furniture, have had to be sold. The palace is so dilapidated that it can hardly be called a proper house for humans, let alone a palace. Now, bats and birds and dogs and spiders also live there.³² There are cobwebs. The estate's *Kali* temple remains, as well as some funds dedicated to maintaining it. And his horse and elephant remain, too: the Lord had refused to sell them, despite offers. We are, in fact, back to the very beginning of the film, but, with the flashback finished, the film will now move forward.

As Act II proceeds, Ganguly comes to see Lord Roy, arriving with celerity in a motorcar, horn honking stridently. While waiting to see Roy, he disparages the palace: its disrepair, the lack of servants. He notes that, even in this condition, the palace retains some economic utility, namely if sold to generate money. When he finally sees the Lord, it is on a veranda, not inside the *soirée* room, which remains closed. This time, Ganguly takes a seat and is given something to drink, which he tries to avoid imbibing—a further sign of disrespect. Ganguly no longer calls Roy 'Lord', but has taken the liberty of calling him 'grandfather', thus inserting himself into the noble lineage and, at once, undermining Roy's select status. Ganguly implies that Roy's gold-handled cane, which the Lord once carried about like a royal staff, is no longer an accoutrement of prestige, but a crutch for those who have become feeble with age, whose time has passed.

Ganguly has come to invite Roy to the opening of his new *jalsaghar*. He boasts about whom he has hired to perform: a dancer and musicians of rare excellence. Roy declines to attend, even though Ganguly has come in person to invite him. It seems that, for Roy, Ganguly may host performances, but could never host true *soirées*, because Ganguly is

³² In Bengali culture, there is an important distinction between an established house for humans (*bhitta bari*)—which can be used in a more formal sense, such as the 'House of Roy'—and the less august idea of a habitat (*basa*, sometimes spoken as *basa bari*), which connotes a temporary lodging. Insofar as some animals are said to live in *basas*, the presence of the animals at this point in the film may be interpreted to suggest that the distinguished Roy *bari* has degenerated into a makeshift *basa*: the perennial ancestral home does not steady and mould time; rather, it is now subject to its ravages.

uncultivated and thus an illegitimate curator of what a *soirée* should offer, such as moments of collective ecstasy and transcendence. For Lord Roy, to delight in the finer things, indeed, to have the cultivation to not only appreciate, but also produce such things, is the preserve of the nobility.³³

Roy immediately resolves to host a *soirée* himself, the night following Ganguly's, with the same performers that Ganguly had boasted about. He will best the upstart. But how will he pay? Roy declares he will use the 'trust' fund set aside for the worship and maintenance of the goddess Kali housed in the estate's temple. Manager Prasanna, who has always been obedient and servile, is appalled and protests. This is beyond the pale. But Lord Roy insists and the *soirée* room is reopened. Roy will seek again to summon an earthly paradise, even if it entails crossing Kali, the protective but severe mother goddess.³⁴

Ganguly arrives at Roy's *soirée*. His manner now is all the more brash, even petulant. The evening before, he had hosted a performance, though we did not hear or see it. He behaves almost as if he himself is hosting this *soirée*, too. At the end of the dancer's enthralling performance, Ganguly tries to make the first gift to the performers, but Roy uses his cane to halt Ganguly's hand. 'It is the prerogative of the house-holding host' (*grihaswami*), Roy says sternly, 'to give the first benefaction' (*inam*), which he then does. Ganguly is humiliated (see [Figure 5](#)).

In the final sequence, Roy is elated, now less for the experience of the *soirée* in itself, but insofar as it served as a means to an end: to demean Ganguly. The Lord is intoxicated, but by victory, not beauty. Moreover, to arrive at this end, he used the money appropriated, inappropriately, from the temple fund, from the truly sacrosanct.

³³ In the terms of Sanskritic poetics, Lord Roy and his peers are *sahrdayas*. A *sahrdaya* can be understood as 'a man of taste' or 'connoisseur', but it is much more than that. Only a *sahrdaya* can have a complete aesthetic experience, because he has cultivated his appreciation to the point that he can fully grasp the creative power of the artist: '... his mind has become lucidly receptive, like a mirror, through effort and constant practice', E. Dimock, E. Gerow, C. M. Naim, A. K. Ramanujan, G. Roadarmel, and J. A. B. Van Buitenen, *The Literatures of India: An Introduction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1974, p. 217. This idea of mirror as receptive provides for interesting interpretive possibilities of the many shots in the film of mirrors, and other reflections.

³⁴ As the goddess of creation and destruction, Kali has also been seen as the goddess of time itself.



Figure 5. *Jalsaghar*: Lord Roy to Ganguly: the host house has the privilege of making the first offering. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

Roy's and Ray's earthly paradise

As in Ray's other films, *Jalsaghar* complicates the interrelations between the aesthetic and spiritual traditions of Bengal's older nobility, on the one hand, and an anti-elitist and putatively populist utilitarian modernity, on the other.³⁵ Putting these more abstractly,

³⁵ Some critics have taken Ray to task for putatively favouring the former, namely valuing the old over the new. Nicholas Dirks says Ray was not a conservative nostalgic: 'Ray was sharply critical both of the particularity of this *zamindar* and the more general system of feudal rule that had been maintained under British colonialism. Nevertheless, Ray wished to complicate the critique of feudalism': N. Dirks, 'The sovereignty of history: culture and modernity in the cinema of Satyajit Ray', in *Questions of Modernity*, T. Mitchell (ed.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2000, especially pp. 148–9, quote at p. 154; on the colonial aspects in Ray's film, see pp. 155–65. Dirks discusses, in brief, Ray's film, *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, which also shows an aristocratic decline of sorts. Overall, Dirks reads Ray's film through concepts such as tradition and modernity as these were constituted by British colonial capitalism. By contrast, my inclination is that the idea of earthly paradise, which I suggest becomes an aspect of *bhadralok* nationalism, is inflected significantly in the colonial encounter, but not entirely constituted by it. Although I do not have the space here to discuss *Shatranj* as it would deserve, I will note, in brief, some differences with *Jalsaghar*, such as that the film is set in Lucknow in the nineteenth century (a very important site of cultural and courtly life), its language is in Urdu, it is very much focused on the expansion of British power in India (whereas this is only hinted at in *Jalsaghar*), that issues of masculinity are fore-grounded, and that it is filmed in 1977 after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Pointing to differences does not indicate that the two films do not belong together in the context of my argument. But it would take

I see, in *Jalsaghar*, a juxtaposition between values that are ends in themselves versus values that are means to an end. The moments of transcendent experience that Ray conveys through his depiction of the soirées appear as ends in themselves, not as, primarily, tools to other goals beyond the uplifting and edifying experience itself; Lord Roy betrays this noble ideal when he uses the soirée, the possibility of earthly paradise, to humble Ganguly.

Paradise and/as enacting the classical

The decline and demise of Lord Roy are already announced in the film's first sequence. As noted above, he is shown motionless and, as the camera zooms out (as the 'photograph' becomes film), we see that he is on the large open roof terrace of his palace. The terrace, and Roy, are enclosed by a Greek-revival-style balustrade interrupted by the palace's *tympanus* with its *acroterion* on top. These are a homage to the ethos and spirit of a classical age, not uncommon during that period of British imperialism in India. Ostensibly, therefore, Roy is seated in a (Western) neo-classical temple—or the vestiges of one, as the entire terrace is desolate and decrepit (see [Figure 1](#)).

These hints of grandeur are also conveyed at the beginning of the flashback where we see the estate as whole, bounded by the river Padma in the distance. The palace's imposing façade comes into full view. Next to it stand a tree and a fountain that, in accordance with the British colonial Greek revival mentioned above, is embellished with Caryatids, reminiscent of those of the *Erechtheion* on the Athenian Acropolis (see [Figure 2](#)).³⁶

significant elaboration to show, for example, how the emergence of Bangladesh plays a part in *bhadra* nationalism as reflected in *Shatranj*. Likewise, important points of confluence between the two films would require a rigorous analysis. For example, in *Shatranj*, the Nawab of Oudh is, like Lord Roy in *Jalsaghar*, a connoisseur of rarefied pleasures, such as music and poetry. Indeed, when faced with being deposed, he asks 'How many kings of England have composed songs? Has Queen Victoria composed any songs that her people sing?'. As Schiller or Collingwood might say, per the epigraphs at the outset: authentic rulers are also vessels of aesthetic value.

³⁶ This allusion is also present in the shot where Lord Roy receives the corpse of his son with the fountain's figures in the background. Scholars say that the porch of the *Erechtheion* stands over the tomb of the mythical king Kekrops. This argument is supported by the fact that the Caryatids are carrying their libation, namely the libation that would have to be poured on the ground as offerings to the dead. See M. Cartwright, 'Caryatid', <http://www.ancient.eu/Caryatid/> [accessed 24 October 2016].

Ronald Inden speaks of Italy's Renaissance era Villa d'Este's complex of palace, gardens, fountains, music, poetry, dinners, and spectacles staged so that ecstasy could be experienced: 'The villa with its gardens was an *earthly paradise* where men engaged in diverting practices that induced moments of *transcendence* during life'.³⁷ The earthly paradise of villa and garden is the time-space where the classics, in which the members of the ruling society had been educated, came back to life. Seeing themselves as adults edified by having studied the Classical (Greek and Roman) age was integral to the 'fashioning of themselves as men and women resident in a courtly paradise and to the fashioning of that paradise itself'.³⁸ It is in this sense that the idea of earthly paradise goes beyond the individual performances in the soirée room. Instead, the complex assemblage of acts and effects serve to demarcate the unique enclosure that is this paradise—a time-space wherein one can, potentially, have ecstatic or transcendent experiences, for its aim is to induce them.³⁹

Inden's analysis is important for two reasons. First, his reference to the re-enacting of the classics is echoed in *Jalsaghar*, albeit in variously mediated and altered forms. This is evident in the appropriation of Greek styles by first the British and then, in turn, the *zamindars*. Furthermore, the film celebrates classical Indian music and dance; the issue of classics will be revisited below. The soirée scenes are so extended and impressive that I would argue that the film is committed to sharing these as extraordinary experiences in themselves more than to advance the plot, namely Lord Roy's decline, Ganguly's rise, and so on. Without such attention to, indeed immersion into, the soirées, the story would be much less compelling. Through the soirées, the film brings the earthly paradise into the viewer's present, so the viewer will savour and *value* it appropriately. The *jalsaghar*, the inner sanctum of the protagonist Lord Roy's palace, is a time-space enclosure which encompasses those inside it who, in turn, are expected to be edified enough to experience the moments of ecstatic delight that these events offer, and which then edifies all the more. In this sense, the soirée room is a chronotope of pleasure that is comparable to how Socrates

³⁷ Inden, 'Classics in the garden', p. 72. Emphasis added.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–4, quote at p. 74. For my argument, invoking the idea of the 'host' is more apposite than that of the 'owner'.

³⁹ Although my focus is on the palace and, in particular, the soirée room, it is important to note how the river figures as a way or enclosing the estate—and, indeed, encroaches on the palace and ultimately ends Roy's lineage when Khoka and Mahamaya drown.

characterized the gardens (*pairidaeza*) of Persian kings, 'filled with all the fine and good things that the earth wishes to bring forth'.⁴⁰

Second, Inden underscores that, with regard to how these paradisiacal performances index the status of the garden's owners, tidy dichotomies between the religious and the secular and between tradition and modernity are dubious at best. 'Classical imagery is being used to symbolise secular entities, the power, wealth, and fame of the garden's owner', but any 'dichotomy of "religious" and "secular" which echoes those of "traditional" or "medieval" and "modern," is, however, too neat if not downright false'.⁴¹ For the purposes of my argument, Inden's point is important insofar as the overlaps among paradise, lineage, and nation also bring together the putatively religious with the secular, the immortal classics with the ephemeral modern, and, in *bhadra* nationalism, the hope of suturing nobility with utility.⁴²

It is through the words of Roy's servant, Ananta, that one gets a sense of the components that make a building into a palace where paradise can be made present. Early in the flashback, we see Roy listening to a live sitar recital, sitting leisurely on a veranda and smoking his hookah. Unfortunately, an obstinate clanging then intrudes upon this subtle ambience. Ananta explains that the noise is that of the new electric generator purchased by Ganguly. Ananta speaks admiringly of the light the generator can produce even in the dead of night and, that night, Roy goes to his rooftop terrace to see the light emanating from his rival's house.⁴³ Later in the flashback, Roy asks Ananta to describe Ganguly's estate. By this point, Ananta is well aware that Lord Roy and his arriviste neighbour are in competition and, accordingly, what he is really being asked. He replies: 'It is not as prestigious as your palace: no music room, no fountain, no garden, no temple, nothing.'⁴⁴

⁴⁰ E. B. Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Mughal India*, George Braziller, New York, 1979, p. 1.

⁴¹ Inden, 'Classics in the garden', p. 72.

⁴² This indicates that an end-in-itself value need not be singular: e.g. it can include, at once, overlapping ideas of earthly ecstasy and noble lineage, both encompassed in the *jalsa*. My understanding of 'overlap' comes from R. G. Collingwood as he advances, in particular, in his *Essay on Philosophical Method*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

⁴³ In Bandhyopadhyay's original story, Ganguly's electric lights are described as in competition with the stars. In the film, Lord Roy ridicules Ganguly's attempt to 'reach the stars'.

⁴⁴ Ray found the estate by chance and after much searching. It was perfect, in his view: 'The Padma had changed its course over the years so that now there were endless stretches of sandy waste where once [there] had been villages. The palace

For the Lord, the palace is a place for the generation of delight, not revenue: a place for a nobility that transcends the boorish banality of money or utility—a place only those who have the right lineage *and* the right aesthetic education can uphold and extend.⁴⁵

Paradise and/as lineage

The soirée also overlaps with the idea of noble lineage, and vice versa. At one level, this seems obvious; after all, in the scene where Lord Roy revels in his humiliation of Ganguly at the final soirée, he explicitly says that he was able to do so because of his noble lineage ('noble' spoken in English). But my claim is stronger: the moments of earthly paradise that the soirées offer are a way of manifesting or channelling or making present the glory of the lineage—a lineage that itself is thereby also a spectacle of sound and light. The ecstasy of the soirée is also that of an aesthetic and spiritual joining with, or sharing in, the lineage itself, of being encompassed in its glory.⁴⁶ To enter the soirée is not to enter a room, but rather to participate in an event—if one has the qualities and refinement to do so—that allows one to experience the nobility and beauty of the lineage, at least for a time.

Most interpreters of *Jalsaghar* have focused on the symbolism of the mirrors in the movie, and not without reason. Yet, in my view, the central symbol of the film is the main chandelier in the soirée room that, I argue, stands for Roy's lineage. Importantly, it is the chandelier that begins and ends the movie, swaying uncertainly in the dark, while the credits roll. The chandelier also sways portentously during the storm—a storm that arises during a soirée, and in which

itself—Greek pillars, entablature, and all—was a perfect materialization of my dream image. It stood looking out over the desolation with a worn and tragic dignity. It had miraculously escaped utter obliteration through a whim of the river, which had approached within ten yards of the façade—having engulfed the garden and stables—and then stopped', S. Ray, 'Winding route to a music room', in his *Our Films, Their Films*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1976, pp. 45–6.

⁴⁵ Speaking of the *bhadralok*—of which he is a member—Prafulla Chakrabarti states they are not inclined to utility—or at least to industry: 'The Bengali Hindu ... never learned to live dangerously; never absorbed the *amorality* which makes for success in a fiercely competitive world; never saw visions of giant industrial and commercial enterprises. Nowhere in Bengali literature do we find a portrayal of the will to victory, of men of mighty deeds who brushed aside all social inhibitions or moral considerations to attain their ends': Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, pp. 110–11, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Spectacle is not used here as it often is in cultural critique, such as spectacle as a tool for mystifying and misleading the masses.

Roy's son perishes and also his wife; with her dies the possibility of having another son for the patriline.

Phillip Kemp and others have taken the chandelier as a sign that the Lord's way of life—and that of the *zamindars* more broadly, presumably—is 'grandiose but *obsolescent*'.⁴⁷ The chandelier, in this interpretation, would be contrasted with Ganguly's electric generator, with the candles in the crystal sconces set against the bulbs of the modern machine; this would, indeed, be Ganguly's perspective. But transcendence is not subject to the historical time of technological progress. I have argued throughout that, for Roy, the palace with its soirées is a place for rarefied delight, not accumulating profits. Likewise, in my view, the chandelier is a manifestation of a living lineage that is, in fact, musical and luminous; if the chandelier were to be valued by its utility alone, with utility itself defined in a particular way, only then could the chandelier be evaluated as '*obsolescent*', out-of-date.

It is true that, when he tries to explain his superiority to his servant Ananta, Roy speaks of his lineage in terms of bloodlines, saying 'blood' in both English and Bengali (*rakta*).⁴⁸ But, immediately thereafter, Roy toasts his noble ancestors: his grandfather, followed by his great-grandfather, and finally his great-great-grandfather, raising his glass to each of their portraits in that order, going further and further back in time and history. Significantly, the portraits are all in the soirée room and all shine, are visible, because of the chandelier. In the film, the chandelier is shown to be jingling sweetly more than once. In one scene, it is the very jingling of the chandelier that prompts a pan of these portraits of the ancestors accompanied by a medley of soirée music. After toasting his ancestors, Roy turns to his own portrait and toasts his 'own noble self'. He is then troubled to see a spider on his portrait and the soundtrack becomes alarming—thunderclaps in a storm, like that of when he clutched Khoka's corpse. He shoos the spider away with his cane (in a gesture that redoubles how he had used the cane to demean Ganguly at the soirée, another intruder into the soirée-as-lineage) (see [Figure 6](#)). Immediately thereafter, he trains his attention to the glorious chandelier that illuminates the soirée

⁴⁷ P. Kemp, 'The Music Room: distant music', *Criterion Collection*, 2011, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1930-the-music-room-distant-music>, [accessed 24 October 2016], emphasis added.

⁴⁸ The use of *rakta* allows Ananta to repeat it, when he sees the blood after Roy is thrown from his horse—after which the movie ends and we see the chandelier along with the final credits. The ending is different in Bandyopadhyay's original short story: Lord Roy has all the chandeliers that the family used over the ages stored in a room.



Figure 6. *Jalsaghar*: Roy shoos spider—another encroachment on the lineage—off his portrait’s knee. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

room; he is directed to it, initially, by a reflection of the chandelier in the glass he had raised to applaud and admire his ancestors’ nobility, as well as his own. It is the chandelier that captures him now, in its splendour, as he looks up at it and its light and sparkle shower him, a luminous ablation, with sublime sitar strains as accompaniment.

The Bengali word for chandelier (*jharabati*) can mean, with a bit of license, something like ‘a cascade of luminosity’. In Bengali, the word *ghar* means room, as in *jalsa-ghar*, but it can also mean ‘house and family’.⁴⁹ Thus, the chandelier hanging in the music room, or *ghar*, embodies three-dimensionally this brilliant family ‘tree’, the light of which now shines on, and through, Roy, the adult descendant, the latest curator of both lineage and delight, until his son is ready to take charge (see Figure 7).⁵⁰

In the flashback, we saw the Lord preparing his son Khoka, the next in line, for a life of nobility. We saw Khoka learning about painting (he

⁴⁹ The more common word for lineage in Bengali is *bangsha*.

⁵⁰ Ganguly, by contrast, describes himself as a ‘self-made man’ who lacks ‘pedigree’.



Figure 7. *Jalsaghar*: the chandelier—luminous and musical lineage. *Source*: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

is especially attentive when his father's portrait is painted) and being tutored in music by Roy himself (see Figure 8). Khoka learned to ride the elephant and his father's horse; in the original short story, we are told that the Roy household once had many stables of horses. At one point, Mahamaya complained that Khoka has inherited his father's obsessions with the arts and with riding, to the point of neglecting his studies. Roy explained that the son must indeed inherit—learn—these things, in order to embody the lineage and properly rule over the palace and estate when his time comes. There can be no compromising when it comes to nurturing Khoka's noble character (including horse-riding) or aesthetic and spiritual edification.

By the final scene, however, his son has died and, in the *soirée* room, the chandelier's candles start going out, one by one. Then all the other candles around the room go out as well. Seeing this, Lord Roy is gripped with dread. The camera shows us the chandelier and Roy approaching it, staring up in horror. Significantly, Roy then steps out of the shot for a moment, but the camera stays focused on the chandelier. Roy returns just as the last candle in the chandelier dies. His spectacular lineage is being extinguished. He falls to the ground,



Figure 8. *Jalsaghar*: father tutoring son in music. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

as he did with Khoka's corpse. He cries out for Ananta, who rushes to his side and assures that dawn has arrived.

Roy hears his horse neighing, reminding us again of the auspicious *shenai*'s call and, after a good look at his gold-handled cane, he insists he will immediately go riding. Ananta tries to stop him, but he rides off, straight at a boat on the bank of the river, prompting the viewer to recall that his son and wife were killed while travelling, in a boat, to be back at the palace in time for the *soirée*, as the Lord had insisted. The *zamindar* charges ahead, faster and faster. But, unlike the ecstasy-inducing acceleration of a *soirée*'s music and dance, there is no pleasure in this gathering speed—only uncertainty and fear. His horse throws him and he dies (see Figure 9). It is the dawn of a new era, but the Gangulys of the world, and their lineages, cannot enrich India in the fullest sense. India must look to the future, but without losing its euphonious, lustrous, and illustrious ideals (see Figure 10). Who then will suture together these diverse agendas?

The absent presence of the bhadralok

By insisting on the aesthetic patrimony of cultural refinement, the film calls for new curators of earthly paradise and a new role for both curators and paradise in the new nation. My argument is that the film awards the *bhadralok* the role of producing, preserving, and transmitting this aesthetic patrimony and, consequently, tasks them



Figure 9. *Jalsaghar*: Lord Roy, dead after being thrown from a horse. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

with suturing this ideal to that of national progress: pursuing at once values that are timeless ends in themselves and those that accumulate value as they progress through time.

Can this argument be advanced when the *bhadralok* do not appear in the film? When the word *bhadralok* is never even uttered? I connect the *bhadralok* to the *jalsaghar* in two ways. The first is to note that the film is made by and for the *bhadralok*; the second is by way of invoking the theoretical idea of the ‘constitutive outside’. It is ‘by’ the *bhadralok* in that the film is based on a short story penned in 1938.⁵¹ The 1930s were years in which *bhadra* nationalism was at the fore in Bengal. Further, the author, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, was a prolific and popular *bhadra* author. He was a close associate of *bhadralok* icon Rabindranath Tagore—the first Asian Nobel Prize winner (as *bhadralok* are quick to point out), which he won for literature. Tagore’s songs, called *Rabindrasangeet*, were and are treated with great

⁵¹ *14 Stories that Inspired Satyajit Ray*, edited and translated by B. Chattopadhyay, Harper Perennial/HarperCollins India, 2014. As mentioned in 48, the ending is different in Bandyopadhyay’s original story: Roy again shuts down the house, whereas Ray shows Roy thrown by and thus killed by his own ‘royal’ mount.

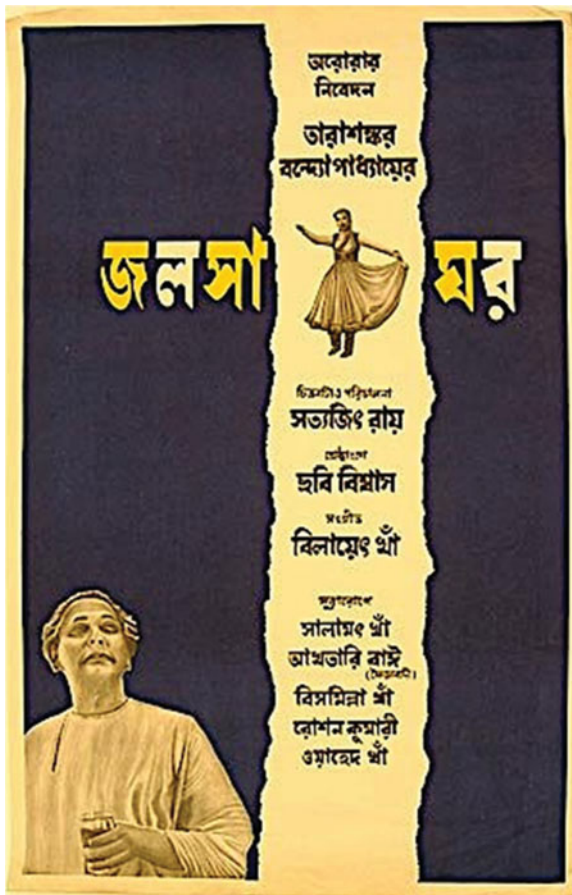


Figure 10. (Colour online) *Jalsaghar* film poster. The film's title is presented as a chandelier, with the *jalsa* image in the middle. Lord Roy looks up while the light of the lineage flows down. Source: Courtesy of Aurora Films.

reverence among the *bhadralok*. That Tagore is linked to—some would say appropriated by—Bengali nationalism is evinced in the fact that his songs are today used as the national anthems for both India and Bangladesh, respectively, with one of the songs composed in the wake of the 1905 partitioning of Bengal by the British Raj and the other composed when Bengal was reunited in 1911. The 1905 partition stoked *bhadralok* nationalism, and its 1911 reversal was significantly due to the agitation of the *bhadralok*.⁵² Satyajit Ray, as Sagarika Ghose

⁵² The popularity of *Rabindrasangeet*—one of the most distinctive features of *bhadralok* culture—is a phenomenon that has not, as yet, been adequately accounted for. I believe the genealogy of *jalsa* I provide here can perhaps do so.

notes, was a quintessential member of the *bhadralok* class. Ray, like Bandyopadhyay, also knew Tagore. Tagore was a friend of the Ray family—a family made up largely of intellectuals and writers. Ray later enrolled in a school Tagore had founded, and studied art there.⁵³

Jalsaghar is also ‘for’ the *bhadralok*. Satyajit Ray intended and hoped that it would compensate, at least in part, for his earlier film, *Aparajito* (*Unvanquished*, 1956), which was a critical success but a commercial failure. Ray had been looking for a story that was already popular among the reading public in Bengal, as was *Jalsaghar*—written, as noted above, by an author who was himself also already popular in these circles. The desire for commercial success is also a reason Ray wanted to create a film that was conducive to the incorporation of song and dance—two elements that would help make cinema more popular for his target audience: a specifically Bengali cinema-going audience, for he felt that the film would not be one that would resonate beyond Bengal. The film was expected to draw members of the middle to upper classes, especially through its use of classical Indian music. As Sharmistha Gooptu writes:

The culture of classical music was a growing trend among the more literate sections of the middle classes in post-independence India, and the classical style music and dance sequences in the film, performed by leading practitioners of the day, could have been expected to draw this segment—Ray’s own social class.⁵⁴

Thus, the combination of Bandyopadhyay’s popularity and the growing interest in classical music and dance provided Ray with a means by which to both exploit and affect the imaginary of his contemporaries.

A second way to establish the centrality of the *bhadralok* in *Jalsaghar* given their absence from the film is in theoretical terms. I would argue that the *bhadralok* serve as a constitutive outside to the conflict between the film’s rival figures, Lord Roy and the industrialist Ganguly, the aristocrat and the businessman—or, more broadly, between projects that pursue ends in themselves versus those that pursue means to

⁵³ Shortly after the independence of India, in the 1950s, Soumendranath Tagore, a relation of Rabindranath Tagore, founded a group in Kolkata for the purpose of promoting *Rabindrasangeet*. It was devoted to music but linked also to national pride. Soumendranath Tagore was himself active in politics and recognized as an inspiring orator, and his wife was a renowned dancer. Significantly, the name of the group was *baitanik*, which can, with some license, be translated as a ‘place for musical enrichment’.

⁵⁴ See S. Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 158.

ends.⁵⁵ As this constitutive outside, the *bhadralok* can be seen to transcend the film's depicted divide between a decaying yet noble aristocracy and a burgeoning utilitarian industrial class, and, in this way, to point to a specifically *bhadralok* sense of nationalism, or *bhadra* nationalism. The semiotics of the film wittingly or otherwise target the Bengali audience, which in this case was predominantly made up of self-described intelligentsia or literati, whose self-identity also entailed a sense of being refined. Through the dynamics of the constitutive outside, the film bestows upon the *bhadralok* the role of constructing a project of education that is also an initiation, upholding the values of refinement, delight, and art that can give the nation the noble character it needs as it progresses in other, more material terms.⁵⁶

There is another absence, related to the *bhadralok*, that must be accounted for: why is there no showcasing of Bengali music, dance, etc.? One reason is that *Jalsaghar* is not specifying *how*, namely through what activities, it—the preservation of noble character through aesthetics and refinement—must be done as much as demonstrating the step prior: *that* it must be done, if only to not let such an important task fall into the hands of the likes of Ganguly. Here, the notion of 'constitutive outside' is again of help.

But there is more to be said. First is that, as noted in the first paragraph of the article, it is not surprising for the Bengali *bhadralok* to represent India and Bengal as co-extensive. Insofar as the film is by, for, and about the *bhadralok*, the music showcased is not not-Bengali. Another way to put this is that anything Indian is Bengali. Sudipta Kaviraj speaks of the 'confidence of the educated Bengali's chauvinism' in relation to the *bhadralok*'s appropriation of history in the nineteenth century: '[A] process in which the Bengali aggressively appropriates the other. Bengalis do not as yet see themselves as part of a larger whole; they simply append India to themselves.' Kaviraj calls this 'the founding moment of conceiving a "national" community, the

⁵⁵ Here, I am referring to Ernesto Laclau's (1990) concept of the 'constitutive outside' as part of the process through which social order seeks to render itself as a (process-less) entity. E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Verso, London, 1990.

⁵⁶ This genealogy of earthly paradise also points, as hinted here, to a crucial component of *bhadralok* self-fashioning, namely as educators of the nation. But the significant links between the soirée room and the classroom are for another time.

historic beginning of an imaginative integration’—one, I might add, very much on the terms preferred by the *bhadralok*.⁵⁷

The second answer regarding the absence of Bengali content in the *jalsas* is the emphasis placed on the timeless classics. The *bhadralok* engagement with the classics was noted above and, indeed, specifically in relation to the intended audience for *Jalsaghar*. What is more, in India, broadly speaking, there have been two sorts of music that can be called classical: Hindustani and Carnatic, glossed as northern and southern. The performances in *Jalsaghar* are Hindustani classical—as one would expect in a Bengal that had been under Mughal rule—and the capital of such classic culture at the time was the city of Lucknow. I have described Lord Roy as a connoisseur, but that can be extended to ‘cosmopolitan’. As noted before, the Roy dynasty became a proper dynasty during the Mughal period; we can come to this conclusion on various grounds, but not least because of the lineage—the portraits of his noble ancestors that he toasts, going back to his great-great-grandfather. It should be no surprise that, embedded in this history, the House of Roy’s cosmopolitanism would be of Persian influence.⁵⁸ Accordingly, I would say that the issue is not whether the *jalsas* are or are not Bengali, but that they are classical and, indeed, cosmopolitan. However, this does pose the challenge to the *bhadralok* that this article has been pointing to: how, then, to appropriate nobility—here, arguably, a classical and Persian-attuned nobility—into the project of Bengali nationalism. The film raises the conundrum and calls the *bhadralok* to respond (thereby justifying their part in doing so); but the film does not answer *how* the *bhadralok* are to carry forward this standard, through what specific practices.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ S. Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 146. Overall, Norbert Peabody’s analysis of the protean interrelationships between kingship, religion, and historical consciousness in pre-colonial times provides a closer parallel to *bhadralok* projects of paradise than does Kaviraj’s account, which is, like those of Nicholas Dirks and Partha Chatterjee, focused on the encounter of India with British colonial modernity. See N. Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

⁵⁸ K. Chatterjee, ‘The Persianization of Ithihasa: performance narratives and Mughal political culture in eighteenth-century Bengal’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 67, no. 2, May 2008, pp 512–43.

⁵⁹ One way to elaborate the argument I have pursued here is to see whether and how it fits with Partha Chatterjee’s distinction between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ domains of nationalism. The binary that *Jalsaghar* presents between Lord Roy and Mahim Ganguly resonates with Chatterjee’s distinction. I have discussed Chatterjee on this subject in G. Ghosh, ‘The (un)braiding of time in the 1947 partition of India’, *Migration in History*,

In this article, I have proposed that the *bhadralok* were challenged to preserve an ethos of nobility that overlaps with the pleasures of earthly paradise. Importantly, it is a paradise in a sensual sense—a garden of wonder, awe, and the uplifting, exceptional, and collective delight of perfumes, sweets, food, flowers, drink, architecture, paintings, gardens, fountains, eroticism, and, above all, song and dance. This is not the other-worldly heaven of unending serenity, bleached white; nor is it a pew-like order as commanded by imposing, authoritative organ music. And it most definitely is not the monastic ideal of paradise sought through penitential prayer, in which the abnegation of pleasure in this life prefigures the same in the afterlife. Rather, here, the ‘task’ is to delight and even transcend. It is an end in itself.⁶⁰

At the same time, this ideal of earthly paradise overlaps with, though is to be kept distinct from, the utilitarian (and perhaps utopian) thinking that also informed *bhadralok* nationalism. The latter, as reflected in the commitments of Nehru, uphold technological innovation and, more broadly, utilitarian rationality as a means to an end—a way of producing the greatest good for the greatest number of ‘the Indian people’.⁶¹ *Jalsaghar* says implicitly that, with the feudal lords rightly gone, and the crass businessmen eager but incapable, the role and responsibility of reproducing refinement have been conferred onto the *bhadralok*. Perhaps we can call it the *bhadralok*’s burden.

A. Grafton and M. Rodriguez (eds), Rochester University Press, Rochester, New York, on behalf of the Davis Center of Princeton University, 2007. For a unique post-colonial perspective on the relation between what we are calling here the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of sovereignty, see G. Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2015.

⁶⁰ With regard to *Jalsaghar*, Kemp remarks that ‘Ray was ready to demonstrate how, in his view, songs and dances should be used in a film—not as *irrelevant interludes*, but as an integral and essential part of the action’ (emphasis added). I suggest that the music and dance that are featured in Indian (particularly Bollywood) cinema are not irrelevant interludes but, rather, a reflection of the value placed on the possibility of an earthly paradise. It is not a coincidence that Indian deities play music and dance. See Kemp, *The Music Room*. Faisal Devji’s research on Pakistan as a community of belonging could provide a model for how the ‘aristocratic collectivities’ of the *jalsaghar* were constituted, which could, in turn, potentially model the ways in which the *bhadralok* sought to appropriate these ideas and practices. F. Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2013.

⁶¹ See M. Miles, *Urban Utopias: The Built and Social Architectures of Alternative Settlements*, Routledge, New York, 2008, p. 54. Modern Western utopias incorporated detailed plans for ‘urban’ organization, which were managerial and, at times, prescriptive. For example, Robert Owen’s ‘parallelograms’, which emphasized internal courtyards for education and recreation, and Charles Fourier’s ‘phalanstery’ (1772–1837), which heralded the cultivation of plants, flowers, and orchards.

As noted at the outset, Sagarika Ghose finds that the *bhadralok* have failed to discharge their duty, have failed to lift the other citizens of India to their level of education and refinement. Many *bhadralok* would argue that it is independent India that has instead failed them, and has prevented them from fulfilling the mission of suturing nobility and utility together into an ideal nation. In any case, the *bhadralok* are absent in both *Jalsaghar* and the new India. The film, albeit implicitly, insists on their importance, whereas India, apparently, does not.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material (including two film clips) for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000482>.