

Cinematic Representation of the Partition of Bengal: A Study of *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted, 1950)

Amrita Chatterjee

SACT, Department of History, Serampore Girls College

Abstract—The 1947 Partition of India redefined the subcontinent’s political and cultural landscape, displacing millions and rupturing centuries of shared coexistence. Among the earliest artistic responses to this upheaval was *Chinnamul* (*The Uprooted*, 1950), directed by Nemai Ghosh. Based on a story by Swarnakamal Bhattacharya, the film vividly portrays the dislocation of refugees from East Bengal to West Bengal, using a neorealist aesthetic to document the trauma of Partition. This paper examines *Chinnamul* through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating film studies and heritage studies perspectives to explore its representation of refugee identity, memory, and cultural loss. It situates the film within the socio-political realities of postcolonial Bengal and argues that *Chinnamul* stands as both a cinematic and historical testimony to one of South Asia’s most defining human tragedies.

Index Terms—Partition of India, Bengal, Refugee cinema, Nemai Ghosh, *Chinnamul*, Realism, Cultural memory, Postcolonial identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most consequential events in modern history, leading to the creation of India and Pakistan and causing the forced migration of nearly fifteen million people (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The human consequences of this political decision included communal violence, displacement, and the enduring trauma of uprooted lives. Bengal, in particular, experienced a distinctive form of Partition trauma — one that unfolded not only through physical separation but also through the fracturing of cultural continuity (Chatterji, 1999). Amid this turbulent historical moment, Indian cinema began to grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and displacement. Nemai Ghosh’s *Chinnamul* (*The Uprooted*, 1950) stands out as the **first Indian film** to directly portray the Partition of Bengal and its refugee

crisis (Bhaskar, 1998). Drawing on the realist idiom, the film presents the psychological and material suffering of those who fled East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to seek refuge in the rapidly urbanizing cityscape of Calcutta. Through its narrative, visual language, and social engagement, *Chinnamul* documents the intersection of personal tragedy and national transformation.

II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PARTITION CINEMA

The Partition of 1947 fundamentally altered the fabric of Bengali society. Families were divided, cultural practices disrupted, and the notion of “home” redefined. Refugee settlements emerged around Calcutta, particularly near Sealdah Railway Station, which became a living symbol of dislocation and survival (Bose, 2007). While contemporary newspapers and literature captured this turmoil, visual media offered a uniquely visceral means of representing displacement.

In postcolonial India, film became a vital site for negotiating collective memory (Mookerjee, 2011). Early cinematic portrayals of Partition were rare, partly because the wounds were too recent and partly due to state censorship and public sensitivity. Against this backdrop, *Chinnamul*’s release in 1950 was a bold artistic and political statement. It offered an unflinching depiction of refugees’ struggles in a period when the new nation was striving to project unity and optimism.

The film’s connection to the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) — a leftist cultural movement that sought to address social inequities through art — further reinforced its political and humanitarian message (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). The IPTA network provided many of the film’s cast and crew,

including Ritwik Ghatak, Bijon Bhattacharya, and Shobha Sen, all of whom were deeply engaged in theatre and people's movements.

III. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THEMATIC CONCERNS

Chinnamul opens in a peaceful East Bengal village where Hindus and Muslims coexist harmoniously — an idyllic representation of pre-Partition Bengal's syncretic culture. The announcement of Partition, however, destabilizes this harmony, forcing Hindu families to flee. Among them are Govinda and Sumati, a young couple expecting their first child. Their journey from village to city mirrors the collective migration of millions who became refugees overnight. In Calcutta, they encounter the brutal realities of displacement: scarcity of food, lack of shelter, and the psychological burden of being perpetual outsiders in their own land. The Sealdah Railway Station becomes a central motif, symbolizing both transit and stagnation — a place where refugees arrive but seldom find belonging.

Thematically, *Chinnamul* engages with the idea of uprootedness not only as a spatial condition but as an existential one. The refugees' loss of land equates to a loss of identity, echoing the broader anxieties of postcolonial India. The film's title — "The Uprooted" — encapsulates the rupture between the familiar past and an uncertain present.

IV. CINEMATIC REALISM AND AESTHETIC STRATEGY

Nemai Ghosh's directorial vision in *Chinnamul* was deeply influenced by Italian

Neorealism, particularly films like *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Rome, Open City* (1945). Ghosh employed non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and minimalist sound design to evoke a documentary-like realism. The cinematography, handled by Ghosh himself, used natural light and long takes to heighten emotional immediacy.

As Bhaskar (1998) observes, *Chinnamul's* realism diverged from the melodramatic tendencies of contemporary mainstream cinema. Instead, it embraced an understated, humanist approach that mirrored the collective resilience of ordinary people. The film's musical score, composed by Kalabaran

Das, complements this aesthetic restraint, using folk motifs rather than orchestral grandeur.

Moreover, Ghosh's framing of urban spaces — congested lanes, railway platforms, refugee colonies — transforms Calcutta into a character in itself. The city becomes a palimpsest of human suffering and survival, embodying both the indifference and the endurance of modernity.

V. CULTURAL MEMORY, HERITAGE, AND THE REFUGEE NARRATIVE

From a heritage studies perspective, *Chinnamul* operates as a visual archive of the refugee experience. It captures the lived realities of Partition not as historical abstraction but as embodied suffering. The refugees' precarious existence around Sealdah Station stands as an enduring monument to displacement — one that continues to shape Bengal's cultural identity. Cultural theorists such as Pierre Nora (1989) describe such representations as *lieux de mémoire* — sites of memory where collective trauma is symbolically preserved. *Chinnamul* functions precisely in this capacity, preserving the affective and material traces of a historical rupture. It bridges the gap between history and memory, transforming cinematic space into a repository of postcolonial heritage.

Furthermore, the film's portrayal of women, particularly Sumati, offers insight into gendered dimensions of displacement. Her pregnancy amid homelessness symbolizes both vulnerability and hope — the continuation of life in a fractured world. Later Bengali filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak would expand upon this motif, particularly in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1962), where the refugee woman becomes a metaphor for the wounded nation (Ghosh, 2013).

VI. RECEPTION AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Upon its release, *Chinnamul* received critical acclaim within progressive cultural circles but limited commercial success. However, its influence extended internationally. The renowned Russian director Vsevolod Pudovkin, during his visit to Calcutta, viewed the film and was so moved by its realism that he arranged for its screening in the Soviet Union, where it played in 188 theatres (Bhattacharya, 2003).

This unprecedented international exposure marked one of the earliest cultural exchanges between postcolonial India and Soviet cinema.

Within India, the film's realist approach influenced a generation of filmmakers associated with the Parallel Cinema movement. Its emphasis on social issues, authentic locations, and humanist storytelling paved the way for directors such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak, who later brought similar sensibilities to Indian cinema (Dissanayake, 1994).

VII. CONCLUSION

Chinnamul remains a cornerstone in the history of Indian and Bengali cinema — not merely for being the first film on the Partition of Bengal but for its profound humanism. By combining neorealist aesthetics with political consciousness, Nemai Ghosh transformed cinema into an instrument of social documentation and cultural preservation.

Through its portrayal of refugees' struggles, the film foregrounds the enduring questions of identity, belonging, and nationhood that continue to resonate in South Asian consciousness. It stands as both a cinematic and heritage artifact — one that bridges art and history, emotion and politics, memory and monument.

In acknowledging *Chinnamul*'s legacy, we recognize cinema's power to bear witness to the human cost of historical change and its capacity to transform collective pain into cultural memory.

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