Online ISSN 2349-9621

Research Article

LIS Today
Vol. 12, No. 1, January–June 2026

Public Libraries in Bengali Cinema: An Enhanced Awareness of Knowledge, Culture, and Social Consciousness

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https://doi.org/10.48165/lis.2026.12.01.07

ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: 15.08.2026
Revised: 04.09.2026
Accepted: 03.10.2026

Keywords
Bengali Cinema
Public Library
Reading Culture
Satyajit Ray
Literature
Knowledge
Social Awareness
Cultural Identity
Bengal

ABSTRACT

Public libraries hold a distinctive place in the cultural life of Bengal. They are more than repositories of books; they provide open spaces where education, self-learning, curiosity, tradition, culture, and social interaction come together. Since the middle of the twentieth century, Bengali Cinema has frequently presented reading rooms, libraries, bookshelves, newspapers, archives, and other knowledge-centred spaces as familiar parts of everyday life. Although libraries are not always the main setting of a film, their presence carries strong cultural meaning, particularly within Bengal's rich literary heritage and the development of its educated middle class.

This paper examines the representation of libraries and related knowledge spaces in Bengali Cinema, with particular attention to the films of Satyajit Ray, the intellectual traditions of regional cinema, and the detective films featuring Feluda. It argues that libraries in Bengali films are often associated with knowledge, culture, identity, freedom, exploration, and critical thinking. Their portrayal also reflects a broader Bengali understanding of education—not simply as a means of obtaining qualifications, but as an ongoing process of learning, intellectual development, and personal enlightenment.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Bengal is closely associated with books, reading, education, periodicals, literary activities, and intellectual life. During the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance, the expansion of vernacular education and the establishment of public institutions made knowledge an important part of modern Bengali society. Libraries played an important role in this development by providing access to books, newspapers, journals, and other sources of knowledge beyond the home and educational institutions.

Bengali Cinema has also maintained a strong relationship with literature. Many important Bengali films have been based on the works of writers such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. The literary collections available in libraries provided filmmakers and writers with valuable sources of stories, ideas, and cultural themes.

In Bengali Cinema, books and reading spaces are often presented as symbols of education, intellectual interest, cultural values, solitude, and social awareness. Libraries therefore have a significance beyond their physical function. They can be understood as cultural spaces that preserve knowledge and reflect the intellectual and literary traditions of Bengali society.

This paper explores the following questions:

• In what ways do libraries and reading spaces manifest in Bengali Cinema?

• How does cinema relate to libraries and the pursuit of knowledge?

• In what manner do books and libraries embody Bengali identity?

• How can libraries function as venues for social awareness and intellectual resistance?

• What insights do cinematic libraries provide regarding transformations in Bengali society?

The primary argument of this paper posits that the library in Bengali Cinema goes beyond being a mere backdrop. It represents a space for knowledge that empowers individuals to engage with ideas that challenge prevailing narratives, inherited beliefs, and political ideologies.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

To understand the importance of libraries in Bengal, it is necessary to consider the development of modern education and print culture. During the nineteenth century, Bengal witnessed considerable growth in printing, journalism, literary societies, educational institutions, and voluntary organizations. The increasing availability of books and periodicals contributed to the growth of an educated middle class and encouraged a strong culture of reading. In this context, libraries emerged as important institutions for promoting education, reading, and access to knowledge.

Unlike private libraries maintained by wealthy individuals, public and semi-public libraries provided wider access to books and information. They played an important role in making knowledge available to a broader section of society and contributed to the development of an informed and educated public.

The history of Bengali Cinema is also closely connected with this literary and intellectual environment. Many Bengali filmmakers were influenced by literature, reading, and the cultural traditions of Bengal. The works of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, and later Rituparno Ghosh demonstrate the close relationship between cinema and literature.

Mrinal Sen, for instance, recalled visiting the Imperial Library in Calcutta, now the National Library, where he came across Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*. His encounter with the book helped him recognize cinema as an art form with its own aesthetic principles and encouraged him to explore literature related to cinema and aesthetics. This example illustrates how libraries and access to scholarly literature could influence the intellectual and creative development of individuals in Bengal.

This relationship is crucial as it signifies a symbiotic process: library → reading → intellectual discovery → awareness of cinema → filmmaking. Thus, the library plays an essential role in the development of Bengali cinema.

THE LIBRARY AS A SYMBOL OF KNOWLEDGE

The library has an important place in Bengali cultural representations, particularly because it is closely associated with knowledge and intellectual life. In films, a person surrounded by books is rarely shown as someone without opinions or interests. Books can suggest curiosity, education, personal aspirations, and social position. A library therefore provides a simple way of showing a character's intellectual world.

Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964) provides a notable example. In the opening scenes, Charu is shown reading and spending time with books, while her husband Bhupati is engaged in his intellectual and political interests. Charu's interest in the library and her search for Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Kapalkundala* reveal her strong interest in literature and her desire for a life beyond the boundaries of her household. The books and library are important because they help show the difference between Bhupati's political concerns and Charu's cultural and personal interests.

The scene also suggests that literacy should not be understood only in terms of formal education. For Charu, reading is more than a learned skill. Books give her an opportunity to explore her thoughts, interests, and emotions. Her engagement with literature becomes an important part of her search for identity and a life beyond the limitations of her domestic surroundings.

Consequently, the library emerges as a symbolic portal:

Book → reading → imagination → self-awareness → the aspiration for a wider world.

Subsequently, Bengali cinema frequently portrays reading as an active form of awareness, rather than just a passive cultural practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on textual analysis, visual analysis, and archival research. The primary sources include Charulata, Aparajito, selected Feluda films, and films by Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. The analysis focuses on mise-en-scène, bookshelves, reading practices, library spaces, newspapers, archival materials, representations of education, and the social background of

characters who have access to books and other literary resources.

The study draws on ideas from library studies, film studies, cultural studies, public-sphere theory, and the sociology of knowledge. Such an approach helps examine not only the presence of libraries and reading spaces in Bengali cinema but also their wider cultural significance. It explores how books, reading practices, libraries, and other information spaces relate to education, social awareness, intellectual life, and the development of modern Bengali identity.

CHARULATA: LIBRARY, GENDER, AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Charulata offers a detailed portrayal of the library as a social and gendered space. Charu lives in a wealthy nineteenth-century Bengali household that provides material comfort but leaves her emotionally isolated. Her husband, Bhupati, is deeply involved in journalism and politics, whereas Charu has few opportunities to participate in the world beyond the home.

The library becomes an important space for intellectual engagement. The opening scene brings together books, embroidery, opera glasses, windows, and elements of the household, presenting Charu as a woman who reads, observes, and thinks about the world around her. Her interest in literature reflects her desire to move beyond the limitations of domestic life and the expectations placed upon women. The influence of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay can also be seen in her literary interests. Bengali literature gives Charu an opportunity to connect with broader cultural and intellectual ideas. In this sense, the book is more than a physical object; it becomes a link between the individual and the wider society.

Thus, the library in Charulata fulfils three significant functions:

i. It offers familiarity.

ii. It creates a mental space.

iii. It suggests the potential for intellectual autonomy.

The film challenges the notion that domestic women lack intellectual engagement. Charu's connection with literature illustrates that intellectual awareness can thrive even amidst limited social mobility. Consequently, the library emerges as a subtle arena for confrontation.

EDUCATION, MOBILITY, AND THE APU TRILOGY

The relationship between knowledge and social mobility is an important theme in Bengali cinema. Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy—Pather Panchali (1955), Aparajito (1956), and Apur Sansar (1959)—presents the intellectual and social development of Apu against the changing social landscape of Bengal.

Among the three films, Aparajito is particularly important because it depicts Apu's movement from rural Bengal to educational institutions in Banaras and later Calcutta. This transition represents more than a change in location. It reflects Apu's gradual movement away from an identity shaped by family and social circumstances towards one developed through education, learning, and personal experience.

Education plays a central role in Apu's development. His early experience with the school system and his later education in Calcutta introduce him to new ideas and ways of understanding the world. Through education, Apu gains opportunities that were not easily available to him during his childhood. His journey therefore presents education as an important means of social and intellectual advancement.

Within this broader context, the library can be understood as an important symbol of access to knowledge. A library is a place where books and other sources of information are collected, organized, preserved, and made available to readers. For a young person such as Apu, access to such resources can open the door to literature, history, science, philosophy, and other fields of knowledge.

Libraries have also traditionally played an important role in Bengali society by providing relatively affordable access to reading and learning. The image of a person entering a reading room and choosing books from different areas of knowledge reflects the democratic nature of libraries. They provide opportunities for people from different social and economic backgrounds to engage with knowledge.

In this sense, Apu's journey in Aparajito can be viewed not simply as a story of education but also as a story of intellectual transformation. His movement from one place to another is accompanied by a gradual expansion of his understanding of society and the world around him. Education and access to knowledge become important forces that shape his aspirations and possibilities for the future.

READING AS SOCIAL AWARENESS

The role of libraries in Bengali Cinema goes beyond individual education. Reading can also develop social awareness and a deeper understanding of society. This idea can be seen in the films and intellectual journey of Mrinal Sen, whose works often explored poverty, class inequality, political conflict, urbanisation, and the changing realities of contemporary life.

Sen's development as a filmmaker shows how reading and access to knowledge can influence artistic thinking. His exposure to film theory at the Imperial Library was particularly important because it introduced him to new ideas about cinema and helped shape his understanding of film as an art form.

A library is not simply a place where books are kept. It is a space where personal curiosity can gradually develop into social awareness. Although a person may enter a library alone, the books they read connect them with different societies, historical periods, cultures, and intellectual traditions. In this way, reading can reduce intellectual isolation and encourage people to understand experiences beyond their own.

This relationship between reading, knowledge, and social awareness is also reflected in Bengali parallel cinema. Mrinal Sen's films, for example, rarely focus only on entertainment. They invite viewers to think about social realities and question the problems surrounding them. Thus, both the library and cinema can become important spaces for developing critical thinking and a broader understanding of society.

The same principle applies to libraries:

they cultivate better readers, while cinema inspires individuals to observe the world around them. Both pursuits share a vital ethical principle—the significance of being attentive.

LIBRARIES, LITERATURE, AND THE BENGALI CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

The profound relationship between Bengali cinema and literature renders libraries particularly significant.

Numerous Bengali films draw inspiration from literary works. This association implies that the books featured in these films contribute to a broader narrative. When characters engage with the writings of Bankimchandra, Tagore, or other Bengali authors, the film transcends mere representation of a book; it invokes an entire cultural legacy.

This fosters a richer interpretation: book within film → literary heritage → Bengali cultural memory → cinematic representation.

Charulata serves as an excellent illustration. The inclusion of Bankimchandra in the film links Charu's individual journey to the broader evolution of modern Bengali literature.

Likewise, the connection between the Apu films and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay exemplifies how Bengali literary narratives can be transformed into cinematic experiences.

Library culture is evident both in Bengali films and in their production processes.

Research on early Bengali cinema indicates that Bengali literature was a primary resource for filmmakers.

Consequently, the library can be perceived as a concealed element of the creative environment in which Bengali cinema is crafted.

THE DETECTIVE AND THE LIBRARY

The connection between libraries and knowledge is an important feature of Bengali detective films. The Feluda series, created by Satyajit Ray, presents knowledge as an essential part of detective work. Feluda's intelligence comes from his ability to observe carefully, read widely, remember details, and understand subjects such as geography, history, science, and culture.

The library naturally fits into the detective story because both are closely connected with information and interpretation. Books, newspapers, maps, documents, and records can provide important clues to a detective. By examining and connecting these sources, the detective can develop a clearer understanding of a mystery. This connection between knowledge and investigation can also be seen in film adaptations of the Feluda stories.

In *Double Feluda* (2016), the library appears as part of the setting associated with investigation and literary knowledge. Such representations reflect a familiar idea in Bengali popular culture: books and libraries are not only places for academic study but also spaces where information, curiosity, and discovery come together.

The popularity of Feluda also reflects an important aspect of Bengali intellectual culture. Intelligence is understood as more than academic success. It includes curiosity, awareness of society and culture, careful observation, memory, and the ability to connect information from different sources. In this context, the library

becomes a meaningful symbol of knowledge, curiosity, and intellectual ability.

THE LIBRARY AS A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE

One effective perspective on the library is through the lens of the public sphere. A public library differs from a private study in that it fulfils a collective cultural function. Various social groups can access the same body of knowledge. Newspapers, books, and periodicals transform into communal resources for intellectual development.

In this framework, the library functions as an institution that bridges the following:

- The individual and society,
- Formal education and self-directed learning,
- Solitary reading and public discourse,
- Educational legacy and innovative ideas.

This makes the library particularly relevant to Bengali cinema's emphasis on social transformation.

The works of Ray, Sen, and Ghatak frequently depict individuals navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity.

The library embodies the modern facet of this dynamic, symbolizing organized knowledge and information access. Simultaneously, it safeguards tradition by preserving literature, history, and collective memory.

Modern cultural institutions in Kolkata continue to exemplify this connection. For instance, the Kolkata Center for Creativity characterizes its library initiatives as a space that transcends mere books and reading areas, fostering knowledge exchange, artistic exploration, and community engagement.

In a similar vein, Nazrul Tirtha integrates a public library with cinemas, galleries, archival resources, and various cultural amenities, emphasizing the enduring relationship between reading, cinema, and public culture in Bengal.

TRANSITIONING FROM PHYSICAL LIBRARY TO CULTURAL ARCHIVE

The concept of the modern library has changed considerably over time. Libraries are no longer limited to collecting and preserving printed books and journals. They now also preserve films, photographs, manuscripts, recordings, digital materials, and other forms of cultural and historical records. This development is especially important in the context of Bengali cinema, where the preservation of films and related documents requires specialised archival facilities.

The library of the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, for instance, maintains a wide range of resources, including books, periodicals, film scripts, Bengali and Hindi literature, journals, newspapers, films, documentaries, and other audiovisual materials. Such collections support both academic study and the preservation of India's cinematic heritage.

The preservation of Satyajit Ray's intellectual and creative work provides another important example. The Satyajit Ray Society maintains an archive containing film scripts, literary manuscripts, illustrations, letters, books, magazines, film-related materials, and items from his personal collection. In a similar manner, the papers of Mrinal Sen are preserved as a research collection at the University of Chicago. The collection includes documents, correspondence, photographs, press materials, and other records associated with his life and work.

These examples show that the boundaries between libraries and film archives are becoming less distinct. Libraries are increasingly responsible not only for providing access to information but also for preserving the cultural memory of individuals, institutions, and society. In this changing environment, the modern library can therefore be understood as a memory institution that brings together traditional library collections, archival materials, and audiovisual heritage.

LIBRARY, MEMORY, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The cultural identity of Bengal has always been closely connected with its literary heritage. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay have left a lasting influence on Bengali society. Their works are not only important literary texts but also reflect the social values, experiences, and historical changes of different generations. Bengali cinema has played an important role in keeping this literary and cultural heritage alive by adapting literary works, presenting historical events, and portraying influential personalities.

A library provides a physical space where this cultural memory can be preserved. Its shelves bring together books, ideas, and experiences from different periods, allowing readers to connect with the past while engaging with the present. A reader entering a library

may encounter works that reflect the social and cultural life of earlier generations alongside contemporary writings.

Bengali cinema also creates a connection between past and present. Films based on literature, historical events, and the lives of important intellectuals often show how the experiences of earlier generations continue to influence society today. In this context, the library can be viewed as an important repository of Bengali cultural memory. By preserving books, literary works, and historical records, it helps ensure that the ideas and experiences of the past remain accessible to future generations.

CLASS AND ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

Nevertheless, libraries should not automatically be viewed as inherently democratic institutions. Historically, access to education and literature has often been influenced by class, gender, caste, geography, and economic circumstances. Bengali cinema has frequently portrayed these differences in access to knowledge and cultural resources. The contrast between the privileged intellectual environment of the household in *Charulata* and the hardships experienced by Apu's family is particularly striking. While Charulata lives among books and other cultural resources, Apu's family faces financial difficulties that limit educational opportunities. This contrast shows that access to knowledge is closely connected to social and economic conditions.

Public libraries can help reduce this inequality by making books, information, and educational resources available to people regardless of their personal wealth. This role is especially important for lower- and middle-income groups who may not be able to afford large personal collections of books or access to expensive educational resources. In this sense, the library occupies an important position between cultural privilege and cultural democracy. Bengali cinema's recurring focus on education, books, and intellectual aspirations reflects this continuing tension and highlights the role of libraries in making knowledge more accessible to society.

GENDER AND THE RIGHT TO READ

Gender adds another important aspect to the way libraries are represented in *Charulata*. The character of Charu shows how a woman's intellectual interests can be limited by the patriarchal structure of the family. Her interest in reading is not directly connected to political ideas, but it gradually helps her become more aware of herself and the world around her. In this sense, reading becomes an important first step towards personal and social freedom.

Through books and literature, Charu is able to imagine a life beyond the boundaries of her domestic surroundings. Reading gives her access to ideas, experiences, and possibilities that are not easily available to her in everyday life. This suggests that libraries and books can play an important role in developing awareness about gender and encouraging women to think independently.

The portrayal also challenges the common idea of a library as simply a quiet place for reading. Silence does not mean that nothing is happening. A quiet space can allow people to think, reflect, learn, and develop their own ideas. For women in particular, access to books and knowledge can provide an opportunity to develop an independent intellectual voice.

CINEMA AS A LIBRARY OF SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

There exists a dynamic interplay between cinema and libraries. While libraries safeguard written knowledge, cinema preserves the visual and emotional narratives of society. Consequently, Bengali cinema can be regarded as a cultural library.

Films encapsulate:

- Urban landscapes
- Local dialects
- Fashion trends
- Domestic architecture
- Social traditions
- Political conflicts
- Labour categories
- Gender dynamics
- Childhood experiences
- Skill evolution
- Modern technology
- Daily Bengali life

The archival significance of cinema becomes increasingly vital as social contexts evolve. For instance, the Library of Congress houses collections of Indian films, including Bengali productions by directors such as Satyajit Ray and Tapan Sinha. This illustrates how Bengali cinema has integrated into the global audiovisual heritage.

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For instance, the Library of Congress houses collections of Indian films, including notable Bengali works by filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray and Tapan Sinha. This illustrates how Bengali cinema has integrated into the global audiovisual heritage.

Consequently, the connection between libraries and cinema is reciprocal: libraries safeguard cinema, while cinema reflects and preserves societal narratives.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL AWARENESS

The digital age has changed the way people find and use information. Search engines, digital repositories, streaming services, e-books, and e-journals have made information more accessible than ever before. However, these developments have not reduced the importance of libraries. Instead, the role of libraries is changing. Libraries are no longer concerned only with helping people find information; they also help users understand, assess, and use information responsibly. This role has become especially important because people today are exposed to a huge amount of information every day.

In the past, traditional libraries mainly helped readers locate books and other printed materials. Today, libraries have a wider responsibility. They can help users identify reliable sources, recognize misleading information, and develop the ability to think critically about what they read and watch. This is particularly important in a time when misinformation can spread quickly through social media and digital platforms.

The connection between reading, learning, and intellectual curiosity has long been reflected in Bengali cinema. Libraries and books are often presented as spaces that encourage learning, imagination, and personal development. This connection remains meaningful in today's digital society. The library can therefore be understood not only as a place for accessing books and information but also as a space for developing critical thinking and media literacy. In this sense, the cultural image of the library continues to have an important role in helping people distinguish reliable knowledge from misinformation.

Modern readers should reflect on these inquiries:

- Who has manipulated this information?
- What is its historical context?
- Whose perspective is absent?
- How reliable is the source?
- How do interpretations differ?

These questions connect the traditional reading culture with present-day social consciousness.

CONCLUSION

The public library occupies a quiet but important place in the cultural world of Bengali Cinema. It is not always shown as a conventional library building. In many films, its presence can be understood through bookshelves, reading spaces, newspapers, archives, private book collections, educational institutions, and characters whose lives are closely connected with literature and learning.

From Charulata's interest in books and literature to Apu's educational journey, Bengali Cinema repeatedly connects reading and education with personal growth. The experience of Mrinal Sen and his association with the Imperial Library also reflects how access to books and ideas could influence intellectual development. These examples show that knowledge was an important part of the making of modern Bengali cultural consciousness.

The library represents an opportunity to move beyond the limitations of one's immediate social and family environment. Books introduce people to new ideas, different experiences, and wider perspectives. In this sense, the library becomes more than a place for keeping books; it becomes a space where individuals can develop their understanding of society and themselves.

At the same time, Bengali Cinema also draws attention to the unequal access to knowledge. Class, gender, education, and social position often influence who can access books, education, and intellectual spaces. Therefore, the library is presented both as an ideal of equality and as an institution whose benefits depend on actual access and inclusion.

The representation of libraries and reading spaces in Bengali Cinema can be understood through four closely connected ideas: *knowledge, culture, memory, and social consciousness.* The library preserves knowledge, supports cultural exchange, protects memories of the past, and encourages people to think about society and its problems.

The strong presence of books and literature in Bengali Cinema further strengthens this symbolism. Reading is often associated with education, self-development, curiosity, and intellectual freedom.

Whether the library appears directly on screen or is represented through books, reading, and literary environments, it reflects the importance traditionally given to education and intellectual life in Bengali society.

Thus, the library in Bengali Cinema is not simply a room containing books. It represents an intellectual and cultural space where knowledge connects the individual with society. Its representation allows cinema to explore education, social differences, cultural identity, and the desire for intellectual growth.

Studying libraries in Bengali Cinema therefore provides an opportunity to understand cinema as a reflection of cultural values rather than merely a form of entertainment. The portrayal of reading, literature, education, and intellectual environments reflects a society that has placed considerable value on learning and the pursuit of knowledge. The public library, whether visible or symbolic, consequently becomes an important cultural image of the continuing Bengali aspiration for an educated, thoughtful, and socially aware society.

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How to Cite this Article: Rahaman J., Pharcy M.S.. (2026). Public Libraries in Bengali Cinema: An Enhanced Awareness of Knowledge, Culture, and Social Consciousness. *LIS Today*, ***12***(1), 53-60. https://doi.org/10.48165/lis.2026.12.01.07