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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 University of Otago, New Zealand
Email: gautam.ghosh@otago.ac.nz

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 represent the languid past of the nobility, and the ascendance of a 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.

* Parts of this article were presented by invitation at the Asian Studies Centre, Oxford University, the South Asian Studies Centre, Heidelberg University, and the Borders, Citizenship & Mobility Workshop at Kings College London. Portions were also presented for the panel ‘Righteous futures: morality, temporality, and prefiguration’ organized by Craig Jeffrey and Assa Doron for the 2016 Australian Anthropological Society Meetings. I appreciate the comments and questions I received on these occasions. Thanks to Daud Ali, Joya Chatterj, Faisal Devji, Nicholas DeGenova, Gita Dharmal-Frick, Ralph Nicholas, Polly O’Hanlon, Norbert Peabody, William ‘Bo’ Sax, Paola Voci, and, in particular, Ronald Inden, Cecilia Novero, and Aditinath Sarkar. I am grateful to Aurora Films and Sandip Ray for copyright permission to use the Jalsaghar materials. All errors, including in translation from Bengali, are my own.
through soirées. These soirées are produced for those among the nobility who are sufficiently cultivated and refined 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, such as 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

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 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

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.
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’. 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 challenge itself as it is 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.

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’. *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. In the context of this article, one might take *bhadralok* to be a muted form of ‘noble people’.

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’. I suggest that they saw—and in some ways still see—themselves as the flagship and what I would

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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 ‘challenge’ for the *bhadralok* than a matter of the *bhadralok* inviting themselves to raise the concern and then 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*.

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, 1986. Interestingly, when the latter was reprinted in 1993, the question mark in the title was dropped.
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* (1947), Jawaharlal Nehru stated that a dynamic, forward-looking 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 (law, 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 terms of the arts, character, cultivation, language, clothing, food, profession, etc. To undertake manual labour would be to sully their *bhdrata* (*bhadra*-ness); they did not want to get their hands muddy.

The *bhadralok* expected that would play a leading role in Bengal and Bengal would play a leading role in an independent Indian nation.13

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11 Among 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 the 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*’.
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,
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

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

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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’.
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.

\textit{Jalsaghar and bhadralok}

In this article, I focus on one particular ideal of nationhood suggested
in Satyajit Ray’s \textit{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 economic—namely material—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 \textit{Jalsaghar} asks,
or tasks, the bhadralok to claim this purview too. \textit{Jalsaghar} suggests 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 \textit{Jalsaghar} as ‘The
Soirée Room’ rather than ‘The Music Room’ or ‘Music Salon’; in French,

\(^{15}\) 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 1984, 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.

\(^{16}\) 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
return to his article below.
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. 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. The transition time to evening, dusk 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.

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 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 (1962) and Eric Hobsbawm (1962). For these scholars, the salon is

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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, 2016, pp. 66–8.

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 argued
below.

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).

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’

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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.
or ‘Raja’, during Mughal or British times. 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. 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. 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 hazur and huzoor) as Roy is referred to throughout the film, especially by his servants—a huzuree is one who serves and 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 goes back to (at least) those times. That the Persianiate-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.

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

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

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. Roy’s ear is so attuned that he 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. 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. 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: 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 possibly be helpful in a full analysis of the dynamics of the soirée, if 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 plebian poite in speaking of this important initiation ceremony, but this is never used in the film—perhaps to distinguish Lord Roy from the plebian. 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.

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.
passions—Mahamaya suggests it is more of an addiction—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. 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
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

28 In Bandyopadhyay’s original story, we are told that Ganguly gradually but steadily
usurped much of the Roy estate’s land.
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’ fanning makes the experience more regal as well as more comfortable.

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.

\(^{29}\) 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, there are elements of **darshan**—a visual connection with something holy or auspicious—in the soirées. See also note 33 below regarding **sahrdayas**.
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.

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: he has pawned her jewels to pay for a soirée. Mahamaya describes a disturbing nightmare that she had about 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, in godly palaces. Urvashi is beautiful and elusive, the source of much delight, and is considered a ‘dawn goddess’. 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.
Some time after the film’s first soirée scene (there are three), the son Khoka and wife leave to visit her family. To get there and back, they will have to take a boat to cross the river that bounds the estate.

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. The names of the servants are worth remarking on: 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.

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...
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.

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. There are cobwebs. The estate’s Kali temple remains, as well as some funds 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. The Padma is one name for the wife of Vishnu. Vaishnav and Shakti worship, respectively, were and are the key forms of religious practice among Bengali bhadrakalok. (The name of Roy’s wife, Mahamaya, is an acknowledgment of the Shakti 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 bhadrakalok 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 bhadrakalok; I will argue the ‘by and for’ below.

In Bengali culture, there is an important distinction between an established house for humans (bhitte 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 Roy bari has degenerated into a basa: the perennial ancestral home does not steady and mould time; rather, it is now subject to its ravages.
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 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

33 In the terms of Sanskritic poetics, Lord Roy and his peers are sahridayas. A sahdaya can be understood as ‘a man of taste’ or ‘connoisseur’, but it is much more than that. Only a sahdaya 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, 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.
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.\textsuperscript{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 right of the house-holding host’ (grihasthā), Roy says sternly, ‘to give the first benefaction’ (inam), which he then does. Ganguly is humiliated.

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, namely from the truly sacrosanct.

\textsuperscript{34} As the goddess of creation and destruction, Kali has also been seen as the goddess of time itself.
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 utilitarian modernity, on the other. Putting these more abstractly, I see, in *Jalsaghar*, a

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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’ (p. 154); 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. 148–49; 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*,

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**Roy’s and Ray’s earthly paradise**

Figure 6.
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.

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 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 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, 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.
Caryatids, reminiscent of those of the *Erechtheion* on the Athenian
Acropolis.\(^{36}\)

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’ (p. 72,
emphases added). 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’ (p. 74).\(^{37}\) 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.\(^{38}\)

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
it is to 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

\(^{36}\) 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.

\(^{37}\) Inden, ‘Classics in the garden’, pp. 72–4. For my argument, invoking the idea of
the ‘host’ is more apposite than that of the ‘owner’.

\(^{38}\) 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.
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 characterized the gardens (pairidaeza) of Persian kings, ‘filled with all the fine and good things that the earth wishes to bring forth’.39

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’ (p. 72). 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.40

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.41 Later in the flashback, Roy asks Ananta to describe

40 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 argues, in particular, in his Essay on Philosophical Method, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.
41 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’. 
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.’

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.

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. 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.

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 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’, Our Films, Their Films, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1976, pp. 45–6.

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.

Spectacle is not used here, as it often is in cultural critique, such as spectacle as a tool for mystifying and misleading the masses.
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 Roy’s son perishes and also his wife; with her dies the possibility of having another son for the patriline.

Phillip Kemp (2011) 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’. 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 to be ‘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*). 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.

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46 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.
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). Immediately thereafter, he trains his attention to the glorious chandelier that illuminates the soirée 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 ablution, 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’. 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.

In the flashback, we saw the Lord preparing his son Khoka, the next in line, for a life of nobility. We saw Khoka being tutored in music by Roy himself and learning about painting (he is especially attentive when his father’s portrait is painted). 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, namely 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 carriage (including horseriding) 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

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47 The more common word for lineage in Bengali is bangsha.
48 Ganguly, by contrast, describes himself as a ‘self-made man’ who lacks ‘pedigree’.
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, as he did with Khoka’s corpse. He cries out for Ananta, who rushes to his side and says 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. It is the dawn of a new era, but will it be left to the Gangulys of the world, and their sons, to form and fulfil it?
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 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? That 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 the short story penned in 1938.49 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

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49 14 Stories that Inspired Satyajit Ray, edited and translated by B. Chattopadhyay, Harper Perennial, 2014. The ending is different in Bandyopadhyay’s original story: Roy again shuts down the house, whereas Ray shows Roy clinging to and then thrown by and thus killed by his own ‘royal’ mount.
winner (as bhadralok are quick to point out), which he won for literature. Tagore’s songs, called Rabindrasangeet, were and are treated with great 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.50 Satyajit Ray, as Ghose 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.51

50 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.
51 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
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 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’.
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.52

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 such that they contextualize the conflict between the film’s rival figures, Lord Roy and the industrialist Ganguly, namely the aristocrat and the businessman—or, more broadly, between projects that pursue ends in themselves versus those that pursue means to ends.53 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

53 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.
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.\textsuperscript{54}

There is another absence, along with the \textit{bhadralok}, that must be accounted for: why is there no showcasing of Bengali music, dance, etc.? One reason is that \textit{Jalsaghar} is not specifying \textit{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, as it were: \textit{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 \textit{bhadralok} to represent India and Bengal as co-extensive. Insofar as the film is by, for, and about the \textit{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 \textit{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 historic beginning of an imaginative integration’—one, I might add, very much on the terms preferred by the \textit{bhadralok}.

The second answer regarding the absence of Bengali content in the \textit{jalsas} is the emphasis placed on the timeless classics. The \textit{bhadralok} engagement with the classics was noted above and, indeed, specifically in relation to the intended audience for \textit{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 \textit{Jalsaghar} are Hindustani classical—as

\textsuperscript{54} This genealogy of earthly paradise also points, as hinted here, to a crucial component of \textit{bhadralok} self-fashioning, namely as educators of the nation. But the significant links between the soirée room and the classroom are for another time.

\textsuperscript{55} S. Kaviraj, \textit{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 \textit{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, \textit{Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India}, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
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. 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 bhadrakol 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 bhadrakol to respond (thereby justifying their part in doing so); but the film does not answer how the bhadrakol are to carry forward this standard, such as through what specific practices.

In this article, I have proposed that the bhadrakol 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


57 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*, A. Grafton and M. Rodriguez (eds), Rochester University Press, 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, 2015.
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.  

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 bhadralk 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’. 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 bhadralk. Perhaps we can call it the bhadralk’s burden.

As noted at the outset, Sagarika Ghose finds that the bhadralk have failed to discharge their duty, have failed to lift the other citizens of Indians to their level of education and refinement. Many bhadralk 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 bhadralk 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 for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X16000482.

58 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 bhadralk sought to appropriate these ideas and practices. F. Devji, Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea, Harvard University Press, 2013.

59 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.