

Bringing Audio Description/Narration to Bengali Cinema: *Pather Panchali* and *Jamai-Babu* in Focus¹

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Abstract

Audio description, along with other forms of assistive technology that can foster an environment for inclusive entertainment, remains largely unimplemented for making audiovisual content accessible in many commonly spoken languages, including Bengali. In this paper, we present two pioneering initiatives that aim to at least partially mitigate this lack by providing audio-described films to the Bengali-speaking visually disabled audience. Additionally, this paper explores the process of creating such accessible content with critical awareness and examines practical concerns related to making the final products widely available to the public on the internet.

Keywords: audio description; audio narration; assistive technology; inclusivity; marginality; visual disability; accessibility

1. Introduction

A notion of accessibility that is limited to only ramps, Braille books, handrails, and other such visible, photographable accommodations, infrastructural fittings, and retrofits can lead to a society ruled and dominated by spectacle. In such an environment, access to cultural texts, like films, remains largely overlooked in popular/popularised/populist discourses, hindering the path to cultural inclusivity. Audio description (AD) holds the potential to reduce this hindrance, ensuring the production of accessible cultural capital. The implementation

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¹ Some of the initial ideas for this paper, especially the ones related to *Pather Panchali*, were developed through an oral presentation, entitled Audio Description as a Class Project: The Possibilities of Student-Led, Low Budget Initiatives for Filling the Gaps in Vernacular Assistive Technology, delivered by Arya Moitra on October 15, 2025, at BITS-Pilani, Hyderabad Campus. It was presented during Accessible by Design, a two-day international symposium organised by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in collaboration with the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems.

(Chakraborty, 2018, p. 30). The early development of AD can be traced through a series of events that took place in the United States during the latter half of the 20th century (Snyder, 2008). Eventually, AD has “emerged as an independent field of study and a viable commercial reality in its own right” (Taylor and Perego, 2022, p. 1). Practical applications of AD have made their way into the realm of Indian cinema. At first glance, this development might seem to be fully in alignment with Section 29 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016:

The appropriate Government and the local authorities shall take measures to promote and protect the rights of all persons with disabilities to have a cultural life and to participate in recreational activities equally with others which include,— ...

(c) making art accessible to persons with disabilities; ...

(g) developing technology, assistive devices and equipments to facilitate access and inclusion for persons with disabilities in recreational activities.

However, given the complex dimensions of language politics that inevitably spread to issues connected to disability, this introduction of AD in Indian films potentially contributes to a notion of accessible cinema that contradictorily endorses an uneven landscape for access to entertainment, giving preference to only a certain section of visually disabled people in India.

The Film and Series Title Directory, made available through the Audio Description Project (n.d.), presents an indication of this unevenness. At the time of writing, the directory offers a list of 650 works with Hindi AD. Titles of works with AD in other major languages spoken in India, let alone the more marginalised ones, either do not appear in the list at all or, in the case of a handful of languages, show up in a much smaller number.² For example, the directory currently displays merely 33 works with Tamil AD³. Sridhar (2020), criticising the practice of imposing the Hindi language “upon populations without recognizing their views and desires,” argues for “[c]ommitting ourselves to acknowledging diverse voices and becoming aware of our own biases and assumptions . . . to create a reality where pluralities co-exist, thrive and enrich each other” (p. 65). Taking this view into account, there is an urgent need for more initiatives that go beyond addressing solely the Hindi-speaking visually disabled film audience, and this paper presents such pioneering projects.

2. Audio Description as a Class Project

Project-based learning “shifts the focus away from passive absorption of information and toward active engagement” (Novalia et al., 2025). A product of this approach is our first AD initiative, which was initially conceived as a class project for the Disability in Indian Literature course at Jadavpur University⁴. Offered at

² The online directory can be filtered based on language and other criteria.

³ Despite this, the number of works featured in the directory with Tamil AD is still currently higher than that of works with AD in any other commonly spoken languages in India apart from Hindi. Other than Tamil and Hindi, works with AD in Kannada, Marathi, Punjabi, and Telugu can be found in the directory at this moment.

⁴ More specifically, Arya Moitra worked on the project as a student under the supervision of Ishan Chakraborty, who coordinates the aforementioned course.

the Department of English, the course has become a platform for the production of several student-led projects. Thus, it provided a suitable environment for producing the first-ever Bengali AD of a film—Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955). With no funds to support the initiative, the work was bound to be done under tight financial constraints. The entire project was produced on a laptop. A simple pair of earphones with an in-line microphone was used for recording the vocal input and for testing the audio output. Additionally, free and open-source digital tools, such as Audacity and Kdenlive, were utilised to deal with the audiovisual content.

On April 4, 2025, beyond the four walls of the classroom, the project was publicly presented with the help of the Centre for Persons with Disabilities at Jadavpur University. The event garnered significant media attention (Anandabazar Patrika, 2025; Das, 2025; ETV Bharat Bangla Team, 2025). During the presentation, both visually disabled and able-bodied people remained seated together to experience the new iteration of a well-known film. The organisation of this event should be considered as an effort to bring discussions related to disability studies out of the academic sphere, raising general awareness regarding AD and its importance in Bengali cinema. This direct societal engagement opens up possibilities for community-engaged scholarship, which “centrally focuses on the collaborative development and application of scholarly knowledge to address pressing social issues” (da Cruz, 2018, p. 149).

Being a student-led initiative, this project certainly lacks many qualities of a well-funded and professionally produced AD. However, this effort still proves that students can successfully attempt to at least partially fill the gaps in assistive technology. The project, the public presentation, the media interactions, and this paper itself should encourage similar undertakings in non-Hindi languages. The low-budget nature of the project only adds to this encouragement. Financial support can definitely enrich such a project, providing opportunities for upgrading the hardware, seeking professional help, and employing other enhancements. Nevertheless, while these possible improvements are desirable, this project proves that the lack of funds does not immediately render the production of AD impossible.

3. Audio Description as a Research Initiative

While the aforementioned project provided a valuable opportunity to explore the practical possibilities of AD in Bengali cinema, it lacked intentional utilisation of critical models to better understand theoretical underpinnings. A way to mitigate this lack has been presented through an opportunity funded by the Whose Knowledge? global campaign. The Accessibility/Languages/Tech initiative is “a collaborative effort between Whose Knowledge? and disability rights activists and researchers from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh,” which seeks to “propose solutions for the creation of meaningful, safe and accessible tech-based experiences of people with impairments in South Asia” (Whose Knowledge?, n.d.). As part of this research project, we have tentatively proposed to create audio-described versions of three Bengali films: *Jamai-Babu* (1931), *Radha-Krishna* or

Kalanka-Bhanjan (1933; henceforth *Radha-Krishna*), and Annapurnar Mandir (1936)⁵. Each of these films holds a unique place in the history of Bengali cinema for different reasons. *Jamai-Babu* is “the only surviving Bengali-language film from the silent era” (Sinha, 2013, p. 43). *Radha-Krishna* is one of the several films from “the early talkie era,” which, according to Gooptu (2010), “were films based on popular Bengali legends, and had been successful as theatre productions” (pp. 31–32). Chhabi Biswas, who is “[b]est-known outside Bengal for his two major performances in Satyajit Ray’s *Jalsaghar* and *Kanchanjungha*,” debuted as a film actor in *Annapurnar Mandir* (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999, p. 67). With this initiative, we aim to apply different AD-related models/theories to the films, potentially opening the door to analysing and comparing the implications of the critical output in future studies within the context of Bengali cinema. The following section of the paper will specifically highlight our process of making *Jamai-Babu* accessible to a Bengali-speaking visually disabled audience.

Jamai-Babu features slapstick humour centred around the protagonist Gobardhan, who comes from the countryside to visit Calcutta (Dass, 1931)⁶. The comic storytelling of this silent film depends on the audience’s ability “to laugh at Gobardhan and with the other more cosmopolitan characters who have mastered the technologies, languages, and modes of comportment of the city” (Sinha, 2013, p. 44). Our work on *Jamai-Babu* explores a specific model: audio narration (AN). Kruger (2010) states that AN “seeks to provide access through an integrated narrative,” making it different from “traditional AD, where the emphasis is on description,” while also acknowledging that “AD will already contain narrative elements just as AN would contain descriptive elements,” which creates “a descriptive-narrative continuum” (p. 233). While the existence of narrative elements in AD should come as no surprise, the very act of defining AN puts those elements in focus. The awareness of AN and the prioritisation of narrative elements might drastically change the course of making films accessible to a visually disabled audience. Kruger (2010) examines the descriptive-narrative continuum within the context of audiovisual translation (AVT) “that deals with providing access to audio(+)visual texts by means of supplementary auditory input that substitutes the visual component of the film (what we may call audio access for short)” (p. 232). An attempt to provide this audio access to a silent film, such as *Jamai-Babu*, brings particular benefits as well as challenges. Silent films and talkies offer two vastly different experiences during the creation of AD/AN tracks. As a silent film contains no recorded dialogue, it allows relatively greater flexibility in terms

⁵ The title sequences of both *Jamai-Babu* and *Radha-Krishna* feature Bengali and English versions of the same titles (Dass, 1931; Chowdhury & Bose, 1933). Both English versions are set entirely in uppercase. While the Bengali and the English titles are similar due to possessing double quotation marks for emphasis, they also contain slight differences, i.e. the presence or absence of a hyphen or a gap. Apart from using title case and omitting the emphatic quotation marks for the sake of readability, we have attempted to consistently follow the format of the English titles in the films by reproducing the placement of hyphens in the title sequences. The titles have been formatted differently by some scholars (Gooptu, 2010; Sinha, 2013).

⁶ The surname of Kalipada Dass, the director of *Jamai-Babu*, is spelt differently in different sources. Gooptu (2010) writes “Dass” (p. 27). Sinha (2013), however, prefers “Das” (p. 43). The spelling used by Gooptu (2010) aligns with how the director’s surname appears in the film (Dass, 1931). We have opted for maintaining this alignment in the list of references and in-text citations.

of framing and placing AD/AN content⁷. This greater flexibility, however, might come with an increased reliance on visual elements in the film, for which audio access needs to be sufficiently provided. The fast-paced nature of *Jamai-Babu* makes this especially difficult, providing little room for pauses during the verbalisation of the lively visual elements.

The notion of AN is based on a process of re-narrativising a film for the sake of providing audio access to visually disabled people, “presenting a coherent narrative that does not disturb the audience’s immersion in the story world” (Kruger, 2010, p. 234). In this context, Kruger (2010) borrows from narratology to present the notion of focalisation in films. Focalisation is defined as “the positioning and orientational restrictions of narration,” referring to “not only WHAT is shown, but from which (audiovisual, psychological, emotional, ideological, etc.) angle, or HOW it is shown.” (Kruger, 2010, p. 236). Kruger (2010) focuses on the written narratives to identify markers of focalisation, which “provide orientation in terms of characterisation (the qualities of the character through which we imagine experiencing events), subjectivity (interpretation of events as opposed to straightforward or objective description, use of personal pronouns), and deixis” (p. 238). This leads to a section on filmic markers of focalisation, in which Kruger (2010) declares that “it is important to understand how filmic narrative works, in order to determine the narrative effect created by filmic devices” (p. 239). With these points in mind, we prepared the AN script for *Jamai-Babu*. The next portion of the paper contains a brief analysis of the re-narrativised elements in the script with a few examples.

The film starts with Gobardhan’s letter, sent to his brother-in-law, Amal, announcing the protagonist’s impending arrival in Calcutta (Dass, 1931). As Amal laughs at the writing, his unnamed friend reminds him that he will be late if he does not leave for the train station immediately to meet Gobardhan. As the two friends get up, the film cuts to a shot of the arrival of a train at the station in question. It is possible to describe the previous scene by focusing only on the external features, disregarding the narrative effect caused by the scene that comes next. This approach can be suitable for conventional AD. Following the AN model, however, we propose the following to re-narrativise the earlier scene in Amal’s room:

বিছানায় শুয়ে চিঠিটা পড়তে পড়তে অমল আর হাসি চেপে রাখতে পারেনা। তা দেখে বই পড়া থামিয়ে তার বন্ধু বলে ওঠে, “কি অমল, চিঠি পড়ে যে তোমার মুখে হাসি আর ধরেনা—ভাইরাভাইকে আনতে যাও, এদিকে যে নটা!” সে নিজের হাতঘড়ি তুলে ধরে অমলকে দেখায়। বন্ধু ঠিকই বলেছে। এখন না বেরোলে সত্যিই বড্ড দেরী হয়ে যাবে।

Lying on his bed, Amal fails to contain his laughter while reading the letter. Seeing that, his friend stops reading and says, “Hey, Amal, that letter has you in stitches—you should go receive your brother-in-

⁷ One also needs to be mindful of how one interrupts the film score while recording AD/AN tracks. However, the video file of our choice contains no recorded soundtracks (“File:জামাই বাবু - বাংলা চলচ্চিত্র (১৯৩১).webm,” 2025). This does not imply that music was not present in silent films. Live music became a part of the presentation of silent films in India as early as 1896 (Ranade, 2006). While the video file we used does not preserve the traces of such live performances, there exists a version of *Jamai-Babu* on Commons with musical score (“File:Jamaibabu, 1931.webm,” 2025). This addition is most likely the result of an effort made by Rahul Ranade decades after the release of the film (Dubey, 2012; Mishra, 2012). We chose to not include this later development in our work.

law. It's already nine o'clock!" He shows his wristwatch to Amal. The friend is right. Amal will be really late if he does not leave immediately⁸. (Audio Description for Bengali Films, 2026, 1:23)

Instead of focusing only on external details, this narration attempts to understand Amal's inner subjectivity, which Kruger (2010) considers an essential element of AN. It is assumed that Amal takes action based on the subjective notion that his friend is indeed right. Later, Amal explicitly apologises to Gobardhan for being late (Dass, 1931). So, the paragraph above fits neatly within the narrative.

Looking into the influence of filmic devices on AN, Kruger (2010) emphasises that various filmic techniques, including different shots and angles, "have to be interpreted in terms of the way they allow and even direct the creation of the story world" (p. 240). At one point in Jamai-Babu, Gobardhan rushes through a street after bumping into multiple people (Dass, 1931). A tracking shot shows Gobardhan running forward while the hustle and bustle of the city goes on behind him. Our narration puts this scene into words in the following manner: "জনমানব ও যানবাহনে পূর্ণ প্রাণবন্ত রাস্তা কলকাতার। সেই ভিড় কাটিয়ে প্রাণ হাতে করে ছোট্টে গোবর্দ্ধন" [Filled with people and vehicles, the roads of Calcutta are lively. Pushing through that crowd, Gobardhan runs for his life] (Audio Description for Bengali Films, 2026, 6:40). Instead of describing the city and the running sequence separately, we use the word "সেই" [that] to connect the two. The city is crowded, and that very crowd is the one through which Gobardhan must run in panic. In this way, we have attempted to cohesively capture and connect all the moving elements, which gain impact due to the additional on-screen movement caused by the tracking shot. Soon after, we solidify the intensification of Gobardhan's panic amidst the chaos by mentioning the cause of his trouble using a suitable exclamation: "বাড়ি যাবে কী করে তা যে সে জানেনা!" [He has no idea how to return home!] (Audio Description for Bengali Films, 2026, 7:13). It is not any external feature but our assumption of Gobardhan's inner feelings that leads to this declaration. In conventional AD, only describing Gobardhan's actions (i.e. asking people for directions while frantically pacing through the street) should suffice, which we nevertheless do right before this exclamation.

According to Kruger (2010), a significant element of narrative impact includes the "imaginary positioning of the audience in relation to the story world" (p. 237). Sinha (2013) argues that "Gobardhan's incompetence in the city is not only the source of humor but is also a potential source of reassurance to audience members of their own cosmopolitanism" (p. 44). Thus, the positioning that allows the audience to treat Gobardhan as the object of laughter in the story world cannot be ignored. This realisation can influence the creation of AN. As an example, one can consider our treatment of a recurring comic device. Throughout the film, Gobardhan stumbles and falls in many scenes (Dass, 1931). During one of these scenes, we emphasise the repetition of the supposedly humorous motif: "গোবর্দ্ধন যেন সদ্য হাঁটতে শিখেছে, কারণ সে আবার পড়ে যায়" [It seems as if Gobardhan has only recently learnt to walk, because he falls again] (Audio Description for

⁸ The Bengali dialogues in our script are the same as the ones that visually appear on the screen as intertitles during the film. The film simultaneously features Bengali, English, and Hindi intertitles. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the paper, we have provided our own English translation for the Bengali excerpts.

Bengali Films, 2026, 3:46). This mocking observation clearly resides outside the realm of external description. Following Sinha (2013), it can be stated that the inclusion of this remark in the AN script aligns with the visual code that incites the audience to laugh at the rural protagonist's predicament.

4. Audio Description as an Openly Accessible Resource

Since the beginning of our collaboration with the Whose Knowledge? campaign, we have continued to direct our attention to making our work widely, publicly, and non-commercially available on the internet. Understanding platform-specific enforcement of copyright regulations and licensing information is crucial for dealing with online content. Our increased attention to this topic has led to certain challenges. While we do not claim full expertise in the nuances of copyright law across different jurisdictions, we nevertheless acknowledge the value of reflecting on some of these practical issues that one might face during the creation and publication of AD/AN content, especially without proper frameworks in place.

Wikimedia Commons (henceforth Commons) is significant to our AD/AN-related initiatives. It is claimed that Commons hosts “more than 100 million freely licensed media files,” which are “either in the public domain or published under a Creative Commons copyright license that allows them to be reused free of charge” (Wikimedia Foundation, n.d.). While we could access the video files for Pather Panchali and Jamai-Babu through Commons, we had to be cautious of the differences in information related to licensing. U.S. copyright laws heavily influence the existence of non-U.S. materials on Commons:

Commons is an international project, but its servers are located in the U.S., and its content should be maximally reusable. Uploads of non-U.S. works are normally allowed only if the work is either in the public domain or covered by a valid free license in both the U.S. and the country of origin of the work. The “country of origin” of a work is generally the country where the work was first published. (“Commons:Licensing,” 2026)

At the time of writing, the Pather Panchali video file is marked as a work that “is in the public domain in India because its term of copyright has expired or it is ineligible for copyright,” followed by a reference “to the Indian Copyright Act, 1957, as amended up to Act No. 27 of 2012 (Chapter V, Section 25)” (“File:পথের পাঁচালী – বাংলা চলচ্চিত্র (১৯৫৫).webm,” 2026)⁹. However, the section also states that the same “work may not be in the public domain in the United States because its U.S. copyright was restored by the URAA [Uruguay Round Agreements Act] as it was still copyrighted in its source country (India) on the URAA date (1 January 1996),” along with the following statement: “If you are the copyright holder of this file, and do not wish to have it hosted on Commons, please contact our designated agent or nominate the file for deletion, explaining the situation” (“File:পথের পাঁচালী – বাংলা চলচ্চিত্র (১৯৫৫).webm,” 2026). In the case of Jamai-Babu, the video file is labelled as a work in the public domain in both India and the United States as it meets specific requirements

⁹ Another video file version of the same film is available on a separate Commons webpage, which contains the same licensing information (“File:Pather Panchali (1955).webm,” 2026). This version was not utilised for the class project.

(“File:জামাই বাবু - বাংলা চলচ্চিত্র (১৯৩১).webm,” 2025). Moreover, since March 24, 2026, the Pather Panchali video file remains nominated for deletion on Commons because a record of the U.S. copyright of the film exists in the Copyright Public Records System (“File:পথের পাঁচালী – বাংলা চলচ্চিত্র (১৯৫৫).webm,” 2026; U.S. Copyright Office, 1998). Since our work on Pather Panchali started as an experiment within the bounds of a university course, it needs to be emphasised that global dissemination of the project was not one of our initial goals. Furthermore, as we are based in India, we primarily prioritised Indian copyright regulations. However, as our initiatives are gaining international recognition, we must re-evaluate the implications of our sources, methods, and other considerations, including concerns about the region-specific nature of issues related to the public domain.

While we utilised Commons for procuring media files, we looked into YouTube for presenting our work. Goodrow (2017) reports that “people are spending a billion hours every day” consuming content on YouTube. Due to its popularity, the platform is a strong candidate for making AD content freely and widely available. However, similar to Commons, platform-specific restrictions become relevant for YouTube as well. In the case of YouTube, video owners can automate the generation of copyright claims based on the Content ID system, giving them the opportunity to block, monetise, and/or track the claimed content (Google, n.d.-a). The claims generated through this automated system are different from manually submitted copyright removal requests (Google, n.d.-b). Keeping these points and the information available on Commons in mind, we are fairly certain that our work on Jamai-Babu will not face such restrictions on YouTube. However, in the case of Pather Panchali, we are being cautious about making the film with Bengali AD available online after looking into the aforementioned issues related to the video file on Commons. As we currently lack the legal framework to sufficiently address this topic, a hasty decision might result in harming the longevity of the project. So, while our work on Jamai-Babu is publicly available on YouTube, we have not published the audio-described version of Pather Panchali on the internet as of now.

From initial ideation to final publication, all the steps of producing audio-described content demand interactions with a multitude of interdisciplinary dimensions. Moreover, as shown in our analysis, the added questions of language politics and social hierarchies further complicate the process. Navigating through these complexities, we cannot overstate the importance of support, which can come in many forms. While the humble beginnings of audio-described Pather Panchali received encouragement and feedback from the public event, our current initiative is supported by a global campaign. Our efforts to increase the online presence of our initiatives can plausibly add to the formation of this supportive network. As we deal with various challenges, we aim to continue working towards sustaining discussions on Bengali AD and accessibility in general.

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