

SRFTI *Take One*  
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'SRFTI Take One', is coming out after a year's gap. The year 2020 was really a tough time for us and the crisis is still continuing in 2021. Several activities have been rescheduled, postponed due to lockdown. Simultaneously, this pandemic taught us a lot; patience, empathy, minimalism, reacting to challenges and so on. Though, most of our regular work shifted into the online mode, yet we did not think of 'SRFTI Take One' as just a pdf file. We are more than happy to publish the journal belatedly as we love to hold it.

This issue is an ensemble of three different types of articles. There are four research articles, submitted by the young scholars who did research in the domain of cinema, electronic and digital media under the six months 'Independent Research Fellowship' programme of SRFTI. Last year, SRFTI organized a National seminar on 'Gender and Media' and the distinguished speakers had presented excellent papers. Initially there was a plan for a separate publication of the seminar papers; however, we took two important papers for this issue banking the rest for our next publication. And one important article is remembering the great filmmaker, Satyajit Ray. SRFTI is celebrating the birth centenary of this film maestro and the best tribute is nothing better than to relook his films from the eyes of a contemporary notable filmmaker Ashoke Viswanathan, Dean of SRFTI.

This publication would not be possible without the help of the constant suggestions, supervision and guidance by the Editorial Team, Dean, Director and the external experts, who reviewed the articles and enriched us with their comments. Ms. Madhavi Tangella must be acknowledged separately not only for her constant support for the publication but also to coordinate the 'Gender and Media' seminar. My sincere thanks to all of them and to the contributors who submitted their papers for 'SRFTI Take One'.





## FILMING LIKE A FEMINIST <sup>i</sup>: Feminist film practice and shaping the Feminist political subject in the Indian Documentary

Kasturi Basu

The decade of the 1980s was an important historic moment for the feminist movement in India. Widespread anti-dowry and anti-rape agitations were questioning the supposedly protective and sanctimonious space of the familial/marital home on the one hand, and the so-called safe space of the police station on the other; both kinds of spaces had finally been publicly identified as sites of brutal violence on women. The institutions of family/matrimony as well as the State were being prised apart as structures of entrenched patriarchal order. These waves of feminist protests, along with protests against price rise of essential commodities, “eve-teasing” and anti-“obscenity” campaigns against objectification of women in commercial cinema and advertisements, brought together women (and men) allies from all walks of life. A new feminist consciousness was growing, a new round of thinking about gender and patriarchy was taking place in society. There was a fresh burst of creativity and churning, as new feminist writings, feminist readings of history, feminist magazines, feminist theatre and feminist political/cultural collectives emerged. (Chakravarti, 2016 & Panjabi and Chakravarti, 2012)

It was in this heady moment that documentary filmmaking in India consciously turned feminist for the first time. The women’s movement spawned a generation of

filmmakers who were also part of the movement. As they took up the documentary camera, they were seeing like a woman, thinking like a woman, arguing like a woman and feeling like a woman. They were sewing into the tapestry of the films their feminist gaze, their lived and felt experiences, their rage and solidarity, and their feminist sensibility. Thus, the early feminist documentary filmmaking in India evolved in resonance with the palpable feminist wave of the 1980s. Filmmakers used their craft to open up spaces in cinema to portray the crisscrossing of ‘personal’ and ‘public’ spheres in women’s lives, to think about power structures and different axes of oppression, to focus on those more marginalised and vulnerable even among women.

In a body of early films made through the 1980s and early 1990s, such as Meera Dewan’s *Gift of Love* [1983], Mediastorm’s *From the Burning Embers* [1988], Nilita Vachani’s *Eyes of Stone* [1990], Sagari Chhabra’s *Now I Will Speak* [1991] and Deepa Dhanraj’s *Something Like a War* [1991], the first generation of feminist women filmmakers were actively responding to the issues that women were raising in the movement.

Very soon, as their tribe grew, the feminist filmmakers (female, male and non-binary- conforming) evolved their film practice, drawing from their widely varying positions and/or personal histories of participation within the broader women’s movement. I argue in this essay that they worked with a whole spectrum of subject matters which could not be narrowly framed just as “women’s issues” or “gender issues”. They, in fact, advanced the feminist argument and feminist “ways of seeing” in depicting reality in much broader social contexts. Within all of these, they shaped new political subjects – female, feminine and feminist - on the documentary screen.

#### *Notion of the feminist documentary and feminist film practice*

Critical scholarship on the Indian documentary and, within it, the specific genre of the feminist documentary has been sparse. Only very recently have some of the first books on this section of cinema been published. (Monteiro and Jayasankar, 2016). Within this new emerging body of scholarship, the feminist documentary practice has often figured as a bucket-list of films “on women’s issues, by women filmmakers”. This approach is at best narrowed-down and at worst a theoretically unsound one. It offers no way to reckon with the concept of a rooted feminist film practice and with processes of sculpting a real feminist subject on the reel.

“Maybe what we are looking at are films by, of, and about women, rather than feminist films. With the women’s movement, there were certain questions which came



out, around violence and the law, that have also framed the notion of the feminist documentary. The kind of things the movement was battling and the kind of silences it was breaking also became a theme for documentaries that came about. The issue-based cinema became popular... While acknowledging the importance of it, I am also a little frustrated with the *essentialising* of women filmmakers.”<sup>ii</sup> sighs Vani Subramanian, speaking on the “bucket list approach” of defining the feminist documentary. This approach leads to more questions than it can answer: Are *all* films made on women’s issues by women filmmakers necessarily *feminist* films? Can films made by women (or men) on subject matters of general concern never turn out to be feminist in their politics? What ingredients does it take to create a feminist film? In feminist films, can the filmmaking practice and the outcome be divorced from each other?

Acknowledging the need to lay out a framework and methodology for our enquiry, let us put down a few more questions that need reckoning: How do we then understand the notion of feminist films? How do we define feminist documentary practice? How do claims of feminist film practice measure up to feminist conceptions of the world? How is a feminist political subject shaped on the screen? What is a feminist politics of representation? What has feminist practice added to the repertoire of the Indian documentary? What is an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework to grapple with these questions?

Gender (with all its intersections) as a *useful* (Scott, 1988) and *necessary* (Chakravarti, 2016) category of analysis, is at the heart of my framework. The two strands of theoretical tools that I peg my research on are feminist cultural studies from within the general ambit of gender studies and documentary studies from within the general ambit of film studies. Historically, both have had their blind spots (Waldman and Walker, 1999) when it comes to a reading of the feminist practice in the documentary. This is true in the West, but more so in India. The former (i.e. feminist cultural studies) has had little time to visit the feminist documentary practice and for the most of its time been preoccupied with examining narrative fiction cinema. More so, there has hardly been any understanding of the feminist documentary practice’s linkages with the feminist movement. Whereas in the latter (i.e. documentary studies), feminist documentary practice has once again figured as a list of documentary films “on women, for women and by women”, except for very initial attempts at breaching some theoretical ground (Dhanraj, 2018 & Chakravarti, 2018). Hence, it is of utmost importance to draw theoretical and methodological tools from both areas of scholarship, as well as to draw from critical scholarly literature on feminist practice in the Western documentary. (Gaines and Renov, 1999, Waldman and Walker, 1999 & Waugh, 1985).

Feminist documentary filmmaking in India has primarily been a process of creation based on active engagement and participation, rather than a distanced art practice interested in representing an objective reality. Hence, as some of the recent scholarship has shown (Basu and Banerjee, 2018, Battaglia, 2017), it is necessary to focus on historic moments that created new ruptures and departures in societal consciousness, to make linkages with the resultant film practice. It is important to trace first-person narratives and personal journeys of the feminist filmmakers, the questions they grappled with, the technological changes in their times, their evolving practice and engagement with the subjects, their articulation of feminist conceptions, their deployment of feminist cinematic devices, their relationship with the film crew, and last, but not the least, the discourses created, in turn, by the screening of their films.

Drawing from feminist cultural studies and the history of ushering in of feminist politics into a range of societal struggles made possible by the women's movement, as outlined above, this essay seeks to broaden the definition of what can be called a feminist film. It etches out the intersectionality of gender with other axes of oppression in context of the feminist documentary and the feminist filmmaking practice in general. Finally, it locates the rootedness of feminist film practice – both solo and collective – in various strands within the feminist movement.

### *Early feminist film collectives*

The formation of feminist film collectives happened very early, side-by-side with the women's movement on the streets. It was in the post-Emergency euphoric moment of "stirring hopes and passions" that Abha Bhaiya, Deepa Dhanraj and Meera Rao met in 1980 and formed Yugantar, the first women-led filmmaking collective in India. It was supported by cinematographer Navroze Contractor and audiographer G. V. Somashekar. 'Women in the informal sector were organising themselves into trade unions and we wanted to make films on their struggles, to inspire other women. The intention was pedagogic – could the films serve as a consciousness stirring device?' (Dhanraj 2018). Active during 1980-1983, Yugantar made four films which had perceptible impact on working women audiences. The first, *Molkarin* [1981] was on the unionisation of domestic workers in Pune. The second, *Tambakoo Chakila Oob Aali* [1982] was on the collective struggles of tobacco workers in Nipani. The third, *Idhi Katha Maatramena* [1983], made in collaboration with the Stree Shakti Sangathana, was a poignant fictionalised take based on real accounts of marital violence, and the fourth, *Sudasha* [1983], was a portrait of an activist in the Chipko movement.

Even though they had started out with a straightforward pedagogic intent, the very process of filmmaking became a complex and rewarding learning curve for Yugantar members, as they grappled with the issue of representation of women workers by middle-class filmmakers. Eventually, during their first two works, which became like “film manuals” for successful feminist strike actions, they worked out an effective practice of collaborative film making – involving the women worker “subjects” in every stage of the process – in filming, scripting, recording testimonies, enacting, re-scripting and even screening the films. Given that all of Yugantar films were shot on 16 mm film, and that for every film of 30 minutes’ duration, they only had 150 minutes of film stock available to shoot, it was remarkable that they went to great lengths to achieve a truly democratic and collaborative process. (Wolf, 2018 & Dhanraj, 2018). As we shall argue in this paper, the process of filmmaking is integral in shaping the politics and aesthetics of a documentary. Dhanraj’s filming process is expository work to substantiate the argument. The question of creating “political trust” was of utmost importance. The films had no directorial voiceovers, the entire soundtrack was created by using the workers’ recorded testimonies and location sound from the factories. The films had shared credits (as a collective). Contractor’s camerawork was lyrical in its framing, delicate in its lensing, responsive in its movements and rich in its tonal quality. The most striking feature of these films was their lively and vivid portrayal of the collective process of formation of women’s unions, the associated process of ordinary workers turning into political subjects, and their execution of a successful women’s strike. Never before in Indian cinema, let alone documentary, had the screen come alive with such stirring visuals of women at work. Breaking from the Western documentary tradition of filming solo interviews, Yugantar introduced the portrayal of women discussing, differing, arguing, debating and planning in large groups, the camera gaze (positioned as a trusted co-traveller) moving from one face to another, in long takes, faithfully recording the very process and sheer power of feminist collectivisation.

The second important feminist filmmaking collective of the decade, Mediastorm, was formed in 1985, by eight women students of the Mass Communication Research Centre in Jamia Milia. Compared to Yugantar, these filmmakers were a younger bunch, who came from a different location and history of participation within the women’s movement, which left its imprint on the aesthetics, subject matters and circulation of their work – a connection that has been of fundamental interest to map in this essay. Being film school students, they were trained with shooting on both the 16 mm film and video formats. In their work, they used the video technology which was both affordable and easier to handle. Mediastorm made three films in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The first, *In Secular India* [1986], looked at the problem of the protection of rights to divorce among Muslim women in relation to the Muslim Women Bill passed by the Parliament in early 1986. After the Deorala Sati incident in September 1987, where Roop Kanwar, an 18-year-old widow, was burned to death, Mediastorm made the film *From the Burning Embers* [1988]. In 1989, they made their third film, *Kiska Dharm, Kiska Desh*, which attempted to analyse the problem of Hindu fundamentalism and repeated communal riots without depicting a particular event and without confining itself to one place in India. Looking back at their work three decades later, Shohini Ghosh (2018), one of the founding members of Mediastorm, notes: “Many of our political assertions – that Dalits, workers and women would rise against Hindutva together – proved to be wrong. The films seemed too polemical, too replete with certitudes. Much of the work we all did later emerged from a critique of our own work.”

*Ways of representation, centre-staging the feminist ‘other’*

After the disbanding of Yugantar, Deepa Dhanraj went on with her solo practice (in collaboration with Navroze Contractor), which continues from 1983 to this day. Carrying over from her political baptism in the twin fires of the Emergency and the women’s movement, Dhanraj continued to have one foot in the feminist movement and the other in the democratic rights movement, the twain often overlapping with each other. In 1983, Dhanraj made a searing film, which was one of the earliest and most poignant expositions of communal violence and its aftermath in India. *Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko?* [1983] portrayed the Hyderabad riots of the early 1980s – an ominous precursor to the Ram *janmabhoomi* agitations that were to follow – with a deeply sensitive feminist lens. Possibly for the first time in Indian documentary, we have a *vérité* film stand witness, with the gaze of the working class, to an unfolding spate of communal killings in which the working class is the worst sufferer. In the film, Dhanraj goes on to prise open the corpse of a riot, to perform a post-mortem on the dynamics, economic logic and minutiae of organised communal polarisation leading to gory bloodbath and its immediate and long-term political gains. Contractor’s camera unfolds the violent, destructive political space inhabited by leaders and foot-soldiers of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Majlis-e-ittihadul Muslimeen and the Telugu Desam Party as one of masculine machismo, and contrasts that with the space of care, shelter and reproductive labour populated by women, young girls, children, and elderly from the working classes of all faiths. The latter bear overwhelming consequences of the political events, and are left to pick up broken pieces from hundreds of lives shattered by diabolic plots mindlessly

hatched by the former.

In her next two films, *Something Like a War* [1991] and *The Legacy of Malthus* [1994], Dhanraj engaged powerfully with the theme of women's body as a battleground of state patriarchy. The horrors of the government's patriarchal and paternalistic birth control policies and their peddling of the false Malthusian assumptions through televised propaganda were definitively crushed by these two films. Carrying forward the legacy of their film practice in *Yugantar*, Dhanraj foregrounded voices emerging from conversations within a women's group in Rajasthan. In a memorable sequence, probably one of its kind in the history of Indian cinema, Dhanraj portrayed the rural women's group exchanging ideas about the female body, their desires, sexuality, love, romance, reproductive choices, while relating all of it with economic arguments with energy, humour, and candid clarity. *The Advocate* [2007], an interview-based straightforward film on the life and activism of K. G. Kannabiran brought forth the journey of the Andhra Pradesh civil liberties movement. In it, Dhanraj consciously introduces the feminist activist Vasanth Kannabiran as a character, who brings with her narrative the history of critical feminist interventions which sought to transform the civil liberties movement from within. In the two films, *Nari Adalat* [2000] and *Invoking Justice* [2011], Dhanraj examined feminist notions of justice among two working class groups – the Tamil Nadu Muslim Women's Jamaat and a Nari Adalat comprising of Hindu working women in Gujarat. The films bring out little-known stories of evolution of these incredibly participatory feminist civil courts, their collective, humane methods of dispute mediation, situated outside the ambit of traditional patriarchal courts and their mechanical legalese. In the light of recent debates over the Triple Talaq Bill as well as debates over the failed "due process" and the #MeToo uprising, a feminist understanding of restorative justice processes becomes vital again. In her cinematic treatment, Dhanraj stays forever faithful to her politics of representation – in her practice of building "political trust" with the subjects, in her focus on working class women, and in her vivid depictions of the processes through which feminist collectivities get forged.<sup>iii</sup>

The body of work by filmmaker Saba Dewan offers another example of a feminist artiste working her way through issues of representation of women who are not from her class-caste location. Dewan takes on culture as a site of women's oppression as well as of feminist resistance and transformations. In her most foundational work *The Other Song* [2009], Dewan constructs with care the forgotten histories of the Tawaif musical tradition of Banaras, through journeys of some of its lesser-known and unknown women performers. She eventually traces the systematic state-sanctioned marginalisation of the Tawaif tradition, following its complete rejection by the nationalist movement for

Independence led by none other than Gandhi. Eventually, the post-independence cultural sphere had to be cleansed of all traces of art practised by these women performers, and the scattered remnants of their musical practice sanitised of expressions of feminine sexuality, eroticism and desire. This was a history of ruthless erasure, on whose ruins came up the grand edifice of Hindustani ‘classical’ music, shaped by male Hindu nationalist cultural reformers, that has now come to define the musical tradition of Banaras. Dewan frames the entire film through her personal search for a lost version of a well-known thumri by the legendary Tawaif performer, Rasoolan Bai. In weaving herself within the frame, Dewan also questions the middle-class liberal feminist space from the perspective of the banished ‘other’. The exploration of the stigmatised ‘other’ is a theme that, in fact, features in Dewan’s earlier work – on bar dancers in *Delhi-Mumbai-Delhi* [2006] and on dancers in village cattle fairs in *Naach* [2008] – where she makes intimate feminist portrayals of working-class women performers labouring in all-male workplaces and catering to the patriarchal gaze. Dewan’s sensitive and compassionate treatment invites audiences to contemplate on the construction and practice of norms around gender and sexuality, to think about women’s stigmatised and underpaid labour and popular culture, through engaging with dance forms of the female performer.

*Feminist battles as everyone’s battles*

*Nari Mukti Sabki Mukti!* Women’s Liberation, Everyone’s Liberation! Thus goes a familiar feminist slogan, firmly rooted in the moorings of socialist feminist ideals. Socialist feminist struggles for over a hundred years, have shaped feminism not as a standalone separatist movement of women, isolated from battles against the exploitation of people or the planet; but rather as a guiding ideology and tool, integral and essential to all anti-colonial, anti-feudal and anti-capitalist battles for freedom of humankind. In the neoliberal era of capital, globally and in India, battle lines over seizing means of production as well as control over social reproduction have been sharply etched out by small and large radical feminist struggles and reinvention of the feminist strike led by a vast majority of women (Arruzza *et al*, 2019). Rural and urban displacement, caste atrocities, poverty wages, clampdown on labour, unaffordable housing, inadequate healthcare, depletion of forests, destruction of ecologies and livelihoods, border politics, crisis in politics of ‘care’, agrarian distress, development for the few at the cost of the many, nationality and self-determination, communal strife, relationship of the citizen and the state – these are not questions ordinarily associated with feminism. Yet, these are biggest issues concerning the survival, dignity and emancipation of an overwhelming majority of women in India.

The feminist documentary in India, since its early days to the present times, has had practitioners, rooted in socialist feminist political beliefs, whose work has embodied the slogan of “feminism for everyone”. At the core of it, these filmmakers have brought in feminist sensibilities and feminist arguments, coming from their unique locational understanding of gendered oppression, in challenging intersecting axes of hierarchies, power, oppression, marginalisation and graded inequalities on the medium of cinema.

Vani Subramanian’s body of work is a good example of this. She has taken on fundamental questions of social reproduction and human rights, such as food practice, food prejudice, pedagogy, communalism, dislocation, displacement, urban development, sex-selective abortions and the death penalty. Subramanian’s political learning ground, before she moved away from being an advertising professional to an independent documentary filmmaker, was in Saheli, a women’s group formed in the 1980s. Saheli had strong connections with a spectrum of political movements: the campaign for victims of the Bhopal gas genocide, movement against violence on Sikhs, anti-globalisation protests, anti-population policies, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan against big dams. Naturally, in films like *Meals Ready* [1993], *New (Improved) Delhi*, [2003] and *Stir. Fry. Simmer* [2012], Subramanian gets drawn more towards engaging with structural violence than making films on individual survivors. Her longer films demonstrate an innately feminist instinct to reflect and look back at grand events and questions, while focusing on the flipside of power, by foregrounding small, unknown, nameless voices of history. Accordingly, in films like *Ayodhya Gatha* [2006] and the more recent *The Death of Us* [2018], one can locate a commonality, an urge to deconstruct the idea that all power rests with the State alone. Both the films are also about implicating the popular consciousness, prevalent social and cultural hegemony, majoritarianism and the ordinary people, who are also paying the biggest price for their ethical and moral slides.

*Ayodhya Gatha*, set in the ground-zero of Ayodhya two decades after the Babri Masjid demolition, demonstrates an important point on what feminist sensibility and feminist gaze can bring to the genre of the “essay film” that takes on a grand question such as the aftermath of communalism. Let us recall the foundational feminist film, *Father, Son and Holy War* [1994] made by a male filmmaker which, with its complete intellectual clarity on the interconnection between fundamentalism, religion, masculinity and the State, has acquired the cult status of a canonical film- text. In it, Anand Patwardhan is shaped by and responsive to the theoretical questions put forward by feminists, as he takes on the big power and powerlessness binary to unravel on an epic and spectacular scale the structures of communal violence and patriarchy playing out in the public sphere. Starting from a feminist theoretical framework, Patwardhan brilliantly works through

his material, to establish the core understanding that communalism is in fact the public face of patriarchy, it's after all Brahminical patriarchy turned outward.

But how does the big power of communalism operate through smaller channels? How does power mediate through intermediaries in society? How does one break down the operations of big power to the molecular level? Putting this question at the centre of focus lends a different feminist lens to Subramanian's *Ayodhya Gatha*. Moving away from portraying solidified opinions of protagonists whose public profiles had been locked into various stereotypes, she walks the viewers into more complex territory that needs reckoning. The almost-charming elderly nurse from Andhra who attended the *Karsevaks* and believed in the ideology of razing down the mosque, the *Karsevak* with a vague and unsure sense of guilt – the everyday, ordinary ideological foot soldiers of communalism, who cannot be cast into black and white stereotypes – brings to light unsettling multi-layered narratives around operations of communalism that we are forced to grapple with. When it comes to representation, Subramanian sticks faithfully to a feminist practice informed by notions of consent, ethics and power hierarchies, taking care never to trivialise, oversimplify or override her subjects. In weaving the visual narrative, she creates a signature style of her own, by combining personalised voice-overs with an immersive, experiential cinematography that makes use of repetitive space-time motifs in harmony with the tenor of her storytelling language. Visual motifs like a *paduka* (ancient wooden footwear for a male priest), a rotating outdoor cinema screen with projections of archival footage, and an enactment of herself as a girl-child growing up in a Hindu household reappear along with sounds of old television and radio as the voice-over gets personal and contemplative. We see a return of this signature style in *The Death of Us*, Subramanian's take down of the popular consensus on the death penalty.

Other contemporary feminist filmmakers, like Subasri Krishnan and Iffat Fatima, among several others, have created a body of feminist films that engage with questions of nation, nationality, State and citizenship. Krishnan explores the question of how ordinary people negotiate their relationship with nationality, the state and belonging to a nation as a citizen. In *This or That Particular Person* [2012], Krishnan takes on issues of State surveillance, privacy and freedom vis-a-vis "Aadhar", the hugely problematic biometric-based unique identification project. In *What the Fields Remember* [2015], she digs up memories of the forgotten Nellie massacre of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, confronting difficult questions of language, ethnicity, community and citizenship. Her ongoing film too is set in Assam, and unfolds in the backdrop of the staggering human costs of updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which has now become a trial run for anti-immigrant communal politics in India. In her work, Krishnan puts



to brilliant use her feminist sensibilities in portraying her subjects – in the backdrop of history playing out on a grand scale – approached with a calm, dignified treatment away from all heat and fury, through unravelling of personal histories of the small voices of history.

*Documentary as a site of feminist historiography*

A lasting legacy of feminist film practice in the Indian documentary has been to turn it into a site of feminist historiography. If reclaiming lost space for the ‘otherised’ woman was a part of contesting patriarchal hegemony in the cultural sphere, equally important has been the retrieval and centre-staging of women’s forgotten histories through piecing together ordinary women’s oral narratives, memories, writings, songs and political participation.

Kashmiri filmmaker Iffat Fatima has, in her body of work, told stories emerging from highly militarised conflict zones of Sri Lanka and Kashmir. Her most powerful intervention till date has been through the poignant feminist film *Khoon Diy Baarav* [2015], shot over a period of nine years, in which she brings out testimonies and oral histories of countless women in rural Kashmir, portraying the relentless struggle of their memory against forgetting in an occupied valley reeling from seven decades of conflict, including an armed insurgency. Other important films, such as Sanjay Kak’s magnum opus *Jashn-e-Azadi* [2007] and Amar Kanwar’s celebrated *Lightning Testimonies* [2007], have engaged with rural Kashmir, and the women’s question in relation to the indigenous movement for self-determination. But Fatima’s work is unique in its content and style; it is something which only a feminist woman filmmaker could have possibly created. Fatima is in the film throughout, her voice and presence registered as a witness to unspeakable *zulm* and indomitable resilience of Kashmiri women who have had sons, brothers, husbands and neighbours, disappeared or murdered in fake encounters over the decades. Fatima feigns no objectivity, she allows her subjective position to become one of co-traveller of the legendary Parveena Ahangar<sup>iv</sup> as the duo travel across the militarised countryside, meeting hundreds of women, as a trusted chronicler of their suppressed histories. Fatima’s approach in the film is intuitive and impulsive. Her framework is not imposed from above, but emerges through the sensory and emotional journey with her protagonists, as she records stories and memories of women in countless settings such as homes, rice fields, fruit orchards, boat rides, and even in marriage ceremonies. The film becomes a powerful counter-history of Kashmir, a feminist archive of Kashmir’s political struggles, turning around the usual portrayal of the ordinary women of Kashmir

from “passive” and “silent” voices into active, vocal political subjects.

Beginning with her debut film *A Quiet Little Entry* [2010], featuring an unknown, ordinary woman, Subbalakshmi, Uma Chakravarti, a veteran feminist historian in her other avatar, has gone on to examine the lives and subjectivities of women participants in militant-nationalist, radical and communist movements in India, from the late 1920s all the way to the present times. Is the quest for love distant from a quest for a free world? Chakravarti traces an erased history of women in the nationalist and the radical movements in India as she seeks to interrogate the polemic of women’s liberation in Indian history. Her material is drawn from a tapestry of memoirs, anecdotes, shared personal bonds, diaries, autobiographies, poems and interviews. Consciously using anti-realist cinematic techniques such as enactments, personal voiceovers, portrayals of heightened emotion, and suggestive (as opposed to deterministic) visual and aural imagery, Chakravarti, in her early works, passionately fleshes out a world in which these women worked, loved and lived; thereby creating a unique visual archive of women’s lost histories. In her later works, we see Chakravarti move more towards realist and direct ways of storytelling, with increased use of the “talking head” but never letting go of her fascination for texts – letters, memoirs, jail diaries and journals – written by her women protagonists. Chakravarti’s style gives preference to bringing forth the first-person narratives of her subjects, over her own authorial or analytical voice. The strength in her storytelling comes from the intimate, emotional and fiery interviews she manages to draw from the gutsy women she centre-stages in her films.

How do we see the fragility of women’s personal histories in the light of a collective struggle? What are the terms set for the personal by a collective imagination? The feminist dictum of “personal being the political” was a challenge to the existing liberal discourse of a divide between the public and the private; what emerges out of Chakravarti’s work is how the political is personal itself. The women in these spaces both affirmed and battled the patriarchal status-quo as they were one of the firsts to carve out a space for women’s political participation. The private, conjugal and family lives of these women marked, shaped and warped their political interests. On the other hand, their shared political spaces sometimes made it possible for women to forge ties beyond constraints. Chakravarti’s films portray how ordinary women shaped a new female (like the mad poet Sughra Fatima in *Ek Inquilaab Aur Aaya* [2017]) – and in some cases a new feminist (like Subbalakshmi in *A Quiet Little Entry*, Khadija Ansari in *Ek Inquilaab Aur Aaya*, Mythily Sivaraman in *Fragments of a Past* [2012], Koteswaramma in *Many Suns Behind a Dark Sky* [2019], Snehalata Reddy in *Prison Diaries* [2019] and fifteen women political prisoners in *Ye Lo Bayaan Hamare (And We Were There) 1967-1977* [2021]) –

political subject in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.<sup>v</sup>

*The self-reflexive gaze as a feminist device*

The documentary centred around subjects of feminist concern, since its early days, has often turned reflexive, subjective and personal in its cinematic treatment. Vasudha Joshi in *For Maya* [1997], Saba Dewan in *Sita's Family* [2001], Nishtha Jain in *Laxmi and Me* [2007] and *At My Doorstep* [2009], Reena Mohan (as director) and Paromita Vohra (as writer) in *Skin Deep* [1998], Ranu Ghosh in *Quarter No. 4/11* [2011], Rahul Roy in *When Four Friends Meet* [1999] and *Till We Meet Again* [2012], Amar Kanwar in *Lightning Testimonies* [2007] – to name a few instances – have tried turning the gaze fully or partly onto themselves, that is towards the filmmaker/writer, placed in relation to their subjects. The device of reflexivity has sometimes been deployed with an intent to demystify latent power dynamics between the filmmaker and their subjects. At other times, the filmmaker has intended unraveling of their social location as a placeholder or point of reference to visibilise broader societal hierarchies wherein they place themselves as one of the several subjects under scrutiny. A third intention has been that of implicating their own class/caste locational complicity from a position of “guilt”. Irrespective of the intent, the device of self-reflexivity has been a familiar one in the Indian documentary.

The self-reflexive gaze is a strong and potent tool, which is not a feminist method *per se*, but which may become a feminist device of storytelling in certain circumstances. However, it also runs the risk of rolling off a slippery edge, in particular when the filmmaker is an outsider-observer located in a power position of social hierarchy in relation to their subjects. In such cases, deployment of the self-reflexive treatment by a filmmaker in control of the camera, editing and production processes may, in fact, fail as a feminist tool, if it ends up compounding the power hierarchies (between them and their subjects) instead of tearing them down. In spite of the best of intentions and efforts to be conscious of the risks, this happens to an extent in *Laxmi and Me*, where Nishtha Jain sets out to portray her relationship as a sympathetic employer with domestic worker Laxmi. It also happens to an extent in Rahul Roy's film *When Four Friends Meet* and its revisit-sequel, *Till We Meet Again*, where he explores the relationship of masculinity and economic/social precarity in his protagonists Bunty, Kamal, Sanjay and Sanju – all residents of the working-class colony of Jahangirpuri, located in the outskirts of the National Capital Region.

As a contrast, something radically different and qualitatively fresh happens with the self-reflexive cinematic device when Pushpa Rawat, a self-trained 26-year-old

first-time filmmaker from a lower middle-class household in Ghaziabad, also situated in the industrial outskirts of the National Capital Region, came out with her first film *Nirnay* [2012]. In the film, co-directed with (and edited by) Anupama Srinivasan, Rawat explores profound questions of life in a disarmingly simple, candid and reflective manner. Throughout the film, she trained her camera onto herself, her family, her women friends, her failed romance, her estranged lover, his parents and his wife. How do young women like herself, belonging to a generation where women are seemingly freer than their mothers and yet so voiceless, negotiate with the society when it comes to key decisions in their lives, around work, freedom, love, romance and the desire to be oneself. As Pushpa and her friends Lata, Mithlesh, Geeta, Vinita and Pooja open up to the camera, their dreams, dilemmas, alienation, and hopelessness come alive. The inter-caste romance between Rawat and her childhood lover Sunil-ji is almost destined to fall apart, and yet it does not deter Rawat to question the inevitability of it, to pull out the deeply-entrenched class, caste and age biases of society even while employing a deeply emotional and non-judgemental storytelling language.

In her second film, *Mod* [2016], Rawat sets out to understand the behaviour of the two men in her family, her father and brother. In doing so, she goes on to portray the alienation, precarity and unformed masculinities in the lives of her brother Ankur and his friends – Lalit, Pahari, W, Bittu – all young, unemployed young men, who are frequenters at the water tank in the neighbourhood. The water tank compound, guarded by walls from the rest of the neighbourhood, offers a space of anonymity to the boys, who find it convenient to shut off the gaze of the rest of the world on them, as they pass their endless “free time” playing card games and cricket, drinking, smoking weed, making rap, and giving in to the occasional brawl. Yet, it is a very male and macho space, and it takes a calm, patient and persuasive Rawat – a lone woman intruding that space with a camera – to stick around for as long as it takes to breach trust with the boys for them to open up to her questions about their lives, dreams, desires, losses and sense of dejection.

Rawat’s work brings no neat resolution or *Slumdog Millionaire*-esque tidying up with aspirational neoliberal redemption. Both *Nirnay* and *Mod* are deeply unsettling and disturbing in the fundamental, almost philosophical, unresolved structural questions they raise. Yet, Rawat manages to humanise and emotionalise her young men and women protagonists, drawing out their underlying dignity and sparks of immense possibility from the often cynical, lost and despondent life-narratives. In both the films, Rawat’s own location as an empathetic insider, her personal stake and relations with her subjects, her emotional labour and her sensitive handling of the reflexive treatment

work perfectly in tune to turn her cinematic methods into a powerful feminist device. Rawat is no ethnographic-filmmaker armed with anthropological devices, set out to study a community where she does not belong. Rather, she inhabits and owns up the very space from where she portrays the societal complexities of lived lives of the close ones of her community. Speaking of historic moments, it is no mere coincidence that Rawat's work strikes a chord and adds new understanding, coming on the heels of the massive anti-rape agitations in India following the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, a middle-income young woman in Delhi in 2012. The incident led to new rounds of public discourse on the "rape law", debates on masculinity and precarious labour<sup>vi</sup>, on "carceral feminist trends" and understanding patriarchy and gender violence beyond the legalistic framework.

Self-reflexivity is not just a powerful device when it comes to the documentary camera, but is as crucial in the process of documentary editing. Jabeen Merchant – who worked as editor on a large body of feminist films, collaborating with Paromita Vohra, Deepa Dhanraj, Rahul Roy and Surabhi Sharma – illustrated with clarity the place of self-reflexivity as a feminist notion in her own film editing process: 'Especially with documentary films, there's also a very important issue, of respecting the people who are subjects in the film, who have trusted the filmmaker enough to speak to the camera and share a part of their lives with an unknown audience. How does one represent them while editing? Because that too is an important power equation confronting us, every day as we work on making films. It's not only about the finished film that we show, but the process through which we arrived at it. One tries to bring integrity to that process. That, to me, is a crucial part of feminist practice. We women tend not to look at the world as binaries. Being "decisive" is overrated in a man's world. We change our minds, take our time to make decisions. There is always room for doubt, for questioning and revising one's opinion. I think there is a value to such an approach. It is a feminist approach, to never think that one knows it all.'<sup>vii</sup>

#### *Contemporary collectives: Portraying Dalit and Adivasi feminist narratives*

I started out this essay by mapping feminist film practice with the early filmmaking collectives of the 1980s. A good place to return to now would be the contemporary collectivised feminist film practice. Ektara, based in the town of Bhopal, came together in the second decade of the millennium, as a loosely-bound group of political activists and film professionals. Much like Yugantar, they use both the fiction and documentary forms as their medium of expression, and more often than not, the lines between the

two genres get blurred. Working-class non-actors playing their own lives on screen, the feminist screenplays developed collaboratively with the protagonists, the copious usage of songs and poems drawn organically from the communities and site-specific folk traditions, mark their film practice. *Chanda Ke Joote* [2011], *Jaadui Machchi* [2013] and *Turup* [2017], the three fiction films bear testimony to Ektara's grappling with issues of representation and intersectionality. What one finds interesting, for the purpose of this essay, is that Ektara's filmmaking philosophy and practice developed over the making of fiction films, gets successfully carried over in shaping the subject matters, craft and aesthetics of the documentary films made by Maheen Mirza and Rinchin, the filmmaker-writer duo and the driving forces behind Ektara. In their non-fiction work, they draw out Dalit and tribal feminist narratives from the mineral-rich forests and plains of Chhattisgarh, where the Adivasis face a massive State onslaught driving them towards continuous displacement and dispossession. *Meanwhile the Killings Continue: An Encounter in Rewali* [2015] is on the encounter killing of a man called Bhima Nuppo followed by demand by thousands of villagers demanding justice for his wife Budhri and her five children. *Encountering Injustice: The Case of Meena Khalko* [2015] tells the story of an alleged encounter killing of a 15 year old Adivasi girl Meena Khalko, who lived in Village Karcha of Balrampur district of North Chhattisgarh, a theme that returns in their recently ongoing film as well. In *If She Built a Country* [2018], they portray a radically alternative imagination of development, bringing to the fore voices of the working-class indigenous feminists of Chhattisgarh. From representing the feminist collectivisation of workers in Maharashtra in the 1980s, to portraying the feminist tribal collectivisation in present-day Chhattisgarh, it is remarkably satisfying to watch Ektara, in more ways than not, completes a full circle, coming three decades after their predecessors in Yugantar.

### *Conclusion*

My inquiry in this essay has been prompted by my personal participation in feminist politics and my subjective position as a film activist and documentary filmmaker. In addressing one of my central questions as to what constitutes a feminist documentary, I have laid down key notions, arguments, ingredients and devices that draw up the contours of this genre, within a broadened and rooted definition of the genre. In laying out the historical and material context of emergence of the feminist documentary in India, we are able to discover crucial linkages, continuities and departures, between the various strands in feminist filmmaking and their rootedness in diverse streams within the women's movement.

A crucial understanding that emerges out of the essay is that the outcome of a feminist film cannot be divorced from its making process or from the conscious film practice, reflexive of the positioning of the filmmaker vis-a-vis her subjects. Through a study of first-person accounts as well as interviews with some of the filmmakers working in this genre, the essay demonstrates how feminist ideologies played out in the very processes of representing and sculpting the feminine and the feminist subject on screen. Through our analysis of film-texts, ways of representation and cinematic devices employed, the feminist film practice is put to test in addressing a wide spectrum of fundamental questions. Finally, in the essay, the feminist film practice opens up new and liberating ways of being and seeing – collaborating, collectivising, filming, screenwriting and editing – that are self-aware about the complex dynamics and power hierarchies playing out between the authors, and subjects of the feminist documentary.

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## Filmography studied (by category) :

1. *Gender in relation to class and labour*: ‘Shit’, ‘Molkarin’, ‘Tambaku Chakila Oob Ali’, ‘Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories’, ‘Kachra Kondi’, ‘Above the Din of Sewing Machines’, ‘Labels from a Global City’, ‘Nirnay’, ‘Can We See the Baby Bump Please?’ ‘Babulal Bhuiyan Ki Kurbanii’.
2. *Gender in relation to nation and democracy*: ‘Gift of Love’, ‘Blood Leaves its Trail’, ‘Something Like a War’, ‘The Legacy of Malthus’, ‘The Death of Us’, ‘From the Burning Embers’, ‘Stir. Fry. Simmer’, ‘Yeh Dilli Hai Mere Yaar’, ‘Meals Ready’, ‘New (Improved) Delhi’, ‘The Advocate’, ‘The World Before Her’, ‘India’s Forbidden Love’, ‘What the Fields Remember’, ‘This or That Particular Person’, ‘Ammi’, ‘Our Gauri’, ‘The Case of Meena Khalko’, ‘Meanwhile the Killings Continue: The Encounter at Rewali’, ‘Memoirs of Saira and Salim’, ‘The Lightning Testimonies’.
3. *Gender in relation to religion and communalism*: ‘Father, Son and Holy War’, ‘Ayodhya Gatha’, ‘Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko?’, ‘Invoking Justice’, ‘Even the Crows: A Divided Gujarat’, ‘In Secular India’, ‘Kiska Dharm, Kiska Desh’, ‘Dharmayuddha’, ‘I Live in Behrampada’.
4. *Gender in relation to caste*: ‘Shit’, ‘Gulabi Gang’, ‘In a Shadowless Town’, ‘Kakkoos’, ‘Manjuben Truckdriver’, ‘Pink Saris’, ‘If She Built a Country’, ‘Immoral Daughters in the Land of Honour’, ‘Jai Bhim Comrade’, ‘We Have Not Come Here to Die’, ‘Savitri’s Sisters at Azadi Kooch’.
5. *Gender in relation to labour, nation, feminist historiography*: ‘Kamlabai’, ‘Sita’s Family’, ‘The Other Song’, ‘A Quiet Little Entry’, ‘Fragments of A Past’, ‘Ek Inquilaab Aur Aaya’, ‘The Many Suns Behind a Dark Sky’, ‘S.D.: Saroj Dutta and His Times’, ‘Prison Diaries’, ‘Ye Lo Bayaan Hamare (And We Were There) 1967-1977’.
6. *Gender in relation to sexuality and cultural politics*: ‘The Run’, ‘...and the Unclaimed’, ‘...in Fact’, ‘Dui Dhuranir Golpo’, ‘Diaries of Transformation’, ‘Zara Nazar Utha Ke Dekho/Tales of Cruising in India’, ‘Naach’, ‘Delhi-Mumbai-Delhi’, ‘Naach Bikhari Naach’, ‘Tales of the Night Fairies’.
7. *Gender in relation to masculine and feminine constructs*: ‘Mod’, ‘Skin Deep’, ‘Nirnay’, ‘Majma’, ‘The City Beautiful’, ‘When Four Friends Meet’, ‘Till We Meet Again’, ‘Father, Son and Holy War’.



## End Notes :

- i The title alludes to 'Seeing Like a Feminist' (Menon 2012).
- ii Vani Subramanian, in conversation with the author, February 2019.
- iii Deepa Dhanraj, in conversation with the author, January 2019.
- iv Parveena Ahangar is a human rights activist, mother of a son disappeared by the State during the armed insurgency, and founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons in Kashmir.
- v Uma Chakravarti, in conversation with the author, February 2019.
- vi See for example, the debate between Maya John and Kavita Krishnan, as summed up in Chauhan, B., Sharma, A. and Chandra, P. (2013). "Anti-Rape Movement: A Horizon beyond Legalism and Sociology" in Radical Notes.
- vii Jabeen Merchant, in conversation with the author, June 2019.

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## Hip Hop Goes to B-Town: Bollywood's Assimilation of the Underground Aesthetic

Elloit Cardozo

### *Introduction*

The movement of Hip Hop around the globe has been conceived as a Hip Hop diaspora by numerous scholars including Marcylenia Morgan and Dionne Bennett, who compare it to ethnic constructions of diaspora, pointing out its transcultural and translocal nature (2011, p. 180). In the due course of its spread around the world, Hip Hop is believed to have noticeably arrived in India in the 1990s. The mainstream Hindi music industry in India comprises chiefly of songs that are produced for the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai, often referred to as Bollywood. Hip Hop music first started appearing in Bollywood in the mid 90's through Baba Sehgal's zany rap songs. After fleeting appearances in the soundtracks of Bollywood films over the next couple of decades, the 2010s saw the eventual consolidation of Hip Hop music in Bollywood through the likes of Yo Yo Honey Singh, Badshah and Raftaar with rap numbers that chiefly centered on alcohol, acquisition of wealth, materialism, and parting. The second half of the decade saw the rise of several underground Hip Hop scenes, majorly in cities such as Bengaluru, Delhi, and Chennai. Rappers from these cities offered a more realistic and rustic alternative to the bling represented by Hip Hop music in Bollywood. With record labels such as Sony Music signing rappers like Divine, and Brodha V and Indian rappers making appearances on

the BBC Asian Network, the stock of artists from the underground Hip Hop scenes soared to previously untouched heights. With the success of their 2015 music video for “Mere Gully Mein”, Mumbai duo Divine and Naezy rose to such prominence that the Hindi film industry eventually had to take note. This culminated into a Bollywood film titled *Gully Boy* being made in 2019, based on their lives, with underground Hip Hop in Mumbai forming one of the core components of the film. The making of a Bollywood film on the subject led to a considerable increase in the attention being paid to the underground Hip Hop scenes in India, alerting film makers, and media companies amongst others to the potential that it harbored as an untapped market. The best example of this is the formation of Record Labels such as Azadi Records in 2017 and Gully Gang Entertainment, and Inc Ink Records in 2019, which focus chiefly on nurturing budding Hip Hop artists in the country. This seems to have led to an eventual paradigm shift with the mainstream, including Bollywood now seemingly keen on fostering the “subversive energies” (Watkins, 2004, p. 569) characteristic of Hip Hop cultures worldwide, as opposed to the otherwise imitational rap which almost seemed like a caricature of American Hip Hop at times, that it was known for earlier. With Bollywood finally willing to engage in the “adaptation” and “appropriation” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 249) of the underground aesthetic of Hip Hop music, one is left to wonder whether this would lead to a process of gradual “assimilation” (McLeod, 1999, p. 135) or “co-optation” (Light, 2004, p. 143). This paper aims to demonstrate how despite only having acknowledged the presence of underground Hip Hop very recently, Bollywood appears to have already started the gradual process of assimilating or co-opting its aesthetic. In doing this, the first half of this paper traces a genealogy of the development of Hip Hop music in Bollywood before *Gully Boy*. The paper’s second half endeavors to demonstrate how the changing attitude of Bollywood towards rap, largely due to *Gully Boy* has led to the commodification of the underground Hip Hop aesthetic, with indications that it might lead to an eventual assimilation of this aesthetic.

#### *A Critical Genealogy of Bollywood Hip Hop before Gully Boy*

Music has always formed an almost indispensable part of Bollywood films over the years. It has however, mostly been relegated to appearing as a peripheral element more than a device that is a major part of either the narrative or any sort of driving force. Vijay Mishra puts it perfectly in pointing out that “[s]ong and dance in fact function as parallel texts of cinema for purposes of recall” (2009, p. 249) He goes on to point out how some of the classic films mentioned in Gopal and Moorti’s seminal 2008

anthology *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* such as *Awaara* (1951), *Mother India* (1957), *Pyasa* (1957), *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959), are remembered for their songs. Danijela Kulezi- Wilson's observation, hence, resonates in this aspect when she says:

During most of its history, the general notion of film music in both theory and practice was the one inherited from the silent era, according to which film music is perceived as an addition to rather than an integral part of a film. (2015, p. 24)

The same rings true of the use of Hip Hop music, with rap, throughout its brief history in Bollywood, occupying peripheral spaces. Despite only being in the third decade of its existence in Bollywood, the role of Hip Hop has already seen a number of changes since it first surfaced.

While Ashok Kumar's rendition of "Rail Gaadi Rail Gaadi Chuk Chuk Chuk Chuk" for *Aashirwad* (1968) can be cited as the first example of spoken word poetry in a Bollywood film. While one might not necessarily identify it as rap, it is one of the first songs in a Hindi film to have shown features of Hip Hop music, with the next one being Kishore Kumar's "Bam Chik" for *Kahte Hai Mujhko Raja* (1975). Rap is widely believed to have arrived in Bollywood with Baba Sehgal. After his album *Thanda Thanda Paani* (1992) sold 5 million cassettes, Baba Sehgal got the attention of Bollywood, making his debut with "It is My Love" in *Khoon Ka Sindoor* (1993). Given that the track that shot Baba Sehgal to fame, "Thanda Thanda Paani", was a Hindi cover of Vanilla's "Ice Ice Baby", it is unsurprising that a large majority of his other tracks were little more than an imitation of American rap. Baba Sehgal's rise to fame led to rap making sporadic minor appearances in a few famous tracks in Bollywood over the years to come such as "Duma Dum Mast Kalandar" from *Hum Hai Bemisaal* (1994), "Dhak Dhak Ye Dil", "Aaja Meri Gaadi Mei Baith Jaa", and "Memsaab O Memsaab" from *Miss 420* (1998). In these tracks he mostly rapped about wooing women and material acquisitions, akin Gangsta Rap in the U.S.A. Some of his tracks also used rap as a humorous element. Bollywood's perception of Hip Hop and rappers during this spell can be perfectly explained by Bakari Kitwana's claim that "the commercialization of Rap music expands the definition of hip-hop culture beyond the four elements to include colloquialisms, body language, attitude, style, and fashion" (2002, p. 8). While Kitwana points out that the commercialization of rap music "expands" the definition of Hip Hop culture to these additional elements, it could be argued that in the first decade of its existence in Bollywood, Hip Hop was restricted to these additional elements to

the extent that they got misconstrued as being central to the culture. Following Baba Sehgal's lead, rap made appearances on tracks of a few more Bollywood films to come over the years, these included Anu Malik's verse in "Yeh Kaali Kaali Aankhein" from *Baazigar* (1993), Devang Patel's rap in "Stop That" from *Gambler* (1995), and Aditya Narayan's verse in "Rangeela Re" in *Rangeela* (1995). The rap in these tracks though, was only added to bring an element of humor. A noticeable exception to the dominant trend of Bollywood Hip Hop during the 1990s, was "Mumbhai" from *Bombay Boys* (1998), by Javed Jaffrey. In a track that talks about dealing with the struggles of living in Mumbai and how to keep up with its pace, Javed Jaffrey's rap makes ample use of the local slang including numerous internal aphorisms and retorts while also code-mixing and code-switching between "Bambaiya" Hindi, Marathi and a typically South Mumbai dialect of English:

*Chota Chota Matter Bane Police Case Bada Bada Lafda Gul Without Trace Ghabrane  
ka Nahi, Give it in the Face  
Woh Kya Bolta Hai? Haan Jaisa Des Waisa Bhes  
[The Smallest of Matters Become a Police Case The Biggest of Issues Disappear  
Without a Trace  
Don't be Scared, Give it in the Face  
What do They Say? Yeah! When in Rome do as the Romans do] (Jaffrey, 1998)*

This can be seen as the first instance of what Motley and Henderson call "glocalization" in Bollywood's engagement with Hip Hop: "global commonality of connective marginality combined with local elements (e.g., language, lyrical content, music, ethnic symbols) that create unique sounds and statements" (2008, p. 252). This track also goes on to prove that it would be incorrect to deny the existence of what one might call 'authentic' Hip Hop tracks in Bollywood during its foundational years. A more accurate observation would be to say that "[t]hey were mostly B-side songs" (D. Parab, personal communication, May 19, 2019), in the sense that they featured mostly on the flip-side of cassettes which receive less attention. It would suffice to say that despite its presence on Bollywood soundtracks prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Hip Hop was never afforded any form of visibility. This naturally meant that "the telecasting or the flow of that content wasn't certain during that era" (Y. Ingle, personal communication, June 16, 2019), when it came to Hip Hop in India.

The way that Bollywood treated Hip Hop in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century makes one realize that "[g]lobal commodification promotes a vacuous... cultural

appropriation that can only be termed imitation at best and sycophantic voyeurism at worst” (Osumare, 2001, p. 179). This period saw the arrival of numerous Hip Hop artists in Bollywood who got shoehorned into stereotypical roles as rappers owing to numerous factors. These include BlaaZe’s parts in “Chori Pe Chori” from *Saathiya* (2002), “Dol Dol” from *Yuva* (2002), “B N B” from *Bunty aur Babli* (2005), “Paathshaala (Be A Rebel)” from *Rang De Basanti* (2005), and “Dilli-6” from *Delhi 6* (2009). BlaaZe rapped almost exclusively in English and saw his verses used as a mere decorative element in larger tracks, effectually rendering him a mere recreation of the American rappers that Indian audiences were familiar with, despite his immense and undeniable talent. The next rapper to be cast in a pre-shaped mould was Hard Kaur whose “Move Your Body” from *Johnny Gaddar* (2007), “Lucky Boy” from *Bachna Ae Haseeno* (2008), “Talli” from *Ugly Aur Pagli* (2008), “Follow Me” and “Mai Tera Dhadkan Teri” from *Ajab Prem Ki Ghazab Kahani* (2009), and “Laung Da Lashkara” and “Role Pe Gaya” from *Patiala House* (2011) amongst other numbers typecast her into a role where she switched between Rapping in English, Hindi and Punjabi, majorly about partying and clubbing. The next Rapper to arrive in a mould similar to BlaaZe and Hard Kaur, was Stylebhai. Stylebhai performed verses in “Ae Pappi” from *Kismet Konnection* (2008), “Twist” from *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), “Baamulaiza” from *De Dana Dan* (2009), and “Character Dheela Hai” from *Ready* (2011) rapping in English effectually as a call to the dance floor or marking one’s exuberance there, further establishing Hip Hop as a musical form most associated with clubs and parties, in Bollywood.

This decade also marked the beginning of a trend where actors from Bollywood tried their hand at rapping for soundtracks of films. These included a verse by Abhishek Bachchan in “Right Here Right Now” from *Bluffmaster* (2005), Akshay Kumar’s verse in “Singh is King” from the eponymous film released in 2008, and “Chandni Chowk to China (CC2C)” from *Chandni Chowk to China* (2009). The independent Indo-Canadian Rapper ishQ Bector, ruled 2008 when it came to Bollywood Hip Hop, featuring on several tracks including “Hello” from the eponymous film and “Karle Gunah” from *Ugly aur Pagli*. A parallel development during these years saw a flurry of Punjabi rap featuring heavily in Bollywood films. Bohemia, an independent Pakistani American Rapper, performed for “Chandni Chowk to China (CC2C)” from *Chandni Chowk to China* (2009), “Subha Hone Na De” from *Desi Boyz* (2011), and “I Got the Picture” from *8 x 10 Tasveer* (2009) dealing with a number of subjects ranging from success stories to psychological demons. RDB, a band initially formed by three British Sikhs, meanwhile featured on “Rafta Rafta” from *Namaste London* (2007), and “Aloo Chaat” from the eponymous film released in 2009, amongst several others, incorporating elements of

Hip Hop in their songs. It was around this time that artists from the underground Hip Hop scenes in India started trying their hand at the mainstream music industry, with Machas With Attitude (MWA) Rapping for “Dheon Dheon” from *Mujhse Fraaandship Karoge* (2011) and Colin Terence Rapping for “Josh” from *Shaitaan* (2011), with themes that mostly spoke about youth culture, partying and being free-spirited. This phase hence, saw Hip Hop in Bollywood being associated with an extremely dynamic nature while simultaneously beginning to transform from an alien form of music that imitated the west to a culture that represented partying and alcohol while also being associated with the Punjabi culture. Bollywood’s version of Hip Hop music during the first decade or so of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, hence, was far removed from the authentic way in which way it was otherwise produced and received in other Hip Hop scenes around the globe while simultaneously differing in the function that it played:

...hip-hop’s transition from an organic, grassroots art form to a transnational commodity... hip-hop’s entry into the mainstream has fundamentally changed its production, distribution, reception, and function as an art form. (Neal, 2004, p. 493)

Hip Hop in Bollywood was hence seen as a ‘commodity’ that was an acquired taste and not everyone would like.

2012 marked the beginning of the arrival of the members of the underground Hip Hop crew Mafia Mundeer, in Bollywood. Yo Yo Honey Singh came first, starting out with “Mai Sharabi” and “Angreji Beat” in *Cocktail*. He has since gone on to rap for the soundtracks of over 25 Bollywood films while mostly talking about alcohol, parting, and women. While Yo Yo Honey Singh has been heavily criticized for the misogyny in his lyrics and for being a bad influence on the impressionable minds of youngsters in India, what one cannot deny is that he made Bollywood sit up and take notice, paving a way for Rap to become a mainstay in Bollywood soundtracks since 2012. In the words of Mumbai-based rapper D’Evil:

There was this one phase where Honey Singh started coming a lot, doing full songs in Bollywood. The reason was because he marketed himself like that, he made himself, he molded himself into that particular artist who would cater to the audience who watches Bollywood movies. Which is brilliant, I think that’s genius. No matter how he is, no matter how I perceive his music, doesn’t matter. He did what we were supposed to do: tell people that Hip

Hop is there, it's there for good, it's there for long. (D. Parab, personal communication, May 19, 2019)

With Yo Yo Honey Singh carving a niche for himself where he spoke about partying and rapped for what would mostly be identified as party numbers, Bollywood eventually opened up to using more Hip Hop music in soundtracks owing to its popularity. His former Mafia Mundeer crewmates eventually followed suit with Raftaar making his Bollywood debut alongside RDB on “Tamanche Pe Disco” for *Bullet Raja* (2013). Raftaar has since gone on to rap for the soundtracks of more than 20 films, dealing largely with subjects of partying and boasting about masculinity, mostly on club bangers, just like Yo Yo Honey Singh. *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania* (2014) marked the arrival of Badshah in Bollywood through “Saturday Saturday” with the track going on to become a party anthem. He has since gone on to rap for the soundtracks of more than 25 films, with his verses mostly centering around partying and treating women as conquests. The fourth former crewmember of Mafia Mundeer, Ikka made his Bollywood debut in 2014 with “In Da Club” for *Tamanchey*, and has gone on to rap for the soundtracks of over 20 Bollywood films since then. He has mostly rapped on dance numbers, and about partying and having fun. Lil Golu, the fifth and final member of Mafia Mundeer made his debut on “Manali Trance” for *The Shaukeens* (2014) before then going on to rap for “Barbie Girl” from *Tera Intezaar* (2017). Hip Hop’s rise to prominence in Bollywood led to it being treated as a commercial strategy with actors cashing in and rapping on the soundtracks of numerous films with Varun Dhawan’s “Lucky Tu Lucky Me” from *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhaniya* (2014), Randeep Hooda “Kharch Karod” from *Laal Rang* (2016), Siddharth Malhotra’s “Bandook Meri Laila” from *A Gentleman: Sundar, Susheel, Risky* (2017), and Anushka Sharma “Naughty Billo” from *Phillauri* (2017) being prime examples. At this point, Bollywood clearly started trying to “construct a simplistic commercial cultural “reality” for rap production that is easily accommodated to the management practices adopted by the music industry” (Negus, 2004, p. 531). In addition to the former Mafia Mundeer members’ domination of Bollywood Hip Hop, Hard Kaur’s simultaneous contributions led towards Hip Hop in Bollywood becoming increasingly associated with the Punjabi culture. “Babloo Happy Hai” from the eponymous film in 2014 saw her rap about themes of partying, material possessions and alcohol. This was enhanced even further by Manj Musik’s appearances on Bollywood soundtracks once he parted ways with RDB. He featured as a rapper on numerous tracks including “Whistle Baja” from *Heropanti* (2014) and “Singh And Kaur” from *Singh is Bling* (2015). During the first half of this decade, Hip Hop music



in Bollywood was hence heavily associated with the ethnic identities of Punjabi culture:

[The] commercialization process involves the extraction of popular cultural expression from its original social context and function, it seems that the “Latinization” of hip-hop has meant its distancing from the specific national and ethnic traditions to which it had most directly pertained. (Flores, 2004, p. 69)

Owing to the popularity of the former crewmembers of Mafia Mundeer, and Hard Kaur, Hip Hop music in Bollywood was mostly associated with alcohol, dancing, partying, and women. Also given the rise of Hindi and Punjabi rap in Bollywood during these years Hip Hop culture got repackaged as something completely removed from its historical and cultural traditions. It can be argued that this led to something à la Flores’ conception of the “Latinization” of Hip Hop in Bollywood. Bollywood’s presentation of Hip Hop during this time was almost understandably stereotypical despite being significantly removed from its earlier representations in the country. What is noteworthy, however, is that this variation of Hip Hop became quite popular as opposed to its predecessor, with almost every Bollywood film soundtrack featuring rap in some form or the other, making it a mainstay on film soundtracks.

It would, however, be factually incorrect to say that the brand of Hip Hop produced by the former Mafia Mundeer members was the only one afforded space in Bollywood. 2012 also saw *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* produce a rap verse in “Jiya Re” featuring Sofia Ashraf and Neeti Mohan which spoke about the importance of a girl’s individuality. *Chennai Express* (2013), besides Yo Yo Honey Singh’s track simultaneously featured rap verses by Brodha V, Smokey and Enkore on “Ready Steady Po” where they spoke about partying. This, despite being a minor indication still served as proof that Bollywood had an eye on the underground Hip Hop scenes in the country as well. 2017 marked the re-emergence of Baba Sehgal with “Bae, Baba aur Bank Chor” from *Bank Chor*. In characteristic fashion, he utilized word play to humorous effects, mixing English and Hindi to form random rhymes and talk about bank thieves.

When we started, we had to wear baggy jeans and we had to look like our American counterparts to be called a rapper. If I had a normal accent while I’m rapping, how my original accent is, they would be like ‘yo, like, you don’t sound like a rapper’... So we were almost in this imitation stage, for a long time. And that’s how most cultures start; *we start imitating and then we innovate* [emphasis added] right? (Cardozo & Mysore, 2020, p. 145)

In conjunction with the claim made by Bengaluru-based rapper Sumukh Mysore, better known by his stage name Smokey the Ghost, beside the lesser-known names in Bollywood trying to bring out a different aspect of Hip Hop from what the audience was used to, even the stalwarts started innovating with the content of their rap. *ABCD: Anybody Can Dance* (2013), the first film on Hip Hop dance in India, featured rap verses in English by Deane Sequeira on “Bezubaan” and Hindi and Punjabi by Hard Kaur on “Sadda Dil Vi Tu”. While Sequeira’s verse dealt with themes of crossing boundaries and overcoming barriers to fulfill one’s individuality, Hard Kaur rapped in praise of Lord Ganesha as part of the devotional track. Elsewhere, Hard Kaur featured on *OK Jaanu* (2017) with a verse on “Kaara Funkaara” where she rapped in English about how love leads to a change in the relationship shared with oneself. Yo Yo Honey Singh also tried making a little more conscious Hip Hop music with tracks such as “Fugly” and “Banjarey” for *Fugly* (2014) with the first speaking about youth culture as being in stark opposition to established powers and the second talking about nomadic living and anti-establishment. Raftaar, on the other hand, rapped for “Dhakkad” in *Dangal* (2016) and “Toh Dishoom” in *Dishoom* (2016) where he spoke about a girl who is a forthright go-getter in the former, while presenting a playful endorsement of toxic masculinity with a dose of nationalism in the latter.

It hence becomes clear that despite its brief history in Bollywood, Hip Hop has undergone multiple stages of evolution with the way that it has been perceived by audiences also undergoing a change over the years, largely thanks to the change in the way it has been presented. It is around this time that the underground Hip Hop scenes in India started picking up steam, and Bollywood duly followed suit, coming up with *Gully Boy*, a film inspired by the life of Mumbai-based underground rappers Divine and Naezy.

#### *Gully Boy and the Assimilation of the Underground Hip Hop Aesthetic in Bollywood*

Rapper Dahav! Parab, better known by his stage name D’Evil remarked that “Indian Hip Hop is always going to have a time, it’s either before *Gully Boy* or after *Gully Boy* because things definitely did change after *Gully Boy*, no doubt about it” (personal communication, May 19, 2019). While *Gully Boy* most certainly marks a crucial juncture for Indian Hip Hop, it certainly wasn’t the first instance of Bollywood’s attempt at a more conscious form of rap. Halifu Osumare posits “[t]he so-called conscious brand of Rap music motivates youth internationally to explore their own issues of marginalization in the hip hop “underground,” which continues to evade the dominant pop culture industries” (2001, p. 172). Underground Hip Hop scenes have been on the rise in

India for a few years now, existing as an alternative to the mainstream entertainment industry. This duality of Hip Hop culture, however, is in no way exclusive to India:

Every populated continent (and most countries) has thousands of local hip-hop scenes shaped by artistic and cultural practices that are produced, defined, and sustained primarily by youth in their own neighbourhoods and communities... these scenes are generally described as underground hip-hop, both to characterize their critical challenge to conventional norms and to distinguish them from commercial hip-hop. (Morgan & Bennet, 2011, p. 180)

Mumbai, amongst other cities in the country, has been home to a burgeoning underground Hip Hop scene for more than a decade and it was about time that the mainstream music industry caught a sniff of it. After Divine, a Mumbai-based underground caught Sony Music India's attention with the acclaim showered on him for "Yeh Mera Bombay" released on 16 November 2013, they signed him to a contract in 2014. He went on to release his breakout single "Mere Gully Mein" featuring Naezy on 16 April 2015. In these tracks, Divine raps about his life in the slums and his love for his city. These tracks are characterized by not just their extremely specific spatiotemporality but also by Divine's use of a dialect that is very specific to this spatiotemporality:

*Tere shootero ka khaas mere gully mein*  
*Pure shehar ki awaaz mere gully mein*  
*Mere Gully Mein gully gully gully mein*  
*Mere Gully Mein gully gully gully mein*  
*Police aayi lagi waat mere gully mein*  
*Ek number saari baat mere gully mein*

Your shooters' favorite is in my street  
The whole city's voice is in my street  
In my street, in the streets, streets  
In my street, in the streets, streets  
It's trouble if the police come to my street  
Everything is number one in my street (Divine & Naezy, 2015)

The "glocalization" of Hip Hop is a "global commonality of connective marginality combined with local elements (e.g., language, lyrical content, music, ethnic symbols) that

create unique sounds and statements” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 252). In adapting the core elements of Hip Hop to suit the specific experiences he wants to address, Divine “glocalizes” Hip Hop to form a variant which remains true to the global aesthetic of Hip Hop in that it addresses issues that are authentic to the spatiotemporal location that they are expressed from, while also localizing them to a very specific context. As pointed out by Osumare, the underground of Hip Hop, globally, is characterized by an element of expressing the voices of the marginalized sections of society. Given that Osumare constructs global Hip Hop in conjunction with the Africanist aesthetic, it only makes sense to follow the same trajectory in speaking of the underground. Osumare defines the Africanist aesthetic as “a processual mode of expressivity that privileges the negotiation of the self in the moment through a complex use of rhythmic timing, verbal or nonverbal rhetorical strategies, and multiple layers of meaning that draw from its sociocultural context and its audience” (Osumare, 2007, p. 12).

One could hence say that in addressing topics that are rooted firmly in the sociocultural context that they are produced in and addressed to a very specific audience, Divine’s rap adheres to the underground aesthetic. The quality of work being produced in the underground Hip Hop scenes, with the impetus that New Media provided to it eventually made the Indian audiences aware of the fact that Bollywood’s representation of Hip Hop is only a small fraction of the culture. It was announced shortly afterwards that Zoya Akhtar was making a film titled *Gully Boy* inspired by Divine and Naezy. It naturally followed that this announcement drew a lot of attention towards the artists from the underground Hip Hop scene in Mumbai.

Another effect of this announcement was that Bollywood saw itself engaging in a relatively more socioculturally conscious form of rap. *ABCD 2* (2015) featured a rap verse by Divya Kumar on “Chunar” where she dealt with issues such as the feelings of defeat and shame, restoring lost pride and yearning for one’s mother. Raftaar, who is famous for being very active in the mainstream as well as the independent Hip Hop scenes simultaneously finally began to show the first signs of engaging in a more sociopolitically conscious brand of rap in Bollywood with “Teen Kabootar” from *Lucknow Central* (2017), where he criticizes the people in positions of power. The highlight of Raftaar’s attempt to cross the underground-mainstream divide came with “Mantoiyat” for *Manto* (2018). In this track, he held up a mirror to the society and its insistence to control individuals’ ways of thinking while also attacking the restriction on the freedom of speech, equating the conditions of our times to those of Saadat Hasan Manto’s. Through the grave issues he addressed in this track, Raftaar serves as the perfect example of how “because a hostile attitude is marketable and commercially successful, rappers

can retain control of the message and keep it undiluted” (Swedenburg, 2004, p. 584). Indian American rapper Raja Kumari’s featured on “Freaking Life” from *Mom* (2017), “Allah Duhai Hai” from *Race 3* (2018) and “Husn Parcham” from *Zero* (2018), speaking about individuality. All of her tracks, however, were geared towards being made into club bangers. While it is undeniable that the Hip Hop produced in Bollywood was still inspired somewhere or the other by its counterpart from the U.S.A., this array of tracks serve as evidence that Bollywood Hip Hop has the ability to merge Hip Hop culture as represented in the U.S. with forms of expression that speak to realities in the artists’ and audience’s immediate surroundings. Rather unsurprisingly, Zoya Akhtar’s announcement also led to a notable increase in the number of artists from underground Hip Hop scenes throughout the country that started featuring on Bollywood soundtracks. Naezy featured on “Birju” from *Hey Bro* (2015), criticizing a con in the local “Bambaiya” Hindi through his rap. He also featured on the soundtrack of *Bank Chor* (2017) engaging in a rap battle with Pardhaan, an underground rapper from Delhi, on “BC Rap Knockout”. The track delved into the rivalry between Mumbai and Delhi, and is an exercise in one-upmanship, employing local slangs and references while speaking of regional pride. Pardhaan went on to Rap in Haryanvi for “Boys of Gudgaawaan” from *Gurgaon* (2017) while Naezy featured on “Hum Hai Insaaf” alongside Babu Haabi for *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero* (2018) where they spoke about social justice and making sure that it is served by bringing an end to unchecked crime. Babu Haabi who rapped on “Chitta Ve” and “Da Da Dasse” for *Uda Punjab* (2016), switched between Punjabi and Hindi as he dealt with the problems of drug addiction, psychological demons and the mental conditions of drug addicts. He also rapped for “Bijlee Giregi” from *Manmarziyan* (2018), talking about the ferocity of an unapologetically outspoken girl (a character in the film). The authentic expression of political messages finally started finding a place in mainstream Bollywood soundtracks with Divine’s “Paintra” from *Mukkabaaz* (2017). Besides talking about the tactics of living life, in this track Divine discusses some of the dark and evil truths of the society, while also adding some political commentary to it. Divine also rapped for “Bantai” from *Haseena Parkar* (2017), speaking about power, resourcefulness and gang violence in rustic “Bambaiya” Hindi straight out of the streets of Mumbai, and “Badla” from *Blackmail* (2018), where he used the local slangs of Mumbai to speak about taking charge of one’s own life in the mean world we live in and extracting revenge. D’Evil who wrote the lyrics for “Badla” with Divine, rapped for “Baba Theme Song” from *Saheb, Biwi Aur Gangster 3* (2018) in what could be seen as an Indian Gangsta Rap, boasting about bravery and living life on the edge, in the underworld. MC Heam rapped for “Ey Chhote Motor Chala” from *Beyond The Clouds*

(2018), using the local slang of Mumbai to speak about the experiences of a boy born and brought up in the hustle and bustle of the city and his love for riding a bike. This way, in plucking artists from the underground scenes while also trying to engage in an aesthetic that is more in line with that of underground Hip Hop, these scenes in India became what could be called a “precommercial market” (Rose, 2004, p. 542) for Bollywood. Given the perpetually dynamic nature of Hip Hop in Bollywood, it is inevitable that the genre has historically tended to crossover and blend into other genres. With the majority of the output of Bollywood Hip Hop coming in the form of music that is sometimes unidentifiable, it is fair to say that Hip Hop in Bollywood had thus far been assimilated into the larger culture of Bollywood music. This has meant that Hip Hop, in its Bollywood manifestation was stripped of most of its identifiable features, seeming almost alien owing to its assimilation into the culture of Bollywood music:

Cultural assimilation is the act of giving up one’s original cultural identity and moving into full participation in the new culture. In addition, assimilation is the process of absorption into an established or larger community, can lose many cultural traits, and can be voluntary or forced. (Bob Marley and Cultural Assimilation, 2016)

Given that the underground Hip Hop aesthetic still hasn’t infiltrated into Bollywood completely, it is worth pondering what things would look like when that eventually happens.

Based loosely on the lives of Divine and Naezy, two of the most renowned underground rappers from Mumbai, it was inevitable that music would form an integral part of Zoya Akhtar’s film *Gully Boy* (2019). Featuring 18 tracks from 54 collaborators, the movie certainly did its groundwork. Unlike numerous previous attempts by Bollywood films about the underbelly of society, *Gully Boy* sources its music from the very hotbed the film is about: the underground Hip Hop scene of Mumbai. The soundtrack features a music supervisor instead of a music director and in Ankur Tewari they had someone who is linked to the independent music scene. Lead actor Ranveer Singh rapped on five tracks in the film. While it seems like a justifiable choice to have Singh rap, using him to replace Naezy’s parts for “Mere Gully Mein” perfectly brings out the ambivalence of films’ end result. In not giving Naezy a chance to reprise probably the passages that played a huge role in the film eventually being inspired from him, *Gully Boy*’s soundtrack seems to have somewhere fallen prey to the

mainstream's demands. Owing to his hiatus, Naezy's voice is, in fact, completely absent from the soundtrack of the film. Divine, on the other hand, features on two new tracks, in addition to reprising his place on the original ones. One of the tracks that Divine features on, "Azadi", is an instance of *Gully Boy's* music having undergone a mainstream dilution of the aesthetic that the underground would have thrived on. The revised version of the song in the film omits the references to the oppression of casteism, Brahmanism, communalism and patriarchy that the 'Azadi' chant has come to represent. This track serves as a perfect example of the "sanitizing of Rap's expression of urban realities, resulting in sterile hip-hop that, devoid of its original fire, will offend no one" (Dyson, 2004, p. 64). The soundtrack, however, doesn't completely do away with this aesthetic. "Jingostan" is a prime example in its references to the dire consequences dissent can have for protesting individuals and collectives in our democracy. In this, the track is a perfect example of how "Rap's ability to serve as a counter-hegemonic narrative of resistance has been compromised because of constraints placed on it by the mass culture industries, however, elements of cultural resistance are still a central part of the music" (Fernandes 2017, p. 68). Another example of the underground aesthetic featuring prominently in *Gully Boy's* soundtrack is "India 91" which features rap verses by MC Altaf, MC TodFod, 100 RBH, Maharya, and Noxious D. The track brings out the diverse multilingualism of the underground Hip Hop scenes in India, while speaking of cultural pride. These two tracks perfectly bring out how the soundtrack ends up diluting the underground aesthetic while simultaneously commodifying it. "Kaam Bhaari" by the eponymous rapper and "Har Gham Mei Khushi Hai" by Ace stand in stark contrast to Naezy's case. The movie acts as both the artists' break in Bollywood. For Kaam Bhaari, the track comes on the back of one he recorded after he won a competition run by colossus Jack & Jones, while for Ace it comes after having been one of the founders of Mumbai's underground Hip Hop scenes in the mid-2000s with his crew, Mumbai's Finest. Another rapper from the track for Jack & Jones, Spitfire, got his break in Bollywood through *Gully Boy*, writing the lyrics for "Asli Hip Hop". By roping in rappers like Ace, Kaam Bhaari, and Spitfire *Gully Boy* has undoubtedly laid out a platform that was earlier unavailable for the underground Hip Hop scene in India. *Gully Boy*, and very naturally the music for the film, seems to present class as the primary grounds for discrimination and oppression in Indian society. Despite being set in the heavily caste-segregated slums of Mumbai, the film seems to conveniently forego the stigmatization that comes with it. It similarly seems to ignore the socially dictated norm of following in a parent's working-class profession because of one's caste identity as a problem. As has been pointed out by several Hip Hop scholars

including Marcylenia Morgan and Dionne Bennett, however, it is precisely this ability to engage in “complex cultural, artistic, and political dialogues” (2011, p. 180) that characterizes Hip Hop’s liberating aspects. Zoya Akhtar, the film’s director has repeatedly emphasized that her film is more about breaking the shackles of one’s economic class than anything else. This makes one wonder as to whether *Gully Boy* has kick-started a trend wherein Bollywood’s tendency to refrain from addressing the complexities of marginalized identities could end up sanitizing the aesthetic that underground Hip Hop is renowned for. It is worth pondering therefore whether Bollywood Hip Hop tracks will herein be reduced to “transfunctionalized objects produced by the subculture becom[ing] the raw material for cultural production by the mass culture industries... [where] subcultural meanings are changed by mass producers (such as advertisers) into more marketable, less radical meanings” (Blair, 2004, p. 501). *Gully Boy* appears to have brought the development of Hip Hop in India to what some critics believe is an undesirable albeit inevitable stage: the commercialization of the underground.

*Gully Boy* only seems to have further increased Bollywood’s fascination with Hip Hop, with almost 15 rap tracks featuring on the soundtracks of close to 10 films within three months of the film’s release including Raftaar’s appearance on “Kartootein” from *Setters* (2019), Ikka’s appearance on “Manmohini” from *Hume Tumse Pyaar Kitna* (2019), and Yo Yo Honey Singh’s appearance on “Funk Love” from *Jhootha Kahin Ka* (2019). Not just that, but Bollywood still continues to tap into the underground Hip Hop scene with Dee MC’s appearance on “Jagg Jiteya” from *Uri* (2019) and Slow Cheeta, Dee MC, Spitfire and Kaam Bhaari’s appearance on “Article 15” from the eponymous film goes on to prove. Given that Bollywood is a primarily commercially-driven industry, and that its treatment of conscious Hip Hop thus far has seen the art form stripped of its complexities, undermining the underground aesthetic, it is understandable that the authenticity of Hip Hop in Bollywood has been questioned, similarly to other global Hip Hop sites pointed out by McLeod “[t]he multiple invocations of authenticity made by hip-hop community members are a direct and conscious reaction to the threat of the assimilation and the colonization of this self-identified, resistive subculture” (1999, p. 146). Authenticity or “reflecting genuineness and truth” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 250) is the aspect of Hip Hop that is the most threatened when it comes to the questions like assimilation and commodification of the culture. Given its movement from the U.S.A. to India, rappers’ and Hip Hop artists’ ‘truth’ would comprise the performance of an indexical authenticity in the temporal, spatial and corporal sense (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 251). Keeping in mind that Zoya Akhtar, the director of *Gully Boy* has expressed a desire to make a sequel to the film based “on the entire



hip-hop culture in our country” (Jha, 2019) and the reports that a spin-off based on MC Sher, one of the characters in the film, is in the pipeline (Bhattacharya, 2019), it is understandable that there is an apprehension towards the future of Hip Hop culture in India. The source of this apprehension, quite understandably is the view that the mass packaging and distribution of rap will reduce it to a commodity that is unrecognizable when compared to its cultural and historical roots. It is, however, arguable that it is the identity of Hip Hop as a culture rooted in resistance that has thus far deprived it of the mainstream attention that *Gully Boy* has finally brought to it.

### *Conclusion*

Given the belief that “[t]he diffusion of hip hop throughout the different spheres of commercial culture is commonly viewed as undermining the authenticity of this youth practice” (Watkins, 2004, p. 569), it is very natural that the increasing attention that Bollywood is paying to Hip Hop can seem worrisome. Given the distortion and historic misrepresentation of the culture as being one-dimensional, this belief isn’t one that can be dismissed very easily. However, right since its foundations, Hip Hop has always been about multiple things: “peace, unity, love, and havingfun” (Brown & Bambaataa, 1984), it has “always been in the clubs, and it has been in the streets” (Divine, 2018). Hip-Hop, as a culture thus, is not only about social inclusion but also about being accommodative as a culture in and of itself. In fact, despite the belief that rappers who do not make sociopolitically conscious music are partaking in an inauthentic form of Hip Hop or the belief that Hip Hop is only about a cheap and vulgar style, “it is this expansion and flexibility that is the real story of Rap’s decade on record” (Light, 2004, p. 138). Hence, quite contrary to the aforementioned apprehensions, it seems almost certain that Hip Hop in India is geared for a lengthy future, especially in Bollywood. What, however, will determine the direction it goes in from hereon will be its answer to the forces of the mainstream, the forces of “assimilation” and “co-optation”. Hence, pretty much like in the U.S.A. “the biggest challenge hip-hop face[s] [is] not survival, but avoiding overexposure and irreparable co-optation” (Light, 2004, p. 143).

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# Reading Anglo-Indian History in Non-Fiction Cinema: A Study of Select Documentary Films

Shyamasri Maji

## *Introduction*

This article presents an interdisciplinary research on cinema and cultural history. It explores the history of the Anglo-Indian community in select, recently-produced documentary films: *McCluskie's Gunj: A Lost Home* (2012), *The White Cloud* (2014), *Let's Twist Again* (2015), *Monuments* (2016), *The Anglo-Indians of Madras* (2017-2018) and *Anglo-Indian Women of Bow Barracks: Voices of the Unvoiced* (2018)<sup>i</sup>. These films which are primary texts in this article provide us a picture of the current condition of the community. These documentaries serve as useful repositories for Minority Studies in Indian academia where till date very little research work has been done on the Anglo-Indian community. Almost all the documentaries mentioned earlier have highlighted the fact that the Anglo-Indians are gradually becoming a vanishing community in India and have tried to investigate why it is so. Although the history of the community is more than 500 years old, in this article, I have focused on its contemporary history as represented in the select films. The Anglo-Indians have a pro-British lineage due to their mixed descent and this problematises their cultural identity in post-Independence India. This article looks into the select film texts as historical narratives which delve deep into the memories of the community members. The overall critical framework of this study is based on postcolonial paradigms of identity and representation (of the

Anglo-Indians) in the social and the cultural matrices of Indian society. I have followed the research methods of textual analysis and interview for the present study. Memory has been used as a research tool for excavating alternative history from the film texts.

### *The Genre Matters*

There are two reasons for choosing documentary as the genre for reviewing the history of the Anglo-Indian community: first, to analyse the representation of the community on the non-fictional plane of the silver screen; secondly, to read the select documentaries as alternative texts of postcolonial history. Fiction films such as *Julie* (1975), *Mahanagar* (1963), *Junoon* (1978), *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), *Cotton Mary* (1999) and *Bow Barracks Forever* (2004) have represented the Anglo-Indian community in India. These representations have invited both applause and criticism. Most mainstream commercial movies of the 1960s and 1970s created a stereotyped representation of the Anglo-Indian community by projecting their supposed drunkenness, wife beating habits and their promiscuity. Anjan Dutt's *Bow Barracks Forever* (2004) was vehemently criticised by the community members for creating a derogatory representation of the community's socio-cultural values.

'Representation' is a serious issue in this context. It calls into question the politics of representation, which, according to Stuart Hall, is based on the semiotic approach and the discursive approach<sup>ii</sup>. My reading of the representation of the Anglo-Indian community in Indian cinema is based on these two approaches: the semiotic approach of (re)constructing the identity of the minority community through its cultural signifiers in the film text and the discursive approach of conveying the power relations between different groups of characters represented in the film.<sup>iii</sup> The community narratives presented in the films mentioned in the previous paragraph are based on fictional scripts. The cultural signifiers and the discursive aspects in these films have been subjected to the filmmakers' imagination, which is constituted of certain fixed socio-cultural notions. So, the representation of the Anglo-Indian identity in these fiction films is a second-hand interpretation of subjectivity, which needs to be interrogated.

In an interview with the Anglo-Indian filmmaker Richard O' Connor (*The Anglo-Indians of Madras*), I asked him why he chose documentary as a genre for representing the relationship between the city and the community. Mr. O' Connor's candid reply to this query was as follows:

One can pack a lot into documentary: from mundane to arcane. One can

include the views of many and can even be indulgent to a fault. This is not possible in a feature film which leaves much to the viewer to discern or fill in. The subject in a documentary does not act but speaks of true events. There is no role playing here, no manufactured drama, but real lives telling real tales. There is a ring of authenticity about a documentary that one cannot take away.

The above extract brings out the potentials of a documentary film. “Documentaries of social representation are what we typically call non-fiction” (Nichols, 2001, p.1). Unlike fiction films, which implore the audience to “suspend disbelief (to accept the world as plausible)” (Nichols, 2001, p. 2), non-fiction films try to “instill belief (to accept its world as actual)” (Nichols, 2001, p. 2). Non-fiction cinema mainly deals with social issues of the present times. However, most of the documentary films dealing with social issues present a historical discourse by analysing the current crisis from a historical perspective. In this context, Bill Nichols (2001) rightly observes that “[d]ocumentary adds a new dimension to popular memory and social history” (p. 2). The representation of the Anglo-Indian community in the select documentary films is marked by a strong historical sense prevalent among the participants<sup>iv</sup> belonging to both the Anglo-Indian community and the mainstream Indian communities.

Unlike the actors in a fiction film, the participants in a documentary film are “cultural players rather than theatrical performers” (Nichols, 2001, p. 5). These participants are “treated as social actors: they continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of camera” (Nichols, 2001, p. 5). A study of the participants in the select documentaries is an illuminating experience. Their recollection of their past experiences and achievements contribute significantly to the craft of visual storytelling in non-fiction cinema. In films such as *McCluskie’s Gunj: A Lost Home* and *Anglo-Indian Women of Bow Barracks: Voices of the Unheard* (2018) certain features of *cinéma vérité* can be observed. In *The White Cloud* the presence of the filmmaker himself is very much unobtrusive. It displays the characteristics of Direct Cinema in many ways.

The participants in these films play an active role in narrating the story of their family and community. The nostalgic recollection of the participants connects the past with the present. These stories which come up from their nostalgic reminiscing are meta narratives of both colonial and post-colonial history. Their recollection of their ancestors’ experiences in the days of the Raj, which perhaps has come down to them as a legacy, gives the viewers an opportunity to re-view the history of the Indian nation from the perspective of the Anglo-Indian community.

## *Historical Background*

Among the minority communities in India, the Anglo-Indians are the only group of “racial-cum-linguistic minority in India” (Anthony, 1964, p.181). The community was formed as a result of interracial marriages during the early days of colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. The Indian Constitution till date provides a patrilinear definition of an Anglo-Indian in Article 366(2):

A person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only. (Basu, 2002, p. 395)

Although the phrase “Anglo” generally refers to the English, the term “Anglo-Indian” refers to the descendants of the Indians from Portuguese, Dutch, French and British lineages. In almost all the films selected in this article, the Anglo-Indians have been represented as an urban community, whose forefathers were mostly employed in the Railways in the days of the British Raj.

The Indian minorities such as the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Indian Christians and the Parsees are politically identified on the basis of their religious orientations. Unlike them, the Anglo-Indian identity focuses chiefly on its cultural characteristics, which include a distinct Westernised way of socio-cultural life and the English language as mother tongue. This was the reason why Frank Anthony, the President-in-chief of All India Anglo-Indian Association, could not agree with Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of including the Anglo-Indians with the Indian Christians (Anthony, 1964, p.181). Anthony defended his proposition by pointing out that “the Indian Succession Act of 1925 had defined the ‘Indian Christian’ as a native of India of *unmixed Asiatic descent* and who professed any form of the Christian religion. This statutory definition of the ‘Indian Christian’ did not include the Anglo-Indian” (Anthony, 1964, pp.181-82) (emphasis added). According to U.E. Charlton-Stevens (2018), a young historian, Frank Anthony’s political project was framed on the precepts of communal nationalism through “the preservation of a distinctive culture and identity, nested within Nehruvian secular construction of the new Indian state” (p.12).

At the time of demotion of the British Empire, the Anglo-Indians needed to identify themselves as either British or as Indians. The situation worsened when they realised that

the British Government was completely indifferent to their crisis for national recognition (Maher, 1964, p.117). It was a matter of great challenge for Frank Anthony to establish the Anglo-Indians as a minority community in India and to ensure reservation for them in the fields of political representation and job. He wrote in his community memoir *Britain's Betrayal in India* (1964) that every section in the Sub-Committee of Minority Rights was opposed to giving the Anglo-Indian Community any political representation (p. 205). It was due to Anthony's rapport with eminent Congress leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru that he could ensure certain privileges for the community.<sup>vi</sup> With the help of Sardar Patel, on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1947, Anthony was also able to restore the job quotas for the Anglo-Indian community in the Railway, Posts and Telegraph and Customs Departments (Anthony, 1964, p.211).

The restoration of the job quotas, however, was not a permanent solution to the economic insecurities of the community. This is because, the settlement had certain terms and conditions, which said that the reservations "would be reduced 'as nearly as possible' by 10 percent successively every two years and expire fully after ten years" (Charlton-Stevens, 2018, p. 213). This made the community members anxious about their future in post-Independence India and thousands of them decided to emigrate to the developed nations for better job opportunities. In *Domicile and Diaspora* (2005), Alison Blunt refers to Robert, an Anglo-Indian immigrant in Western Australia, who spoke about such economic anxieties. He said that during the 1960s, when the management of the British and the American companies in India were transferred from the British to the Indians, the Anglo-Indians were cornered in their workplaces by the Indian bosses (p. 156). According to Robert, the Anglo-Indians were often threatened and marginalised by the Indian employers in the following language: "You are the part of the British rule or British Raj, of India, and we really don't want you all anymore. We are going to put our own people in to do the jobs that you all are doing now" (Blunt, 2005, pp.156-57). One can witness such biased attitudes of an Indian employer towards an Anglo-Indian employee in Satyajit Ray's fiction film *Mahanagar* (1964). In this film, Haradhan Bandyopadhyay playing the role of the Indian employer not only expresses his dislike for the Anglo-Indian community, but also sacks Edith, the Anglo-Indian girl, from the office by making false accusations against her.

The 1960s was a period of cultural anxiety for the Anglo-Indians. Referring to Frank Anthony, Blunt discusses how Indian angst against English language had intimidated the community members at that time: "The constant tirades against English and repeated attempts, overt or covert, to drive it out of the Country, inevitably had a reaction on the Community whose mother-tongue is English" (Anthony qtd. in Blunt, 2005, p.155).



Blunt observes that “the imposition of Hindi as the official language in 1963 led many Anglo-Indians to fear discrimination, unemployment and exclusion” (2005, pp. 154-55). In an anti-English society, the Anglo-Indian women feared that they might be harassed in public places for wearing ‘dresses’ <sup>vii</sup> (Blunt 2005:155).

In spite of the anxieties discussed above, many Anglo-Indians stayed back in India and accepted their ‘Indian’ national identity. English, which is their mother tongue, has been recognised as one of the official languages for government proceedings. Over the decades, they have been living in different parts of urban India such as Chennai, Kolkata, Patna and Bengaluru. The Anglo-Indian population is also scattered in small towns such as Agra Cantonment, Asansol, Kharagpur, Thangassery and Pondicherry. Very few Anglo-Indians are left in McCluskiegunj, a rural settlement, which was established as Anglo-Indian homeland by E.T. McCluskie in 1934.

As per the Constitutional norm (Article 67) the President of India nominates two Anglo-Indian representatives in the Parliament. Currently, George Baker and Richard Hay are the nominated representatives in the Lok Sabha. In a recent article titled “Lost in the Middle: Anglo-Indians” published in the online edition of *Deccan Herald*, Harish Sridharan provides us with this striking information:

The Anglo-Indian nomination to the Lok Sabha was supposed to stop by the end of the 1960s but the reservations continued way into the late 90s and 2000s. The reservations are expected to expire by 2020. George Baker, however, has claimed that he proposes to ask the Prime Minister to extend the reservation of the seat. He claims that complete assimilation of the Anglo-Indians into Indian society would take another 50 years, the Guardian reported. (20<sup>th</sup> May, 2019)

From the above excerpt, it is clear that even after seventy years of Independence, assimilation of the Anglo-Indians into Indian society remains an issue to both the Anglo-Indian community as well as to the people of other Indian communities.

The above discussion raises the question whether the acquisition of minority rights and Indian citizenship could offer homely conditions to the Anglo-Indian community in postcolonial India. The decline in the population of the community members since the Independence makes the issue of their ‘homing’ more pertinent than that of other minority communities in India.

Many left India. <sup>viii</sup> After Independence, those who stayed back in India were looked upon as postcolonial subjects. Astonishingly, very few history books have documented the history of their postcolonial crisis. The history books which have dealt with this problem

are mostly written by members of the community itself. The community members, as mentioned earlier, have been mostly subjected to stereotypical representations in mainstream fiction films. As far as their representation in Indian non-fiction cinema is concerned, very few documentaries have been produced on the Anglo-Indians and almost no research work has been done on them. In order to counter the barriers of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the Anglo-Indians in cultural texts, one needs to be aware of the insiders' views. That is why I have laid emphasis on what the community members have said about their culture and postcolonial experiences. Most of their views, as represented in the select documentaries, are based on memory.

There is a close bonding between history and memory but authenticity of the latter is often interrogated because it is undocumented. However, one cannot overlook the importance of collective memory<sup>ix</sup> in framing and shaping the historical consciousness of an individual belonging to a particular community. Geoffrey Cubbit (2007) observes that “the individuals who remember do so not as isolated agents, but as social beings... enmeshed in networks of social relationship, implicated in various kinds of social or cultural community. The very contents of memory reflect this” (p. 118). In this respect, memory, both personal and collective, plays a crucial role in mapping the relationship between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society).

#### *Alternative History in Select Documentaries*

In “Culture’s In-Between” Homi K. Bhabha (1996) observes that “[w]e have entered an anxious age of identity, in which attempt to memorialize lost time, and to reclaim lost territories, creates a culture of disparate ‘interest groups’ or social movements” (p. 59). When we examine the documentaries, we discover that the Anglo-Indians are desperate to retrieve and preserve the lost time so much so that the effort assumes the nature of a social movement. By going back in time, the participants try to tell the world the story of their distinct cultural identity and heritage, which as many participants have said are fading away due to the assimilative protocols of a homogeneous national identity. The documentary filmmakers have used cultural memory<sup>x</sup> as an effective narrative tool for representing Anglo-Indian history and identity in the select documentaries. Different objects such as photographs, buildings, recipes, cutlery, tailor-made ladies’ dresses and old tombs in cemetery function as important signifiers of cultural memory in the mise-en-scene of the documentaries selected here for detailed study.

*Monuments* (2016), a documentary film made by the Department of Journalism, Mass Communication and Video Production, Mar Ivanios College, Kerala, narrates in

Malayalam the history of the Anglo-Indian community at Thangassery, a beach town in the Kollam district of Kerala. The socio-architectural survey of the town in the film communicates the predominance of Portuguese culture there. In this film, an Anglo-Indian lady informs the viewers that while her grandparents talked in Portuguese, her father conversed in both Malayalam and Portuguese. Although she spoke in English, it was evident from her words that the Anglo-Indians in Thangassery had inherited linguistic hybridity from their forefathers. She referred to the Malayalam word “chouchi” (“elder sister”) and also to certain Portuguese words such as *copa* (“cup” or “goblet”), *chapa* (“number plate” or “sheet”), which are used in the family gatherings.

In *Monuments*, the ruins of a fort and a lighthouse communicate the association of the place and the local people with the history of Portuguese colonialism in India. These historical monuments bear evidence to not only the political history of the past but also of the present demographic situation, in which a section of the local population represents the legacies of Portuguese lineage in their Anglo-Indian identity. It is mentioned by a participant that a true Anglo-Indian wedding has a typical bridal dress with a long trail like Lady Diana, flower girls, bridesmaids and ritualistic observances, which are absent in inter-community marriages in Thangassery. Another lady mentions certain recipes such as duck roast, turkey roast, dumpling stew made with rice flour and pork vindaloo, which are traditional and are a must for Christmas and other festivities. She remarks that with the passage of time, the recipes have undergone changes. The changes in the traditions are passed on to the succeeding generation and these also contribute to the repertoire of the community’s collective memory.

*The Anglo-Indians of Madras* (2017-2018), is a documentary series, directed by Richard O’ Connor and Harry MacLure. These two filmmakers have represented a detailed view of Madras (presently known as Chennai) by exploring the local history of its different neighbourhoods such as Santhome, George Town, Royapettah and Vepery, from the Anglo-Indian perspective. Produced as it is by two Anglo-Indians, this series is unique because it is based on detailed research on the community’s history. So, this series presents an insider’s view about the past and the present experiences of the Anglo-Indians in postcolonial Madras. Representation of the community’s contribution to the Indian society in the fields of education, sports and music features as common theme in all the episodes of this series.

In all the episodes of *The Anglo-Indians of Madras*, neighbourhoods and buildings act as recurring symbols of Anglo-Indian culture. In the episode titled “Vepery and its Environs” (Part 2), Mr. Richard O’ Connor, the narrator, begins by saying, “Every neighbourhood has its olfactory air about it. Thus, while Santhome smells of the sea and

Royapuram of the day's catch of fish... , Vepery has the aroma of fresh cakes and bakes.”

The renowned bakeries of Vepery are remembered by not only the local Anglo-Indian residents but also the community members who emigrated to Australia many years ago. Keith Long, an Anglo-Indian immigrant in Melbourne, recalls the bakery items that were available in the Italy bakery on the Perambur Barracks Road in Vepery, when he lived in India. The red colour St. George's School and Orphanage is described as three hundred years old, which makes it one of the oldest schools in the country. The magnificent building of St. George's Cathedral stands adjacent to the American Consulate. The narrator informs the viewers that at one point of time the Anglo-Indians were actively involved in the church services. In Part 3 of “Vepery and its Environs” makes a minute representation of the Anglo-Indian quarters next to the Sacred Heart Church. Old, dilapidated houses belonging to Anglo-Indian families are shown in Episode 5 “St. Thomas Mount” (Part 1). The participants have a strong sense of emotional attachment towards these buildings. On being asked about the contribution of architecture (buildings) in the series, Mr. O'Connor gave the following reply:

For the Anglo-Indian community (as for any other community), the school, the church, the hospital, the cemetery, the theatre, the playground and the parish hall (in every hub) were important landmarks that left indelible impressions on the mind and heart. The hill and its steps in St. Thomas Mount, the beachfront in Santhome, Kunhiraman's store in Royapuram, the bungalows of Veteran Lines in Pallavaram, the clock tower in Royapettah, the shopping complexes in Purasawalkam, the railway colony in Tambaram, the railway institute and Binny's in Perambur and the Doveton school, Nurses Association and Tram Shed in Vepery are all important landmarks for the community in these places. Community members remember congregating or socialising, visiting or relaxing at these places, all of which serve as a reservoir of memories, especially for the diaspora or those who have left their hometowns, from which they can time and again draw emotional sustenance.

*McCluskie's Ganj: A Lost Home* (2012), produced by Siddharth Jha and presented by Lok Sabha TV, begins with the words of Frank Anthony that “the community is Indian and it has always been Indian.” Unlike the other films, this film represents the history of that section of the community members, who live in a rural place, in the forested area of Chotta Nagpur plateau. It narrates the history of the community's dream to have a mini-England in India, which they could have claimed as their homeland.

In *McCluskie's Gunj: A Lost Home*, old family photographs have been used amply to communicate that the place was once inhabited by a large number of Anglo-Indians. These discoloured photographs are remnants of an era when the Anglo-Indians represented themselves as ones belonging to the European society in their dress and appearance. These are the objects of material memory<sup>xi</sup>. Like the vacant and dilapidated bungalows of the colonial times, these photographs evoke what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls 'postmemory': "Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (p. 22).

The old photo albums have remained with the present residents of McCluskiegunj as family legacies. The photographs aid the present generation to visualise the lives of the dead kinsmen when they were alive. In this sense, these photographs play an important role in revisiting the family tree and the crisis through which the ancestors had gone. This strategy of representing the past shows that postmemory "characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 22).

The film shows that a local *chowkidar* of a vacant bungalow displays the photographs of a *sahib's* family in front of Dheeraj Singh, the narrator. The *chowkidar* and his wife are quite young and it is evident that they have inherited the responsibility of looking after the bungalow and the album from his ancestors. As he tells the story of the inmates of the bungalow to Singh, it becomes clear that in McCluskiegunj the history of the Anglo-Indian community belongs to both the Anglo-Indians and the non-Anglo-Indians.

This documentary highlights the fact that lack of job opportunities are a major cause of decline in the Anglo-Indian population in McCluskiegunj. It shows that the situation improved a bit when a branch of Don Bosco Academy was opened there in 1987. The local Anglo-Indian families have converted a section of their homes into hostels for students who mostly come to study in this school from distant places. At present, the only source of income for the educated Anglo-Indian residents in McCluskiegunj is the rent received from the hostels. Unlike them, Kitty Texeira, a poor and uneducated Anglo-Indian participant in *McCluskie's Gunj: A Lost Home*, earns her living by farming. She has faced strained economic conditions since her childhood. She sold fruits at McCluskiegunj railway station since the age of nine. She is married to a local tribal. Clad in sari, she apparently looks like a part of the larger community residing there. The aspect that distinguishes her from the larger community is her language. She speaks in English like the other Anglo-Indian participants in the film, who are more educated

than her and are in a better economic position than her.

Kitty was born during the 1950s. Dheeraj Singh informs the viewers that Kitty's maternal grandfather had lost all his savings in E.T. McCluskie's Colonisation Society of India. He also says that the Colonisation Society was a company in whose shares many of the early settlers had invested. Kitty's grandfather was one of those early settlers. Her narration of the history of McCluskiegunj can be described as postmemory. It reveals the trauma of her ancestors, who had directly witnessed the failure of McCluskie's mini-England project. She delves into the causes of the failure of the project and observes that "the Colonisation Society did very bad with the settlers here, amalgamated and all the money was lost in shares. My grandfather lost forty thousand on the shares" (*McCluskie's Gunj: A Lost Home*). Singh observes that Kitty's story has received a lot of critical attention because her image is very different from the educated and well-to-do Anglo-Indians. Her story is personal and at the same time it represents the community's story of not finding a province of their own unlike most of the cultural groups in India.

*Let's Twist Again* (dir. Sonata Dkhar, 2015), a documentary presented by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust in collaboration with Doordarshan and Prasar Bharati, begins with the definition of an Anglo-Indian as it is given in the Constitution of India. In this film, an effort has been made to connect the community members of Agra Cantonment, a suburban railway town, with the Anglo-Indians living in metropolitan cities of Delhi and Kolkata. In this documentary film Phillip Carville, a retired employee of the Indian railways, repeats the phrase "In those times" while talking about the Anglo-Indians, who lived in the railway colony of Agra Cantonment, at the time of Indian Independence. The act of repetition reinforces his urge to describe the cultural identity of his community to the world. He says that at that time there was a big gathering of Anglo-Indians in Agra and every second house in the cantonment area had an Anglo-Indian family. He takes pride in saying that after the British left India, the Anglo-Indians played an important role in the administrative services and in telegraph, postal services and the railways. The collective memory of the glorious time becomes resplendent when he reminisces: "We were the striking features. Our ladies dressed in dresses, hats on their heads, high heel shoes, speaking English, not speaking the local language...People respected the Anglo-Indians like nobody's business" (*Let's Twist Again*). He also observes, "And why were we standing out? Because of our dress, because of our culture, because the way we behaved" (*Let's Twist Again*).

The cultural dilemma of choosing between the Anglo-Indian tradition and the mainstream Indian customs is well represented in this documentary: Sandra D'Rozario, an Anglo-Indian teacher in Frank Anthony Public School in Delhi, can be seen in *salwar*

*kameez* when she is in school and in dress when she is at home. She says that “now we wear what everybody wears.” Louis Albert, a retired Anglo-Indian teacher, in the same film, says that even in Anglo-Indian schools, the principals insist that the female teacher should wear sari instead of frocks, skirts and coats. He feels sad that the community’s sartorial tradition has been fading away with time but considering the socio-economic needs of life, he remarks stoically “What can you do about it? You need a job!”

*The White Cloud* (2014) is a short-length documentary of five minutes fifty-three seconds. Directed by Ashay Gangwar and produced by Technology Filmmaking and Photography Society of Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, it represents a day in the life of Duncan Jude Hall, the last Anglo-Indian engine driver in Kharagpur, a town in the Midnapore district of West Bengal. Hall’s birthday coincides with the day of his retirement from service in the Indian Railways. His father and grandfather were also engine drivers in the Indian railways. It tells us the local history of Kharagpur as a railway town through the eyes and voice of Hall. It is he who shows the viewers the old pieces of furniture and the large liquor containers in the dilapidated and abandoned railway institute of Kharagpur. During the colonial times, this institute was an important place of entertainment for the British and the Anglo-Indian people.

In Sayan Dey’s documentary *Anglo-Indian Women of Bow Barracks: Voices of the Unvoiced* (Aurthaat Productions, 2018), the old paintings of an Indian woman and a European man symbolically refer to the formation of the community through inter-racial unions in the days of colonial past. This visual description acts as an apt preface to the history of Bow Barracks,<sup>xii</sup> which is verbally narrated through voiceover and captions. The elegiac background score communicates a sense of loss, which is observed among most of the elderly participants in the film. A connection has been made between the past and the present through the nostalgic recollections of Anglo-Indian women, who either live in the Bow Barracks or had lived there for a considerable period. This film explores the relationship between the city and the community from the perspective of the Anglo-Indian women, who can be described as the first representatives of modernity in post-Independence Kolkata.

Referring to the times “when consensus fails, and when the consequences of cultural incommensurability make the world a difficult place” (Bhabha, 1996, p. 59), Bhabha (1996) observes that “[a]t such moments, the past is seen as returning, with uncanny punctuality, to render the ‘event’ timeless, and the narrative of its emergence transparent” (p. 59). In Dey’s documentary Bow Barracks has been represented as an Anglo-Indian ghetto, where there are several inconveniences such as lack of proper hygiene, sewerage and water supply. Besides, there is also the problem of unemployment

among Anglo-Indian youths. In the midst of this gloom women play an important role in maintaining the families. Through a voiceover, the viewers are informed that the women of the Barracks support their families by working as personal assistants, dancers, singers, street food sellers and ‘domestic helpers’.

Unlike the women of other Indian communities, the Anglo-Indian women enjoyed liberty in the matters of education and socialising. In Dey’s representation, most Anglo-Indian women are economically independent. So, it was quite unusual to me when I saw that Dey has referred to the Anglo-Indian women of Bow Barracks as “unvoiced.” This was something contradictory to the familiar image of Anglo-Indian women represented in print and film media. In an interview, I had asked Dey why he used the phrase “unvoiced” in the title of his film and he had said that as women belonging to the Bow Barracks community, their voices have not been adequately represented. By “voices” he has referred to their own ways of representing themselves in the documentary, which they were unable to do in the fiction films.

The women participants recapitulate that dancing and singing, which once were considered as popular fields of employment for Anglo-Indian women, seem to have been exhausted now. Two elderly women, Cleopatra and Jennifer, recall their career as circus dancers and talk about their French, Irish and Indian ancestries. They confess that they had wonderful evenings in the past when excellent musical programmes were organised in the city. It is obvious that they are referring to Western music and dance in the big clubs and restaurants. They say ruefully that now they can have such parties only in the Barracks. It is quite apparent from their conversation that the Anglo-Indian culture, which once spread in various parts of Kolkata such as in Chowringhee and Central Avenue, has now shrunk to the boundaries of red-bricked Bow Barracks.

The dress code of the younger women in the film, make them look like women belonging to the other majority communities in the city. Jennifer, who wears a *bindi*, looks like a typical Hindu-Bengali woman. They say that their switching over to ethnic dresses is a cultural compromise for ensuring their social security in the public spheres of the urban space. It is very difficult to relate these women with Edith in *Mahanagar* (1963) and Miss Stoneham in *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981). Yet, what connects their real-life narratives with the fictional narratives of Edith and Miss Stoneham is their tenacity to act as the economic backbone of their families. They speak in English and are confident in their profession. One cannot, however, overlook the fact the documentary focused on representing mostly a sad picture of the community. After watching this documentary, Dr. Robyn Andrews (personal communication, 11 June, 2019) <sup>xiii</sup> remarked in an email that she did not like the “mournful negativity of this film.” In her email, she also wrote



that “The quality of the film is very poor...I suspect the researcher/director did not have good access to the members of the community. Rapport and trust take a long time to build, and this makes an enormous difference to...what people are prepared to share.”

The stories and observations of the Anglo-Indians in these documentaries have been looked upon as alternative history. The representation of alternative history in these documentary narratives is marked by a subtext of cultural negotiation that the Anglo-Indians made in postcolonial India. However, such negotiations are not always lamented by the community members, particularly by the young members of the community. Towards the end of *Let's Twist Again*, Catherina Moss, a young Anglo-Indian researcher in Kolkata, observes very gladly that “the way of life is not just changing, but also evolving to adjust with the time and it doesn't show the Anglo-Indian community dying out. It just shows them adapting...and surviving, because in spite of all the changes... if you look around the city, during the Christmas time, you'll see the dances are still happening.” This film ends with a positive note with the Anglo-Indians dancing and merry-making in their community gatherings. The community dances in this context are viewed as a ritual which passes on from one generation to another.

Such a positive note can also be observed in the series *The Anglo-Indians of Madras*. Instead of lamenting on the loss of the golden past, both the Anglo-Indian and the non-Anglo-Indian participants in this series try to emphasise the contribution of the community in enriching the nation's education system through its schools and colleges. This series also represents the strong role of Anglo-Indian members in political houses such as the Legislative Assembly of Madras and the Parliament. In *The White Cloud*, Duncan Jude Hall says that the people in the railway office at Kharagpur love him so much that they miss him after his retirement. In the office, if anybody told him that “Yeh British ka raj nahi hai!” (“This is not the regime of the British”), he replied humorously that “Yeh humara raj hai!” (“This is our regime”). His repartee reflects his faith in democracy as an Indian citizen.

I conducted an e-mail survey to know the views of half a dozen community members on these documentaries. Keith St. Clair Butler, an Anglo-Indian writer settled in New Zealand, (personal communication, 30 May, 2019) has said in an email that in Dey's film “the questions conducted by the interviewer seemed to buy into the stereotype of Anglos being good only for dancing, jiving and eating.” Georgina Maddox, a writer and curator in New Delhi, has criticised the Hindi author Vikas Jha's comment on the Anglo-Indian community in *McCluskie's Gunj: A Lost Home*. In this film, Jha remarked that the Anglo-Indians did not like to touch the soil or to do hard work like the Indian *mazdoors*. Maddox (personal communication, 30 April, 2019) has said in an email that

Jha has completely ignored “the larger political reason that did not allow the town to grow and flourish.” She has argued that it is not mentioned in the film that “like many Jharkhand villages, the Maoist rule and state of anarchy did not allow McCluskiegunj to grow.” Cecilia Abraham, the page administrator of Anglo-Indian Stories on Facebook (personal communication, 25 April, 2019), has observed in an email that “The filmmakers need to get more historical research.” Abraham has rightly observed that in *Let’s Twist Again* the camera lens was focused more on the older generation of the community than on the younger ones. However, she has also said that “These are documentaries, so the representation is very apt. People are speaking their mind.”

### *Conclusion*

The study shows that the colonial aftermath left a trail of trauma in the minds of the Anglo-Indians. The Anglo-Indian participants in the documentaries try to recompense the loss of the bygone days of the Raj. To them, postcoloniality emerged as a socio-cultural plane of oscillation between the community’s collective memory of the Raj and its cultural negotiations in the present times. This oscillation is clearly visible among the elderly participants in the select documentaries when they share their stories through nostalgic recollection of the past. Their observations reveal the undocumented facts of Anglo-Indian life and culture, which should be read as the community’s socio-cultural history. Although they lament for the gradual fading away of their culture, they have accepted India as their homeland. To the younger generation of the participants, the economic issues matter more than the partial loss of the cultural identity. To them, the cultural negotiations and the assimilative protocols are not as difficult as these have been to the older generation. However, memory operates as the only means through which the participants of the younger generation look into their heritage and cultural identity. These documentaries have refrained from representing the participants’ views on the political affairs of the nation. This is an important issue which remains unaddressed in the select documentaries.

## Notes :

- i All these documentary films can be accessed on YouTube.
- ii The semiotic approach of interpreting meanings in any form of representation was influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, and the discursive approach was modeled on the ideas of Michel Foucault, a French historian (Hall, 1997, p.15).
- iii Power relations also work on the pretext that in the fiction films mentioned above the Anglo-Indian community is represented by non-Anglo-Indian filmmakers.
- iv Since the people featuring in the documentary films are not actors, I have referred to them as participants in this article. The term has been used in Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies (2012, p. 81).
- v Non-fiction cinema is broadly classified into two types: cinema vérité and Direct Cinema. Although both types are concerned with the representation of reality, there is difference in their approach towards the representation of the reality and also in their engagement of the subjects (participants). The former is a part of ethnographic filmmaking that “solicits active participation of subjects” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012, p. 81) and induces “self-revelation on the part of the film’s subjects” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012, p. 81). The latter one is described as “a practice of non-interventionist observational (fly-on-the wall) documentary filmmaking involving minimal intervention of the filmmaker” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012, p. 120). Its purpose is to “unobtrusively observe, allowing events to develop and life to reveal itself” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012, p. 81).
- vi There was much debate on how many seats were to be reserved for the Anglo-Indians in the Constituent Assembly. Pandit Pant, an old friend of Anthony, was the first to suggest that the President or the Governor should nominate representatives from among the Parsees and the Anglo-Indians in places where they failed to secure representations in the Legislature (Anthony, 1964, p. 207). Finally, Sardar Patel, the Chairman of the Advisory Committee of Minority Rights, decided that the privilege of being nominated in the Legislature would be given only to the Anglo-Indians (Anthony, 1964, p. 207).
- vii The Anglo-Indians refer to the outfits of their women as dresses. To them, ‘dress’ refers to Western outfits such as frocks, skirts and gowns.
- viii A large number of Anglo-Indians emigrated to the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America for better job opportunities. At present, there are around 150 000 Anglo-Indians in India and 250000 in the countries mentioned above (Muthiah, 2013, p.11).
- ix Collective memory refers to certain traditions and social practices that are associated with a group’s identity.

- x According to Jan Assmann cultural memory is “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (1988, p.126). Cultural memory is maintained through cultural formation in different objects and observances (Assmann, 1988, p. 129).
- xi Material Memory refers to all objects, which are part of family heirlooms. These objects generate a strong sense of belonging among the inheritors. These relics connect the earlier generations with the present generation of a family. It adds a historical sense to the concept of legacy.
- xii Bow Barracks is a neighbourhood in central Kolkata, where members of the Anglo-Indian community reside in six blocks of three-storied buildings. During the First World War, these buildings served as garrison mess for American soldiers.
- xiii Dr. Robyn Andrews is a Senior Lecturer in the Social Anthropology Programme at Massey University in New Zealand. She has done ethnographic research on the Anglo-Indian in Kolkata. She is the author of *Christmas in Calcutta: Anglo-Indian Stories and Essays* (2014).

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## Visions of a Market: A Case for Drishyam Films

Trinankur Banerjee

### *Introduction*

While there has been considerable scholarly attention to the phenomenon of Indian New Wave supported by National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), little attention has been provided to the shifts within NFDC's functional model after the turn-of-the-millennium, particularly after the introduction of Film Bazaar in 2007. Film Bazaar marks a moment in Indian film history from which the welfare state ceases to function and opens up for negotiations with the market, a classic tendency in any globalized economy. Film Bazaar not only marks an attempt of the state to negotiate with the transnational markets but also indicates that the project to create a platform for a national cinema remains unfinished. I try to understand the historical conditions of emergence of Drishyam Films as a post-Film Bazaar development, measuring the differences with NFDC'S Film Bazaar (i.e Funding ) approach as well as of approach as well as the similarities between the strategies, and try to understand how the market can function beyond constructing a 'cinema of the consensus' and how it allows an articulation of political cinema within its supposed boundaries. In the following pages, I have attempted to outline the aesthetic predilections, the infrastructural visions, and industrial aspirations vis-à-vis Film Bazaar and Bollywood/Hindi popular, and and how , Drishyam Films tries to bridge the gap while

maintaining a distance from both structures. I divide my attention between the filmic texts and the production-distribution-exhibition logic at work in them. I will look at the films produced by Drishyam Films such as *Aankhon Dekhi* (2013, Rajat Kapoor), *Masaan* (2015, Neeraj Ghaywan), *Dhanak* (2016, Nagesh Kukunoor), and *Newton* (2017, Amit V Masurkar) etc. with particular emphasis on narratorial strategies, stylistic consistencies among these films, and thematic choices. I attempt to understand the importance of festivals in this context, and how festivals function as windows to certain transnational/global possibilities and new frameworks of recognition. I also try to look into various other initiatives by Drishyam Films such as the Screenwriters' Lab in collaboration with Sundance Film Festival and the 'Quest for Stories' which, despite the differences in scope and capacity, have replicated many of the initiatives set in motion by Film Bazaar, such as the co-production market, work-in-progress lab and the screenwriters' lab. Thus, in three separate sections, I tackle these questions and attempt to imagine Drishyam Films as an advancement of the Film Bazaar model, which, in turn, is an acknowledgment of globalisation of art cinema paradigm.

#### *Inside the Filmic Texts*

Any attempt to understand what Drishyam Films represents through its films and refracts through its practices must begin with an analysis of the historical conditions that allowed the emergence of such a production house. The production house, as the founder Manish Mundra, a self-admitted admirer of independent cinema, has often suggested, imagines itself as a consistent and constant producer of independent films for niche markets, targeting festival audiences and multiplex spectators.<sup>1</sup> However, Drishyam Films is neither a unique entity in the Hindi cinema market in this regard nor can it be read as an individual case study. After Film Bazaar paved the way for a host of Indian films towards global recognition by helping them shape their articulation in congruence with the global art cinema paradigm<sup>2</sup>, multiple players have emerged in the last decade such as Phantom Films, Anurag Kashyap Films (AKFPL) etc. who are in a constant negotiation with the Bollywood phenomenon, through certain circumventive or symbiotic measures. While Drishyam films shares some commonality with these production houses, there are certain registers of difference.

The watershed moment in this context could be traced back to the commercial and critical success of *Gangs of Wasseypur-Part 1* (2012, Anurag Kashyap). The *Gangs of Wasseypur* (GOW) series' commercial success was catalytic in the imagination of a niche, urbane audience who are often aware of the global cinematic culture, a spectatorial

energy that remained untapped until then. However, it is also important to recollect the global critical reception of the film. Not only did the film receive a screening in the prestigious Cannes film festival, but in writing the review of the film, film critic Deborah Young of *Hollywood Reporter* pointed out Kashyap's ready acknowledgement of the gangster canon as well as the auteurs of the genre such as Coppola and Scorsese, and yet retaining what she understood as the 'spectacular, over-the-top filmmaking style' of Bollywood.<sup>3</sup> While such an understanding only reveals the ever-expansive aegis of the term 'Bollywood', *GOW* could be read as a negotiation between a globally recognised realist form and the melodramatic form, with which Bollywood, and Hindi cinema at large, shares a historical association.<sup>4</sup> While it has been steadily developed into a model by a number of films after this point, the body of work that belongs to the oeuvre of Drishyam Films, however, problematizes such easy negotiations through its diverse nature of films and their multifarious tendencies. Such tendencies, I argue, provide a broader perspective to Hindi cinema and how such tendencies often slip into the popular, indicating the porosity of the imagined separation between the two practices.

Drishyam Films, based in Mumbai, was started in 2014 after its founder Manish Mundra, following a dramatic conversation with Rajat Kapoor, noted actor and director of Bollywood, decided to produce *Ankhon Dekhi* (2014, Rajat Kapoor). Since then, Drishyam Films have produced nine films including *Ankhon Dekhi*. The films are, in chronological order- *Masaan* (2015, Neeraj Ghaywan), *X: Past is Present* (2015, Multiple directors), *Umrika* (2016, Prashant Nair), *Dhanak* (2016, Nagesh Kukunoor), *Waiting* (2016, Anu Menon), *Newton* (2017, Amit V Masurkar), *Rukh* (2017, Atanu Mukherjee), *Kadvi Hawa* (2017, Nila Madhab Panda). These films could be broadly categorized into two distinct categories according to their stylistic choices, and it is possible to observe two markedly different realist spaces emerging through the oeuvre. Films like *Ankhon Dekhi*, *Masaan*, *Umrika*, *Dhanak*, *Newton* and *Kadvi Hawa* majorly focus on rural/suburban/semi-urban spaces where the filmic action takes place in the exteriors while the spaces concerned in *X: Past is Present*, *Waiting*, and *Rukh* are urban spaces, where the action mostly takes place in the interiors. *Ankhon Dekhi* takes place in the Delhi 6 neighbourhood of Old Delhi, *Masaan*'s principal location is Benares, *Umrika* oscillates between a rural space and the dense suburbs of Mumbai, *Dhanak* is largely depicting rural Rajasthan while *Newton* unfolds in the jungles of Chhattisgarh, where the conflict between the State and the Naxalites looms large at every moment of the film. On the other hand, *X: Past is Present* takes place in bars and hotel rooms, while the stories that develop across successive flashbacks are also urban interiors save the final one. *Waiting* also unfolds in a hospital. However, such duos is not simply limited to the mere spatiality of these



films, but extends to the very nature of realism these films endorse.

The films where much of the narrative unfolds in the exteriors do not simply use cities, towns and villages as backdrops, where the narratorial action progresses without much concern for that particular location. Rather, in films like *Ankhon Dekhi*, *Masaan*, and *Dhanak*, the particular location in which it unfolds becomes central to the narrative, often providing crucial motivation in its progress. For example, in *Dhanak*, the desert plays a significant role as thirst is developed into a crucial factor in the narrative. The figures that occupy, the objects that frequent these spaces are also an essential part of the realism that tries to construct a locale that resembles that particular location. This is perhaps most heightened in *Masaan* where the protagonist of the film belongs to a *Dom* community, who have been involved in burning funeral pyres for generations in the banks of Benares. More importantly, even the interiors are ‘localized’, most noticeable in *Ankhon Dekhi* where the interiors of Old Delhi and their closely knit architecture mirrors the nature of the community the characters dwell in. What surfaces from this discussion is that these films could be read as a consistent and constant attempt to create a ‘reality effect’, to authenticate each location through a cinematic ekphrasis where there is a gradual elaboration of each location both in terms of interior and exterior.

On the other hand, the other set of films takes place in ‘generic’ urban interiors where a particular location is nominal at best. In *Waiting*, for example, the city of Kochi exists nominally, while most of the narrative takes place in various interiors such as hotel, hospitals and houses. Such spaces could be considered as ‘enumerated spaces’ where each space (hospital, hotel room, bar etc.) exists autonomously without any spatial connection except narrative continuity.<sup>5</sup> Hence, these films are marked by a noticeable absence of any kind of traversal between these spaces, which is exactly antithetical to the other set of films, where traversing between such spaces constitute the majority of these narratives. Moreover, the diametrics of traversal mirror the broader thematic concern of these two sets of films. The films that endorse local realism often features a journey, or journeys of individuals. The narrative motivation is immanent in these journeys, instead of being a transcendental one as it is in the other set of films (for example, in *Waiting*, the critical conditions of the loved ones is what motivates the film from the beginning).

Hence, it is possible to conclude that these films show formal congruence with their content. However, it is important to remember that formally, these films show diverse tendencies, making it difficult to map their critical and commercial success according to their formal traits. The two films that have garnered considerable critical and commercial success, *Masaan* (selection in *Un Certain Regard* section of 2015 Cannes

Film Festival, winner of FIPRESCI prize and *Prix de l'avenir* in the festival) and *Newton* (selection for India's official entry at Oscars 2017, screening at 2017 Berlin Film Festival Forum section and winner of CICAÉ<sup>6</sup> award for the best film in the forum section), are extremely self-conscious in their attempt to cater to a global art cinema audience. Formally, both films try to align themselves with a certain kind of contemplative cinema or observational mode of filmmaking, where individual journeys of the exterior mirrors their journeys of the interior, and the individual becomes the refractive material for more complicated questions of sovereignty, autonomy, secularity, citizenship and the function of state machineries (the police in *Masaan*, the army in *Newton*) to come through. *Dhanak*, although categorised as a children's film (it won the Crystal Bear Grand Prix for Best Children's film in 65<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival), bears similar traits despite its stylistic allegiance to the melodramatic form as a children's film. However, the other films, although some of these films have won awards at various other festivals (*Umrika* won the World Cinema Dramatic Audience award while *Waiting*'s director Anu Menon won the best director award at 2015 London Asian Film Festival), have mostly been commercial failures. Stylistically too, these films show none of the traits that *Newton* or *Masaan* exhibit so pertinently. These films follow a simple, often linear, narrative technique following a series of action-reaction chains, and show no desire to exhibit any particular locale (*Umrika*, for example), choosing instead to focus on individuals and their narratorial developments.

However, in terms of aesthetic choices, these films exhibit a certain consistency in casting, which makes Drishyam Films' oeuvre stand out from other such initiatives. All of these films have consciously avoided casting a star actor in the lead roles, instead relying on actors who have consistently been associated with 'character roles' and have a niche following among the middle-class audience. Sanjay Mishra, Rajat Kapoor, Richa Chadda, Pankaj Tripathi et al. have frequented some of Drishyam Films' ventures. While Phantom Films and AKFPL have also produced films where a particular locale dominates in terms of realist aesthetics, these films have often employed star actors (Ranbir Singh, Anushka Sharma, Ranbir Kapoor et al.) which clearly shows that these films are openly negotiating with the Bollywood phenomenon. Such is not the case with Drishyam Films where in terms of casting, they are trying to forge a completely different possibility by promoting actors who themselves claim to be part of the 'alternative' paradigm of Indian cinema or have become intrinsically linked with the idea of parallel cinema (Naseeruddin Shah, for example).<sup>6</sup>

However, formally, Drishyam Films is in an uneasy negotiation with Bollywood. While it claims to make films that retain 'an Indian flavour while catering to international

audience', a series of films, working with medium to big budgets, have emerged after the success of *Gangs of Wasseypur* that work within various suburban milieus instead of a metropolis space, with such spaces becoming active agents in the film's narrative. *Shuddh Desi Romance* (2013, Manish Sharma), *NH10* (2015, Navdeep Singh), *Bareilly ki Barfi* (2017, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari) and various other films have adopted this technique within the scope of popular melodrama. With the exception of *Newton* and *Masaan*, Drishyam Films cannot distinguish itself from such efforts in terms of formal innovation, except *Ankhon Dekhi*, where the innovation is at the level of narratorial technique instead of aesthetics.

It is here the question of a different degree of realism visible in certain films in this context becomes pertinent, namely *Masaan* and *Newton*. What emerges through these films is a form of observational cinema, where the camera continues to observe a space without attempting to enter it to enhance dramatic possibility. Globally, this kind of technique shares many names, and one of the popular sobriquets is "Slow Cinema", which, despite its many variations, has become a common feature in films that have enjoyed festival success over the years. On this uneasy ground of a new, radical form of realism, festivals have emerged as a consolidated aspiration for Drishyam Films.

#### *Festivals: A Window to the World (Cinema)*

International Festivals have historically been imagined as locations for certain kinds of national cinema to gain attention, where certain margins of a particular space becomes the centre of global attention, and a form of political cinema fluently conversant with the-then art house practices has found home in these festivals. It has a tradition of shedding light on obscure national cinemas, unknown auteurs, and some of these festivals have pioneered stylistic shifts in film history by recognizing them. In the history of Indian cinema, the alternative practices cannot be imagined without the unprecedented festival success of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) in multiple festivals around the world.<sup>7</sup> However, after disparate presences in festival circuit, there has been a renewal of interest in the potential of film festivals as potential windows to the world, almost coinciding with Drishyam Film's emergence, especially with the success of *Gangs of Wasseypur*. While in terms of aesthetics, it does try to create a different path from the narration/stylistic choices of the Hindi popular, the significance of the alternative does not lie in the aesthetics alone, but in the industrial practices of Drishyam Films. Within a familiar workflow of production-distribution-exhibition, Drishyam films, I argue, has tried to forge a mode of survival not simply by mimicking the structure but inventing

sustainable ways of functioning within the workflow. While the production process follows the standard mode of neorealist practice, relying on a more immediate, intimate process of filmmaking rather than the expansive and elaborate form of studio system, it is the distribution and exhibition process that require more attention. As Ritika Bhatia, the present head of Festivals and international alliances section of Drishyam Films, explained, unlike the big studios, Drishyam Films do not have the star value that catalyses certain marketing or promotional possibilities. Due to the industrial value of the star, as well as his/her association with a number of products, a big studio has multiple sources of capital for promotional purposes. Moreover, the network of studios and multiplexes, with star value functioning as the decisive force, is something that is largely absent in the case of Drishyam Films. Hence, a new kind of approach is necessary to function within the ambit of the same market, and it is here Drishyam Films could be considered as an alternative. Its industrial aspiration is evident in its location right opposite to Yash Raj Films at Andheri in Mumbai. I would try to analyse the information I have gathered through interviews and understand how Drishyam Films has managed to begin and build a body of work that tries to co-habit and yet, forge a new space within the dominance of the popular.

As elaborated by Mauli Singh, the founder of loudspeaker media, who has been at the helm of promotional and publicity activity of numerous Drishyam Films as well as NFDC Film Bazaar, the publicity for an independent, low-budget film relies on focused, free publicity. The focus shifts from the star to the content, and relies a lot on organic visibility. She describes the process as a more intimate one unlike the big studios, where a publicity team pushes the film through paid methods. One of the most defining methods in this regard is the practice of medianet devised by Times of India in 2003. Medianet is a practice where content is available as paid space on the newspaper or the website, and the content is pushed and channelized to popular domains. Any Hindi popular film uses this strategy to garner publicity through forced visibility. However, the affordability forces independent films to take a different route. The promotional mechanism hinges on few decisive factors. The first factor is the content, or the theme of the film. Often the contemporaneity functions as a prime mover in this context. The second factor is the presence of recognised names. Although these films don't feature big stars, they often feature actors who have a certain amount of familiarity/popularity amongst the gentry, such as Naseeruddin Shah, Irrfan Khan, and Nawazuddin Siddiqui et al. The presence of these figures often plays a big role in promotional affairs as they are popularly associated with a different kind of practice. Their capacity to oscillate between the popular and the alternative is a major driving force in this regard. While in

the popular they often play a supporting role to the star, in the alternative they occupy the central concern and hence, this particular shift is something that is highlighted in promotions. The third, and the newest development in this regard is the festival selection or awards. While film festivals have been there for nearly eight decades, Indian cinema's festival adventures were mostly limited. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen et al. have succeeded consistently in the major film festivals. Two of the most recognised film festivals in this regard are Cannes Film Festival and Berlin Film Festival or Berlinale, solely due to their historical importance in bringing Indian cinema to an international audience, beginning with the success of Ray's "Apu Trilogy". However, with the demise of New Indian cinema in the 1980s, festivals disappeared from the popular imagination. However, it is the festival of success of *Gangs of Wasseypur* I and II, especially their reception as elaborated in the Cannes Film Festival reports across various newspapers that marked a watershed moment in this context. However, the popular imagination is now no longer limited to Cannes and Berlin Film Festival, but has expanded further, thanks to various media outlets. Some of the festivals that have come to prominence in this regard is the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Sundance International Film Festival etc. Due to the strong diasporic presence in Toronto, the plethora of Indian films present in each year has made TIFF a recognised name among the Indian public. For example, in TIFF 2016, as many as 12 Indian films were selected, including films from recognised art-house Indian directors such as Deepa Mehta, Buddhadeb Dasgupta et al. Sundance has come to prominence through a similar route, bringing its global familiarity as a consistent exhibitor of independent films with or without art-house aspiration, and has played a crucial role in giving space to a host of independent films after Anurag Kashyap's moment of international recognition. Its screenwriters' lab<sup>8</sup> should be understood through this new association and enthusiasm surrounding a new kind of cinema whose aesthetic imagination concerns particular spaces and themes emerging from Indian Territory. However, two major film festivals, namely the Locarno International Film Festival<sup>9</sup> and Venice International Film Festival, which have been consistently regarded in the same pedestal as Cannes or Berlinale, were largely absent in the festival discourse of Indian cinema. However, recent successes at Locarno and Venice, namely of *Thithi* (2016, Raam Reddy) and *Court* (2014, Chaitanya Tamhane), have brought limelight upon these festivals. However, the channelling of festival success through popular media requires aligning the various favourable conditions. Balancing the popularity of the festival with the content's relevance or ingenuity in terms of promotion is precisely what ensures free publicity for the film. One of the biggest disadvantages of this particular brand of cinema in terms of promotion is the lack of association with

other industries such as fashion. Hence, the channels of promotion are numbered, specific and constrained. However, the congruity between the imagined spectator of these films and the channels mentioned ensures that the publicity is organic, vectored and has the desired impact. Newspapers such as The Hindu, Hindustan Times, India Today etc. and online portals such as Scroll, Wire etc., that disseminates a liberal viewpoint, and have a stipulated readership among urban middle class audience, are some of the prime targets in this regard.

Another important dimension of promotion is intrinsically connected to the question of distribution. Since Drishyam Films do not have direct collaboration with distributors, it relies on influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a strategy where certain influencers of a particular industry are invited to examine the product and refer it to the wider public. As mentioned by both Ritika Bhatia and Mauli Singh, prior to the release of the film, Drishyam Films have organised a screening for such industrial influencers. Some of these names include Anurag Kashyap, Kiran Rao et al. who have had a long and successful association with films that that are continually trying to a create a niche beyond the Hindi popular. It is through such a process did Eros International took up the responsibility of distributing Newton. It has further led to a collaboration between Eros International and Drishyam Films in 2017 in terms of co-producing four films in 2018. Distribution is a key factor in the context of Indian cinema, since the concept of limited or staggered release is absent in India due to high degree of piracy. Hence, ensuring a wide release is necessary for commercial success, which in turn requires a distributional collaboration.

Another mode of distribution is the digital domain, which is gaining currency in the recent on-demand video content platforms like Netflix, Hotstar, and Amazon Prime video. This mode of distribution, on the other hand, is connected to the question of festivals, since these platforms often curate and programme their content from the festivals. Earlier, as explained by Ritika Bhatia, film festivals would open up doors for international distribution. Historically, that has been one of the prime aspects of film festival exhibition. *Masaan*, for example, was taken up by Arte for international distribution. However, the digital platform's allowance to have an afterlife of the film after traditional exhibition, and the possibility of cumulative accumulation of revenue over time, has given digital platforms the precedence. One of the major problems of international co-production/distribution is the precariousness associated with it, and the logistical conflicts. Hence, the festival success of these films immediately translates into content license agreement with these video platforms. These films are often exclusively available over a particular platform, or are spread across platforms. In this

way, the film also has the promise of a global audience. Thus, the festival aspiration has manifold manifestations in diverse spheres when it comes to such films. In fact, success at a major festival guarantees the film's selection/invitation in multiple small and medium-scale festivals around the world, which, according to Ritika Bhatia, contributes significantly to the revenue. For example, *Newton*, *Dhanak*, and *Masaan* went to more than thirty film festivals around the world, including diasporic film festivals that often provide an important and emerging space of exhibition for these festivals. Moreover, visiting multiple festivals often provide an opportunity to look beyond usual national/diasporic population, and plays with the possibility of an international recognition whose momentum could be crucial in subsequent ventures, as the production house is immediately recognized as a producer of a distinct aesthetical oeuvre. Hence, festival could be seen as a conglomerate of micro/macro-possibilities for the alternative cinema.

However, the politics of international film festivals is worth paying attention in this regard. Any major international film festival often celebrates the global consumption of a local landscape, where the film is seen as a mode of anthropocentric knowledge production. Within certain aesthetic parameters, such filmmaking thus responds to a global demand rather than a more local or national concept of the popular. Hence, the politics of these films is closer to a form of universal humanism rather than what is understood as political cinema. Thus, festivals function as an alternative site for Drishyam Films to activate new channels of production, distribution, and exhibition.

One of the most defining aspects of these films is that how these films play on two completely different registers nationally and globally. These films particularly resonate with the 'migrant middle class' who has moved to cities from villages/small towns mainly for employment. ....And thus, they constitute a large part of the audiences thronging to multiplex theatres where such films are usually exhibited. The gradual demise of single screens in various spaces, and their dilapidated conditions have turned the urban middle class spectators away from the single screens. The 'good cinema', which often attuned itself to the global shifts in terms of realism, exemplified by a large section of films of the Indian New Wave of the 70s and after, had to look for new spaces of exhibition as the single screen was no longer a favourable option. It is here the multiplex provides a route to the cultivators of 'good cinema', namely the urban middle class audience. It is also important to remember that the public space of multiplexes and the private space of on-demand video platforms share an audience of similar taste, and hence, the movement of these films between two spaces is out of natural reflex. *Masaan*, for example, simultaneously comments on the nostalgia of Benares as a site of tradition as well as its uneasy encounter with modernity. While the first aspect caters to a national

taste, the second aspect is where the global receptivity of the film is determined. This is distinctly different from the Hindi popular, which largely caters to its global notions instead of problematizing it. Hence, Drishyam Films could be read as an attempt not simply to produce local products for global consumption, but also focusing on its politics unlike the Hindi popular.

Thus, it could be said that the alternative aspect of Drishyam Films is not limited to its infrastructural preparation and imagination, but extends to its thematic aspirations and aesthetic implementations. The aesthetic distance between the popular and this alternative notwithstanding, Drishyam Films should be read as a method through which certain spaces gain local and global visibility, and the potential for new structures to exist within and beyond the behemoth of Hindi popular, if not co-habit the same industrial networks.

It is here one must think of a genealogical approach for alternative cinema in the aftermath of the digital penetration during the early 2000s. New modes of filmic practice, not simply in terms of its aesthetics, but also its infrastructure has emerged. Hence, the important of rethinking alternative practices with respect to the shifted/shifting conditions of economic and cultural structures cannot be overstated. Film Bazaar, I argue, is crucial to this genealogical approach and thus, by connecting the umbilical cord of Drishyam Films to Film Bazaar, I want to draw a possible trajectory of alternative/independent film practices in Indian cinema as a concluding analytical move.

### *Film Bazaar as genealogy*

Film Bazaar, as the name suggests, is an acknowledgement of the market, but also comes with the promise, as well as illusion, of choice, and how Indian cinema can no longer contain itself to the contestable category of national cinema but must also compete with global paradigms of art cinema. However, Film Bazaar, notwithstanding its close alliance with the state, and hence its expansive capacity, functions as a passive agent. This is a distinct shift from the previous practice, where NFDC used to take an active part during the production period. NFDC's function as an intermediary in the alternative practice opens up a new way of producing alternative cinema. Instead of national, statist patronage, NFDC offers the promise of a global, private patronage which shows that there is a void in terms of national patronage, since global patronage often functions in tandem with global artistic/cultural interests, which may not always align with national artistic traditions or cultural necessities. Instead of filling this lack, there is a further fracture in the alternative practice with the emergence of a host of



production houses with a sustained interest in independent cinema, many of which walk the tightrope of popular and the alternative. It is in this fractured moment Drishyam Films needs to be encountered.

Film Bazaar's arrival in 2007 came with a host of events which borrows from standard international practice. Some of its ventures are Work in Progress Lab, Viewing Rooms, Industry Screening, Producers' Workshop, and Knowledge Series. Among them, the first three events have become a classic model of locating capital for production, distribution and exhibition of independent cinema. For example, in Kolkata, from 2003, SRFTI, in collaboration with European Documentary Network, used to arrange Docedge, a documentary festival as well as platform for pitching unfinished documentary projects to potential producers.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Film Bazaar is not a unique attempt in terms of its imagination, but its scope and expansive nature sets it apart from other such ventures in the South Asian Film market. In terms of statistics, Film Bazaar has grown over the years in terms of international and national producers, mentors and other industry personnel attending the program. However, the operative mode of Film Bazaar is distinctly obscure to popular perception of film industry, and hence, it is yet to penetrate a significant ground in the public domain because of its structural unfamiliarity. As Mauli Singh points out, getting a press release for Film Bazaar is more difficult precisely because of the lack of understanding of its functionalities, and its impact on Indian cinema. Hence, when she was given the responsibility of doing PR for Film Bazaar, she concentrated more on the final products of the Film Bazaar instead of its operation. The consistent success of Film Bazaar selections in various international festivals later on (as discussed on endnotes) became one of her prime focuses, and eventually that became the sole 'selling point' of Film Bazaar, and not its operational nuances. Few important points emerge from this discussion.

Although Film Bazaar only provides the films a platform for potential producers, its idea is sold as that of a production house for independent cinema, which NFDC has ceased to be for a decade now. Hence, it goes to show that in public imagination, the idea of a production house bearing the flag of alternative cinema is still a more accessible idea than that of a complex negotiation in the form of Film Bazaar, and it has definitely affected the Indian alternative circuit in a palpable manner. One of the major developments after Film Bazaar's arrival was the formation of AKFPL (Anurag Kashyap Films Private Ltd.), a production company owned by Anurag Kashyap, one of the most famous directors in Indian alternative practices. Phantom Films<sup>11</sup>, of which Kashyap is an integral part, is another development which has moved to and fro between the popular and alternative in terms of production efforts. It is no coincidence that these

are post-Film Bazaar developments, capitalizing on the shifting landscape of alternative cinema, a new form of audience in the multiplexes as discussed. Ironically, however, Film Bazaar and these efforts have little similarity between them except the nature of films that eventually come out of them, albeit through different paths. Hence, it's not Film Bazaar, but the Film Bazaar imagination that is at heart with the recent shift in alternative practice; an imagination that elides the complicated understanding of infrastructure in favour of a more utopian idea of 'platform' i.e. film funding without accountability and/or market viability.

It is here Drishyam Films have emerged as a late, but potentially more concrete development than its predecessors. Not only has it vertically integrated the production-distribution infrastructure, but has simulated micro-models of the Film Bazaar initiative, thus simultaneously functioning as a production house and serving the imagination of a platform. I argue that this is a unique case, a possible hybrid of contemporary Film Bazaar and erstwhile NFDC, and its private nature shows the acknowledgement of the market to such niche demands. Although it is perhaps the newest endeavour in the market, it has perhaps gone the furthest in terms of the diversity of efforts. Although much has been discussed until now, two significant efforts have been launched in the last few years. The Drishyam-Sundance Screenwriters' Lab during 2015-17 and Quest for Stories since this year.

The Drishyam-Sundance Screenwriters' Lab could be read as an effort more in congruence with the Film Bazaar's Work-in-Progress lab, which has nurtured some of the most successful independent films over the last decade. For example, from the 2016 Screenwriters' lab, *Manto* (2018, Nandita Das) eventually made it to the prestigious Un Certain Regard section of 2018 Cannes Film Festival. This is a common phenomenon in Film Bazaar, where multiple films have entered some of the most decorated film festivals around the world after going through its Work-in-Progress lab. However, in 2017, Drishyam Films shifted its course of action by pausing the screenwriters' lab and began a new effort called 'Quest for Stories'. This new effort requires further attention because, I argue, of its potential repercussions.

Quest for Stories is a competition for screenplays, for which Drishyam Films plans to award the screenwriter a cash sum of 5 lakh rupees and develops the winning screenplay into a film with in-house collaborators. As Manish Mundra states<sup>12</sup>, Drishyam Films have planned to eventually consider up to five original screenplays and very significantly, he adds that he is trying to promote screenwriters from 'small-towns', who can hardly get a 'platform' unlike writers working in the privileged space of a metropolis. However, significant to this discussion is the aspect of purchasing the copyright of the

script and developing it in-house. This is what, I suggest, sets Drishyam apart from the other recent initiatives in the network of Indian independent cinema.

During the Hollywood Studio era of the 1930-40s, the vertical integration of production-distribution-exhibition also entailed a clear division of labour between the various functionaries of a film, and the screenwriter often used to be a separate figure from the figure, both of whom would be part of the in-house infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> The rise of independent cinema, which had the ambition to exist outside the studio infrastructure, or find an alternative infrastructure exemplified by John Cassavetes where he wrote, directed and often acted in his films.<sup>14</sup> However, Drishyam Films combines the studio practice with a competition format, focusing on 'small-town' stories, and most importantly, ordinariness, a common interest for all independent films. Moreover, the screenplay's promised in-house development in consultation with the writer shows certain modifications of the studio system, and the ambition to develop a 'system for the alternative', where alternative cinema could function within a concrete infrastructure, instead of working beyond/without one. Thus, Drishyam Films could provide a genealogical shift in terms of infrastructure of alternative practice initiated by Film Bazaar, and shows a potential structure of alternative that borrows the methods of popular but stands distinctly apart from it in terms of its final product.

Thus, I have tried to show how Film Bazaar's foundation in 2007 stirred a new mode of imagining independent film production, prompting multiple players in the market to emerge with an aspiration to tap into a locally niche, but globally ever-expansive market of independent cinema, through digital spectatorship, growing network of film festivals. However, Drishyam Films' emergence and its shifting modes of operation, its particularities of aspiration and its evolution as a production house from a recognized player in the independent circuit to an active agent in a potential genealogical shift in the production of independent cinema shows that there are multiple ways of thinking independent cinema as a local-global industrial practice that shares certain grounds, yet separates itself consciously, from the dominant/popular cinema.

## End Notes :

1. See, for example, 'Newton Producer Manish Mundra's Mantra at Drishyam Films: Small is Beautiful', *India Today*. September 29, 2017. Accessed 28th February, 2018. URL: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/leisure/story/19700101-oscar-newton-raj-kumar-rao-india-official-entry-manish-mundra-colour-yellow-productions-1054464-2017-09-29>
2. Some of the films to have come out of Film Bazaar have done reasonably well in Film Festival

circuits, namely *Court* (2014, Chaitanya Tamhane), which won two awards at Venice Film Festival. Multiple films like *Chauthi Koot* (The Fourth Direction, 2015, Gurvinder Singh), *Titli* (2014, Kanu Behl) have been screened at the prestigious *Un Certain Regard* section of Cannes Film Festival during their respective years.

3. See Deborah Young, 'Gangs of Wasseypur: Cannes Review', *Hollywood Reporter*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2012. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2018. URL: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/gangs-wasseypur-cannes-review-328768>
4. For a detailed discussion, see Madhuja Mukherjee, 'Of Recollection, Retelling, and Cinephilia: Reading Gangs of Wasseypur as an Active Archive of Popular Cinema', *Journal of the Moving Image*, Number 13, Dec 2015, 91-113. Mukherjee elaborately argues how Kashyap's films contain pervasive references to Bollywood, indicating their intrinsic alliance with the imagination of Bollywood.
5. For a detailed discussion on enumerated spaces in Indian cinema, see Moinak Biswas, 'From Space to Location', *Positions*, Vol. 25 Issue 1, 2017. By citing examples from various decades of the early years of Indian cinema, Biswas argues how such films would narrate through the movement of characters between a set of enumerated spaces without showing the process of movement.
6. CICAIE is the International Confederation of Art Cinemas is the only international organisation dedicated to art cinema and the CICAIE award is given at twelve major film festivals around the world. *Newton* receiving the award could be read as an acknowledgement of the conscious effort towards bracketing the film within the contemporary art cinema practice.
7. *Rather Panchali* won numerous awards in Cannes (Best Human Document) and Berlin film festival (Selznick Golden Laurel), and came at a moment of the pinnacle of post-war realism, catapulting Indian cinema to the global map, and setting in motion an alternative practice in Indian cinema.
8. Screenwriters' lab is a collaborative effort by Sundance Film Festival with Drishyam Films that lasted from 2015 to 2017, a model borrowed from Film Bazaar, but different in scope. This will be discussed later.
9. Locarno International Film Festival, famous for its award Golden Leopard, started in 1946 and is widely regarded to have supported neglected voices in cinema, especially directors beyond established canons of new waves. Its popularity has, however, increased over the years and currently it enjoys a distinct status despite not being included in the 'Top Three', namely Cannes, Venice and Berlin Film Festival.
10. Docedge is currently held in Max-Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata, and has grown to become the most significant annual destination for documentary filmmakers and enthusiasts around the country.
11. Phantom Films, a joint venture of Kashyap, director Vikramaditya Motwane, producer Madhu Mantena, and Vikash Behl, does not always dwell on alternative cinema. Rather, it is perhaps best known for featuring popular stars (Ranbir Kapoor, Ranveer Singh, Anushka Sharma et al.) in small-town narratives within the ambit of popular melodrama, a classic case of blending the

popular idiom with new spaces of interest.

12. See “In Search of the Heartland”, *The Hindu*, March 22, 2017. Accessed: 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2018. URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/in-search-of-the-heartland/article17566603.ece>
13. For a detailed discussion, see, for example, Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Faber and Faber: London, 1988.
14. John Cassavetes, often regarded as the pioneer of American independent cinema, was a prolific actor, most widely known for his performance in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968, Roman Polanski). He also used to cast his wife, Gena Rowlands, an accomplished actress, creating the prototypical independent cinema format of working within the constraints of availability. He adopted cinema verite technique in his fictions, using improvisations in terms of available material and instrument, ensuring a more immediate, intimate form of filmmaking which was later popularized as Independent cinema. However, since then, Independent cinema has become a slippery, polyvalent term in film history, which is used by journalists and scholars to describe diverse kinds of films.

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## Woman and the Burden of postcoloniality : The courtesan Film Genre (1960-1990)

Nandita Banerjee

The courtesan, as historical character and cinematic spectacle, is one of the most enigmatic figures to haunt the margins of Indian cultural consciousness. Various described as dancing girl, nautch-girl, prostitute or harlot, she appears again and again in Indian cultural texts. Socially decentered, she is the object of respect and admiration because of her artistic training and musical accomplishments. The figure of the courtesan lends itself to a whole range of interpretations, it is richly invested with allegorical possibilities. Skirting the boundaries of the legitimate and the illegitimate, an intricate blend of Hindu and Muslim social graces, in the post-independence era, the representation of the courtesan or prostitute projects a view of woman at once humiliating and tantalizing, essentialized and active. ‘*Tawaijs*’, the Awadhi term for highly-skilled courtesans rose to prominence between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the royal courts of Awadh, part of present-day Uttar Pradesh. They sang, danced and were the purveyors of all that was considered good taste and high fashion. They took Persian influences from the courts of Shia kings and married them with Indian forms.

The *tawaijs* had considerable agency over their financial, sexual and spiritual lives according to Veena Oldenburg. In the words of Ruth Vanitha, the author of *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema*, “In north India, after the defeat of the 1857

revolt, the colonial rulers smashed the indigenous modernity. It was replaced by colonial modernity- educated urbanites now internalized Victorian norms and grew embarrassed about their own social institutions and literature, especially erotic and playful literature that came to be labeled 'obscene'.

However, courtesans were highly educated and resourceful, while some were forced into sex work, others moved into theatre, music recording and cinema. These were among the first modern urban women, shaping the most modern art form-cinema. Like their predecessors, they owned property and were glamorous figures, stars of the city. We see such characters in films such as *Bank Manager* (1959), *Benazir* (1964), *Sunghursh* (1968) and *Salma* (1985).

In fact, women from *tawaif* backgrounds were the first woman directors, producers, singers, actors and choreographers in the movies. Fatima Begum was the first-ever female director: she launched a production company in her own name and made eight silent films (including *Bulbul-E-Paristan* and *Goddess of Luck*.) Jaddan Bai (Nargis's mother was another pioneer, who worked as actor, singer and music director in the '30s and '40s (she acted in movies such as *Sneh Bandhan*, *Jagirdar* and *Gramophone Singer*) was the daughter of courtesan Hafeezan Bai of Delhi.

These women worked as colleagues with male directors, producers, script writers and lyricists, so the male filmmakers knew that they were strong women, and that knowledge is reflected in the courtesan characters we see in films such as *Aadmi* (1939), *Raj-Nartaki* (1941), *Kala Pani* (1958), even *Dream Girl* (1970). Some women in films, continued simultaneously living as *tawaifs*, which is depicted, though negatively, in *Pati Patni aur Tawaif* (1990). Later, when middle class women took over these roles in film-making, while some women from *tawaif* backgrounds continued working in cinema but disowned their past, the early pioneers were often forgotten.

The courtesan films have enjoyed wide and consistent popularity in India and has been a favourite subject of the Bombay film makers. From *Mamta* (Mother Love, 1966) to *Mandi* (Marketplace, 1983), *Pakeezah* (The pure one, 1971) to *Bhumika* (The Role, 1977), *Amar Prem* (Eternal Love, 1971) to *Utsav* (Festival, 1985) from *Chetna* (The Conscience 1970), *Dastak* (1970, The Knock), and *Khilona* (Toy, 1970) to *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Ram, Your Ganges is polluted, 1987), and *Salam Bombay* (Adieu Bombay 1987).

Filmmakers have repeatedly turned to the oldest profession in the world to make statements about the present. As the "other woman, her role often supersedes that of the heroine: Chandramukhi in *Devdas* (1955), Gulam in *Paysa* (1957), Kishori in *Kalapaani* (1958) and Tulsi in *Main Tulsi Tere Angan Ki* (1978) come most easily to mind. These outcast women are nurturing and sacrificing, beautiful and gentle. Prostitutes with golden

hearts help and nourish the hero”.

In my present study I would like to take three important commercially successful films *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan* and *Utsav* and raise a number of questions regarding male projections of female power and vulnerability in post-colonial India. What exactly is the power structure of the distinct universe signified by the courtesan culture, at once economically dependent and yet distinct from the world of men? What is the politics behind the glamourisation of the nautch-girl associated with the notions of art and entertainment? How has the Bombay film projected the image of courtesans? Can the brothel signify an alternative female space? How does the courtesan film capture the feeling of belonging and non-belonging inside the woman herself?

The concepts of pleasure, luxury, physical adornment seem to predominate in the references to courtesans. They were employed by kings, rich merchants and bankers, and the harem was a well-built structure in the palace provided with many luxuries. The most crucial aspects relate to the economic organization of the prostitutes' body and the social worth of her cultural attainments. Their profession being an important source of revenue to the state, their rights and privileges were naturally recognized. During the later Mughal period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, courtesan culture was patronized by the *nawabs* and flourished in North India, particularly Lucknow. Essayist, historian and novelist Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1926) commented on the social standing of famous courtesans. In contrast to Europe .he wrote. these women “participated more or less equals in the gatherings of refined and polished people... The houses of Chaudharyan Haider Jan and some other courtesans of high status were the clubs of genteel people.”

The heroine of *Pakeezah* (The Pure One,1971) is the classic secondary figure, silently acquiescing to the buffetings of fate and caught in a web of social and familial intrigue. More than any other courtesan film, *Pakeezah* recreates the decadent milieu of this subculture as well as the artistic and linguistic refinement which characterized it. For these and other reasons *Pakeezah* enjoys the status of a cult classic. Starring the highly acclaimed actress Meena Kumari, the film was a huge success when it was released and continued to draw crowds when it is shown. Produced directed and written by Kamal Amrohi, who in fifty years had directed only four films and whose third wife was Meena Kumari. *Pakeezah* is poetry and fantasy and nostalgia all orchestrated together on a grand scale. Film researchers Shampa Banerjee and Anil Srivastava write, “after he (Amrohi) had completed shooting five reels of the film, *Pakeezah* was stalled for seven and a half years, mainly due to Amrohi's differences with Meena Kumari which eventually led to their separation. When it was finally taken up again, Meena Kumari was already



an alcoholic and the film was one of her last. She died soon after its release, yet it is impossible to find any lack of consistency in her portrayal, or any sign of the passing of the years.” It was Padma Khanna who had impersonated Meena Kumari in that final climax song and dance performance, “ aj hum apni duawon ka asar dekhenge, teer e nazaar dekhenge, zakhme Jigar dekhenge” which translates to “ Today I shall see the effects of my prayers , I shall see the glances like arrows , I shall see the wounds of the heart” . Infact the Mother India actress Nargis wrote a piece on Meena Kumari's death in 1972 which was published in an Urdu magazine excerpts from a translation by Yasir Abbasi “ Wishes for your wedding, Happy Diwali, Eid Mubarak, I have often offered aswell as received these wishes on numerous occasions, but congratulations on your death ( Meena maut Mubarak ho). I have neither heard nor said this earlier , Meena today, your baazi ( elder sister) congratulates you on your death and asks you to never step into this world again. This place is not meant for people like you”.

*Pakeezah* creates the mood and sensibility of the grand romance. For events and characters are all larger than life. The central character is named *Pakeezah* (meaning “the pure one”) by her lover when he seeks to give her a new identity from her past one of a dancing girl. She is actually Sahebjan (Meena Kumari), the daughter of a courtesan, abandoned in a graveyard when her mother dies after giving birth. She is brought up by her aunt Nawabjan, who wants to take revenge on her dead sister's husband for her tragic end. So the father, Sahabuddin (Ashok Kumar), the scion of an aristocratic household of North India, is told that her daughter is alive, but when he goes to the salon to fetch her, the place is locked. Nawabjan and her entourage is escaping to another town, in the railway carriage where Sahebjan is asleep, a strange man slips a note between her toes which says, “your feet are beautiful. Do not let them touch the ground or they will be soiled. ” On reading the note, Sahebjan loses her heart to the stranger and dreams about him night and day.

One of her rich and aristocratic admirers takes her sailing on his boat, which is attacked by a herd of elephants. As the party got scattered Sahebjan finds herself in a strange spot on the shore and enters a tent pitched there. Inside she finds a diary that reveals the owner to be none but the man on train. The two finally met, but Sahebjan's aunt forces her back to her life as a courtesan. She runs away but is found by Salim, her lover who wants to marry her. Unable to tell him of his past, she runs away again returning to an empty Rose Palace. Salim sarcastically invites her to perform at his wedding and Sahebjan gives the performance of her life on the broken glass pieces of a chandelier. Her aunt sees Sahabuddin among the hosts and reveals to him the identity of his daughter. When he tries to rush to her, his own father, the old aristocrat who had

objected to his marrying the courtesan Nargis, shoots him dead. Before dying, however Sahabuddin tells his nephew Salim that Sahebjan is indeed his daughter and Nawabjan insists that Salim marry her to wipe out the injustice committed against's mother. In a grotesque finale, the *nikah*, or wedding ceremony is performed in front of the body of the dead Sahabuddin. Sahebjan is finally freed from her life of shame.

In *Pakeezah* we see the most substantive expression of the prostitute's subjective longing to escape the prison house of sexualized ritual and commodification. The feet become a motif throughout the film and are invested with layers of meaning. They are simultaneously an emblem of prostitution through self-sufficiency, of displaced emotion as when *Pakeezah*, in the climactic scene of the film, dances on broken glass to show her defiance of aristocratic norms and values.

*Umrao Jaan* (1981) is the quintessential courtesan film of Bombay cinema. Directed by Muzaffar Ali, the film is based on a popular novel with the same title by Mirza Muhammad Ruswa (1857-1931). The film *Umrao Jaan* effects a further transformation by having the beautiful Rekha play the role of the Lucknow courtesan.

The narrative of *Umrao Jaan* starts in Faizabad in 1840 in an average middle-class Muslim family. The father has made an enemy of the unscrupulous and criminal Dilawal, who spends twelve years in jail. In revenge he kidnaps the man's younger daughter Ameeran and sells her to Khanum Jaan, a madam who runs a brothel in Lucknow. Ameeran's name is changed to Umrao and she grows up in Khanum's establishment. Umrao soon forgets her former existence and learns the techniques of being an accomplished courtesan. She is courted by Gauhar Mirza but loses her heart to Sultan Sahib, who is rich, handsome, cultured and well mannered. After a short lived romance, however he leaves her to get married and Umrao is left disconsolate. Her next client, Faiz Ali, is a robber with whom she elopes but he is killed on the way and Umrao slowly makes her way to Kanpur. She earns fame as a poetess and is celebrated as a courtesan. She finally arrives in Faizabad, her point of origin and enters her long lost home. There is a surprise and tearful reconciliation with her mother but her young brother, now grown up, will have nothing to do with the likes of her. Saddened and truly alone, Umrao's circle of victimization is complete. The final shot of the film presents a double image of the heroine as she is left facing her reflection in a mirror.

Like other courtesan films, here is a microcosm of a social and historical world and of woman's place within it. The hustle and bustle of a household, the petty or smart economic transactions, the comings and goings of men in search of pleasure, the clink of glasses, the jangle of anklets, the storms of love and passion all contribute to the felt impression of a rich and vibrant culture under scrutiny with the help of rose-

tinted glasses. Because we are rarely outside the ambience of whose house the effect is simultaneously one of claustrophobia and intense involvement. The courtesan herself shares this feeling of belonging and non-belonging for while her body is trapped within the walls of the pleasure palace, her thoughts range far and wide as she dreams of love and romance and personal fulfillment. Thus social detail and the critique of woman's exploitations become incidental to individualized and psychic representations of the world.

In 1984 Girish Karnad made *Utsav*, a big-budget film adapted from a classic Sanskrit play of the fourth century A.D entitled *Mrichhakatikam* ("The Little Clay Cart") by Sudraka. A story of pimps, prostitutes and common life. The film was made simultaneously in Hindi and in English for the international as well as Indian market and cost Rs.1 crore (one hundred million.) Girish Karnad, himself a playwright turned filmmaker who had the reputation of belonging to the new cinema but acting in commercial films, was now moving from a low budget film to a big budget one. Moreover Rekha, the foremost star of the commercial cinema had the leading role in *Utsav*.

Like other courtesan-heroines, Vasantsena is beautiful, generous, passionate and emotionally vulnerable. Although she reputedly commands wide influence and respect, she is presented weak and in need of male protection. The first sequence shows her being pursued by two ruffians, Samasthanaka, the king's comical and bull-headed brother-in-law, and his companion. By a series of mistaken identities, Vasantsena is able to get into Charudutt, a Brahmin's house, where he is all alone, his wife and son having gone away for a few days. Here we get our first look at the beautiful courtesan, as seen through the eyes of an admiring Charudutt. Heavily adorned with gold ornaments, Vasantsena is temptation incarnate, and Charudutt does not need much persuasion to succumb to the proffered pleasures of the flesh. Afterwards, Vasantsena leaves her ornaments behind to avoid being attacked by thieves on the way home. The ornaments now seem to take on a life of their own as they change hands in rapid succession and contribute to the complications of the plot. As an extension of their owner, the gold ornaments serve 'magically' to solve many problems and to link the several characters in the film. Charudutt gives the bundle for safekeeping to his friend Maitreya, who sleeps with it under his head. From there it passes into the hands of the thief, Sajjal, who has come to rob Charudutt's home in order to have money to purchase the freedom of his beloved, Madanika, who is Vasantsena's personal maid. When Madanika finds out about Sajjal's theft, she thinks the jewellery was stolen from Vasantsena herself and approaches her mistress in fear. But Vasantsena knows the truth and accepting her ornaments back, grants Madanika her freedom.

The ornaments also serve the function of bringing Vasantsena and Charudutt's

wife together. As a dutiful Hindu wife, Kamala tries to compensate for Charudutt's carelessness in losing Vasantsena's ornaments by sending her own last piece of jewellery to the courtesan. She then leaves home in seeming anger at her husband's infidelity, only to return the next day to meet Vasantsena, who she knows will enter the house as she exits. Relaxing in Charudutt's bed after a night of passionate love making, Vasantsena jumps up when Kamala announces herself. Charudutt's wife is not offended but rather proud that the famous and beautiful courtesan is in love with her husband. Thereafter the women develop a warm friendship, in the course of which Vasantsena puts her ornaments to Kamala, she even gives some to Charudutt's little son to play with and to turn his little clay cart into a golden one. The female bonding shown between the good understanding wife and the courtesan plays out the ultimate male fantasy: the freedom of a man to move without guilt between a nurturing wife and a glamorous mistress.

The jewellery finally brings Samasthanaka and Charudutt together as rivals for Vasantsena's affections. In the culminating episode of the film when Samasthanaka seeks revenge on both Charudutt and Vasantsena for outwitting him, he accuses Charudutt of killing the courtesan (whom he has himself rendered unconscious in a fit of jealousy) in order to steal her jewellery. With his head on the executioner's block, Charudutt protests his innocence but is reconciled to his fate. Finally a new political order was released which decrees a pardon for all prisoners. The tables are now turned on Samasthanaka, the ousted king's relative. Bruised and beaten by the newly freed people, he slinks away while Charudutt is happily reunited with his wife. Vasantsena is aligned with the defeated, for Charudutt forgets her in the joy of being alive again and his wife's embrace. Realizing the hopelessness of her situation as the other woman, she runs from the scene and the last shot shows her accepting the alienation of a now humbled Samasthanaka.

*Utsav*, the film seeks to both glamorize and enliven the present by framing ancient courtesan culture as spectacle, caricature and romance.

In all three of the films discussed above, the prostitute's consciousness may be said to be constructed out of a pattern of nature overlaid by culture. The emotional turmoil of the heroine results whenever she is swayed or affected by deep personal emotion and self-realization that clash with her socialized role of a public entertainer. Thus, while these quintessential courtesan films ostensibly celebrate her artistic talents and enrichment of social life, it is as (im)pure woman that she is judged and elevated only when the threat of her sexuality is suppressed.

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## The Challenges of a Volatile Nationalism and the Patriarchy for 'Half Widowed Gazala' and 'Hysterical Arshia': A Study of the Cinematic Projection of the Fragmentary Lives of Kashmiri Women in the Film *Haider*

Kirti Sachdeva

*Vishal Bhardwaj's film Haider, adapted from Shakespeare's play Hamlet, reverberates the existentialist question, "Do we exist or do we not", in the context of Kashmiri women. It shows the plight of the 'half widows'- condemned to endlessly wait for their husbands, and the tragedy of the women who sink into madness resulting from the split between conflicting identities, ideologies and loyalties. Their identities are reduced into shreds of chaos - Arshia psychologically breaks down due to patriarchal pressure and becomes hysterical due to the mismanagement of Kashmiri politics; Ghazala, on the other hand, wails like a hollow bamboo after the crackdown, which immediately orphans her, with no home and no kin, except for Khurram, to fall back on*

*The present paper examines the search for identity by women characters in the jeopardized state of Kashmir, with the focus on the characters of Ghazala and Arshia. By showcasing the death of both the female protagonists in the end, the film, resonates the 'sati syndrome', wherein the woman martyrs herself for the audience and for restoring the patriarchy and the state machinery. The castration complex in *Haider*, shows the disciplining of a woman's sexuality by the son; she becomes an entity where men preach their own discourses of*

*female chastity and modest conduct. Hamlet's timeless dialogue, 'Frailty thy name is woman' relives its reality in the lives of Ghazala and Arshia, who have to prove their loyalties to the state and to the men. The paper dwells into the disillusioned lives of Kashmiri women.*

**Keywords:** Women, Kashmir, Haider, Patriarchy, Nationalism

The portrayal of women in *Haider* elucidates the female voices and the narratives in a strife-torn state like Kashmir, India. It depicts the search of women for sense of security, stability, assurance, professional opportunities and harmony in a jeopardized territory. The film gives voices and subjectivity to characters who are marginalized and victimized not just by patriarchy but also by state oppression. The two female characters - Ghazala and Arshia - come across as strong female protagonists, however, their individual struggles against the confines of the state-inflicted oppression is met with grave consequences and each has to pay, with their lives, the price of being born in a strife-ridden state. The movie captures their survival instincts, their endeavours to realize their ambitions in life and to materialize their passions in the midst of violence and bloodshed. They attempt to attain psychological normalcy and balance in the face of the crumbling structures of family and home. Both Ghazala and Arshia become representative of 'the woman' who bring forth the complicated relationships between the state, patriarchy and female subjectivity. Ghazala voices out the tragedy of the 'half-widowed' Kashmiri women whose husbands have disappeared and whose fate is marked by an 'endless wait' for their men.

The opening scene of the film shows the space of home being turned into the medical operating room by Doctor Hilal, who shelters and nurses a wanted separatist in the house. The professional commitment of Doctor Hilal compresses the personal space of Ghazala, marks the denial of her subjectivity, escalates her emotional void and sets in motion the tragedy of her family. The personal void makes Ghazala vulnerable to being manipulated by bogus political promises of Khurram who caters to her fears and extends warmth and sense of security to her. His promises become a web of falsification and concoction which deceives her into believing the legitimacy of her relation with him and renders her incapable of comprehending the distortion of events. Ghazala's manipulation by Khurram is synonymous with the ways in which Kashmir and its people are manipulated by misleading political agenda and false promises. Even the relationship

with Khurram does not liberate Ghazala, he dissociates her from her family and then pretends to shelter her just like the autocratic patriarchal state of Kashmir

Interestingly, the film re-creates the castration complex as experienced by Shakespeare's Hamlet, when he becomes obsessed with his mother's sexuality and tries to confine her. Similarly, Haider attempts to discipline the mother and his castration complex is associated with his mother's relationship with Khurram and with her political alignment. Ghazala keeps oscillating between the two – a son who is unable to accept the replacement of the father figure by the uncle and is desperately searching for the disappeared father, not only to restore his idea of family but also to harmonize his idea of Kashmir, and the other - Khurram – the brother in law, who is eager to not only take the place of Doctor Hilal, but also to use it as a political agenda . Ghazala's strong affection for Haider and the physical intimacy have been captured in various scenes of the film. She calls him 'Jaana – my angel', the emotions transiting from anger to apology, from defending herself to pleading for an explanation for her decision to marry Khurram. Ghazala, as an isolated woman, channelizes her love towards the son, who becomes a reason for her to live and the strength for her to endure the years of loneliness. She elaborates on her dead marriage with Doctor Hilal and how her life and home have been gambled by his humanitarian commitment. Torn between Khurram, who pronounces the discourse of future bliss and security, and Haider, who reverberates the moral discourse of fidelity, purity and poignancy, Ghazala represents the state of Kashmir trampled between two fighting nations and the victim of various political ideologies. She is confronted with the hard choice of keeping either the lover or the son. The crackdown in Kashmir drastically alters Ghazala's position- she becomes the half widow, orphaned and homeless. She seeks to transcend her fragmentary existence as a half widow and a half bride by aspiring to become a whole, through her union with Khurram.

The arrival of Haider provides shifting perspectives on the identity of Ghazala as she is scrutinized from the perspective of fidelity and her allegiances. For Haider, the father as a patriarch had kept the mother intact within the territory of home and therefore to find the father becomes important to bring back the mother within the well-knit microcosm that they earlier had. His obsession with the mother and reluctance to 'share' her with someone outside the domain of the family becomes symbolic of the castration complex he feels when the mother is inclined towards Khurram. However, Khurram posed a potential threat for Haider since he entered the physical and emotional territory of Ghazala and reconfigured the entire power dynamics by replacing the patriarch. The changing dynamics of home which gets extended in the political realm too, nurtures



disillusionment in Haider since Khurram's infiltration into the private family space runs parallel with his rising power in the state machinery. Ghazala becomes the site of honour, and is constantly robbed of individuality. The different male characters try to punish her for remarrying; she is referred as Khurram's mistress and her aspirations to gain marital bliss are not only seen as a personal transgression but also a political betrayal. For Haider, the past was a marker of home, mother, fidelity and the patriarch, whereas the present was characterized by lack of home, changed patriarch, dissociation with the mother and the sense of infidelity on the mother's part. He calls Ghazala as duplicitous, having two faces – one of innocence and the other of deception.

Gertrude in the play *Hamlet* exhibits similar unfortified position as a female. Though she comes across as a strong willed, affectionate and an assertive woman, her choices are seen as a transgression and always judged from a misogynist perspective. Her marriage to Claudius is perceived as a moral debasement since Hamlet views her as a paragon of female honour and virtue. Oblivious of Claudius' evil acts, she becomes a site for Hamlet to purge out his aggression and discontentment with the state of affairs in Denmark. The son tries to put restraint on her private life by asking her to not sleep with Claudius. Her perception keeps oscillating between being either guilty or innocent. The son sees her as a sensual creature and fails to understand her emotional and domestic needs. In the end she is sacrificed for restoring the social, political and moral order of the Elizabethan society.

Arshia, who possesses a curiosity to investigate into the political affairs of the state, represents the young female voices in Kashmir. She starts off with a zeal and vehemence to question the authority and voices the discontent of the people by working as a journalist. Through her minor attempts and limited spaces, she interrogates the state by posing questions to the army general on the nature of 'torture' that they inflict on people. She becomes active within the political sphere by helping Haider in finding his father and represents the emerging political enunciation by women. However, the annihilation of her own family by the state and the slaughter of her romance shatters her psychologically. She exhibits strong feminism in the beginning of the movie, when she is seen as actively working as a journalist, and when she tries to pacify Haider and extends her warmth and care to him. She tranquilizes his perturbed and agitated mind by asking him to purge out these apprehensions by crying rather than fostering and nurturing them in his mind. Her choices are constantly controlled and dictated by the masculine state, which informs her father and brother to keep her away from Haider, confine her, administer her movements and supervise her interaction with the external world. Therefore, women: their choices, their loyalties, their alignments and

their ideologies indirectly and unconsciously get superintended by the state-manifested patriarchy. They have to confirm and function within the parameters stated by the nation and prove their loyalty to the patriarchal nation state. Non-conformism against the law of the father or brother becomes a statement of anti-national sentiment for Arshia. She is asked to swear by the Quran as a test of her allegiances. Despite her courage to be a non-conformist to the state and patriarchy she gets manipulated by her father who lulls her into obedience by emotionally exploiting her and deceiving her in order to extract news about Haider. With the false promise of providing safety to Haider, the father uses her in the service of the state.

A similar end is met by Ophelia in the play *Hamlet*. She is torn between the different patriarchs - one represented by her father and her brother and the other by Hamlet. She becomes the entity to whom men preach their own discourses of female chastity and modest conduct. The father and the brother warn her against the potential dangers of being disowned by men if she submits easily. She represents the limited choices that women had in the Elizabethan age; they are expected to be eternal virgins encapsulating modesty, and their only future is to become a dutiful wife and a devoted mother. Hamlet sees her as a sexual object driven by the fragilities of women : infidelity and deception, and inscribes the entire misogynist discourse in relation to her, in order to purge out his discontentment with the uncontrolled sexual and marital choices of the mother. She is forced into madness with no outlet to reconcile the paradox of patriarchal expectations.

At the end of the film *Haider*, both the important female protagonists die. Arshia sinks into madness as a result of the being stuck between conflicting identities, ideologies and loyalties. The men around her demand her to align with their respective causes, which reduces her own identity into shreds of chaos. Her madness is symbolic of the psychological imbalance that emerges out of the mismanagement of the Kashmir state which turns the home into a political organisation, constantly demanding affirmation and adherence to itself. The state shatters her notions of family and romance. The cycle of betrayal shatters her idealism attached to the family and to the Kashmiri state which used and abused her for their personal and political ends. The chaotic turn of events dismantles the presence of a linear reality in the state of Kashmir. Even when she dies, both Haider and her brother Liyaqat fight over her body, which again reinforces her tragedy. Even in her death, the identity politics and differences do not resolve.

Ghazala becomes a puppet in the hand of the separatist groups in Kashmir when she carries a suicide bomb with her. She is used by the militants and becomes a political statement against the state. On her part, it becomes an endeavour to resolve the

ideological differences represented by Haider and Khurram respectively. Ghazala pleads Haider to surrender, however, her suicide marks her surrender in the face of growing atrocities and thus her sacrifice and attempt to free herself from the bondage. It also represents her disillusionment with the political and the personal spaces of Kashmir and the surrender of her zest for life, for family and of a sense of normalcy in the state of Kashmir which constantly divides her. She realizes the futility of love which cannot blossom in Kashmir, the lack of social relations and the meaningless life that is present in the unreal world of Kashmir. Her suicide corresponds the 'sati syndrome' (64) that Shoma Chatterji mentions in her book titled *Subject--Cinema, Object--Woman: A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema*. It reflects the condition of women who "shy away from venturing beyond the parameters of ordained wifedom", therefore, to restore the patriarchy, she becomes a martyr in order to be a widow again and prove her fidelity to the first dead husband. It becomes both a personal and a political act. Shoma Chatterji refers to similar tendencies in the chapter "The Final Exit: Suicide, Celluloid And the Woman," wherein she states that "woman martyrs herself for the audience and for the characters in the film. Alternatively, she would have had to face the death sentence (195). She punishes herself for her ignorance of Khurram's deception and rehabilitates her character against the accusation of infidelity by Haider. Her suicide secures certain degree of sympathy in the audience, since it not just becomes a motif for her to prove her loyalty towards her husband and son but also becomes a political statement enunciating a resolution of national conflict by preaching non-violence.

The state fails to protect, safeguard and defend the micro unit 'family' and makes women 'half widow', or orphans them, in the name of protection. The movie shows thousands of women coming out of their homes and searching for their sons, husbands or brothers. The phrase 'Do we exist or not?' in context of the women's relation to the nation state assumes a greater paradox since the disappearance of their men renders them as mere shadows of their role as wives, daughters, sisters or mothers. Existing in a territory with an all-male driven, repressive and violent groupings—terrorists, state, bureaucracy, police, army and man-oriented family—women become the most vulnerable and helpless creatures despite the magnitude of strength and survivalist impulses they show. They are reduced to mere properties and territories to be battled for. The consequential tragedy is ultimately received by women who become witnesses of divided loyalties within the home and have no autonomy to express their allegiances. The film projects the women characters being burdened with the moral responsibility of endorsing, validating and sustaining the traditional values and proving their loyalties.

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Focus : Ray at 100







## Narrative Disjunction in The Cinema of Satyajit Ray

Ashoke Viswanathan

In *Pather Panchali*, the text does not, in any way, follow the patterns of a classical dramatic narrative; it is, in a sense, linear, but also rambling; and the faint linearity is not always consistent because the narrative gallops along, in an episodic manner. The structure seems distinctly more pyramidal than linear. The events seem to be piling up, one on top of the other until the final denouement which is more of an anti-climax: a gradual disquieting lapse into a second start, a start of a new journey into the unknown.

Satyajit Ray's choice of this Bibhuti Bhushan text and, indeed, his cinematic realization of the same, clearly reveal his penchant for the disjunctive narrative. While many critics and scholars have stressed on Ray's 'masterly' storytelling quality, it is my humble submission that in several of his films, he has demonstrated a propensity to subvert the narrative in an original manner.

If we take a close look at *Kanchenjanga* (1962), it will be apparent that the text is driven by ideas and not by action; the mood is existential and a feeling of urban alienation is predominant even though the setting is the hill station of Darjeeling. While maintaining the classical concept of unity of time, the structure embraces distinctly modernist elements like the use of a 'rondo'<sup>1</sup> like flow in terms of the episodes. A

*mélange* of parallel syntagmatic episodes emphasize a near *Waiting for Godot* like situation wherein that which was anticipated does not happen. There is also a hint of postmodern feminist constructs such as the remarkable bonding of mother and daughter, Labanya and Monisha, working to thwart the designs of the domineering patriarch, Indranath Roy. I call it postmodern because the period of the early sixties in Calcutta was a period of time in which patriarchy ruled the roost and any kind of subversion could be termed as the stirrings of postmodern rupture ; this subplot is a statement, albeit subtle, that seeks to underline the importance of individual choice, particularly in the case of the woman.



The film is constructed in elegant passages and while the primary plot relating to the probable engagement of Monisha and Banerjee involves several characters flitting in and out of several scenes, the secondary plot relates to the rescuing of a disintegrating marriage. While the secondary plot shows a modicum of development, the primary plot is even fraught with uncertainties and ambiguities. Here, too, the narrative is often decentered to allow for specifically cinematic constructs like cloudy scenes epitomizing a Wasteland<sup>2</sup> like world and more sunny spaces symbolizing some sort of hope in an earth weary with the worries of nuclear testing.

This work seems to predate even Antonioni<sup>3</sup> in that the viciousness of the upper middle class is depicted in a fairly realistic manner; and yet, the so called bourgeois class is not unnecessarily vilified. Banerjee's closing dialogues are exquisitely composed:



Here in these idyllic surroundings, you may feel that love is much more important than security. But when you go back to Calcutta, if ever you feel that security can be more important than love, or that love can grow out of security, then call on me.

*Kanchenjanga* is not a straight narrative by any stretch of imagination; its use of motifs and aural signifiers serve to create a polyphonic milieu, full of resonant discoveries. The Nepali boy and his wonderful ditty have a choric quality, tellingly commentative and bewitchingly expressionistic in tone. The entire film has a fresco like quality, an amalgam of different pieces of great aesthetic significance.

The other film that eschews the straight narrative and seeks to explore uncharted territory is *Aranyer Din Ratri*, (*Days and Night in the Forest* – 1969). Here the first half appears to be linear but in the second half, a discursive pattern sets in and the film assumes a distinctly syntagmatic structure.

The film begins with a bang, as it were, with the pre-title sequence dramatically merging into the titles<sup>4</sup>. This beginning seems an introduction of sorts with the four principal characters quite different in their attitudes and proclivities. The story moves along in episodes and the women characters, Duli, Aparna and Jaya also present a range of varying attitudes. If Duli, the tribal girl, is a subaltern with a feisty temperament, Aparna is more of an upper middle class woman of an intellectual disposition; while Jaya is of the same milieu as Aparna but less cerebral. Among the men, Hari is a sportsman, slowly recovering from being jilted in love. Ashim is a confident soul who needs to have his smugness shaken, somehow, by the enigmatic Aparna while Sanjoy is a curious mix of Bangla Culture<sup>5</sup> and middle class morality. Shekhar seems the ubiquitous buffoon, the court jester, as it were, but his inner self, albeit unashamedly thick skinned, is genuine in its gregarious quality. If the first half uses key episodes to convey the *The Calcutta Chromosome*<sup>6</sup> in an alien environment, the second half is pointed in its eschewing of the traditional narrative idiom. . Here one has used a deliberately anachronistic allusion to Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 1995 an intriguing medical thriller with a fair share of mystery; the sense here is different: an attempt at humour with Calcutta (now Kolkata) being everyone's favourite whipping boy! Here too, motifs and signifiers abound like the famous 'sand flowing out of the hand' shot that serves as a metaphor for time. The 'memory game' itself is a remarkable narrative construct; it is like an analytical microscope weeding out elements of milieu and zeitgeist from mere names. The characters are unmasked and decoded while the narrative becomes distinctly discursive.

If the track involving Hari, Duli, Shekhar and Hari's nemesis is an episodic

roller-coaster ride of love, lust, revenge and awakening, the syntagma involving Jaya and Sanjoy is exceedingly subtle in its playing out Sanjoy's hesitant withdrawal in the face of Jaya's explicit overtures. The dialogue between Aparna and Ashim is the most ambiguous and intriguing of all the interactions as the vulnerability in the one seeks to unmask the guardedness of the other. The private and the personal shake hands with the outwardly and the superficial.

As in many of Ray's texts, *Aranyer Din Ratri* ends in a bittersweet zone with no victories and no defeats; nothing is achieved but all is not lost. In this delicate tapestry of eroticism and soul-searching introspection, the city slickers return to the city. It is this lack of a traditional climax, this steering clear of catharsis that makes Ray's texts uniquely disjunctive in their narrativity.

In *Nayak* (The hero – 1966) it is a journey – a kind of spiritual sojourn, apposite to a dream (and fraught with dreams) that is most arresting.

The structure is reminiscent of Bergman's masterpiece, *Wild Strawberries* (1957) wherein the journey of Dr. Isak Borg played adroitly by the spontaneous Viktor Sjöström, is symbolic of his achievements and insecurities as a doctor. And yet, there is something uniquely Indian about the Ray text. While the structure effectively decenters the narrative in favour of several strands of psychological and philosophical exploration, the array of supporting characters create a magnificent tapestry of moods and morals. The journey is, in a sense, a framing device that encapsulates various streams of episodic narrativity. The principal text is, therefore, constantly interrupted by flashbacks, dreams and the conscious recounting of incidents from the past. This dynamic depiction of



time serves as a signifier that seeks to scratch below the surface of the matinee idol, gently probing into his areas of insecurity. Coming from a lower middle class background, the protagonist, Arindam, is a product of the collective consciousness of the Bengali but also is a rebel of sorts in

his career choices. Opting for cinema while eschewing the call of the theatre, he goes against the wishes of his mentor, Shankar Da. He is also an exception as he does not totally conform to the traditional definition of an actor, he is a thinker and gently appreciative of Aditi (the pseudo journalist) and her faintly supercilious appraisal of so called “superstars”.

The flashbacks reveal that Arindam, for a time, did have his feet firmly on the ground. His friends were his theatre comrades as also his man Friday not to mention his kindred soul, the trade unionist whom he had to betray. If one were to compare with Dr. Isak Borg, Ray’s Arindam is slightly more flawed although both characters undergo paroxysms of guilt.

The dreams in *Nayak* have often come in for a great deal of criticism. The first one, in which Arindam sinks into a quicksand of cash has often been denigrated as being too literal, too obvious. While this accusation may be somewhat true owing to the directness of the presentation, there are other elements in that selfsame dream that are worth mentioning. The soundtrack is very interesting for one. The phone rings and faint ambient sounds serve to create an atmosphere of menace. The skeletal phones, too, are artistic and fearsome. The reference to Shankar Da and his appearance are ingenious and his made up face is distinctly disturbing. The second dream seems more assured in its realization albeit the influence of Fellini’s *8 1/2* (1963) is distinctly palpable.

The point here is that the structure of the film is in the tradition of narrative disjunction with the dreams and the flashbacks running parallel to the main track; moreover, the parallel syntagmas often impact the main journey and disturb the linearity, thus building moments of stasis.

The text of *Pratidwandi* (The adversary-1971) is full of cinematic elements of varying efficacy. Apart from the use of negative shots to convey a feeling of disorientation, the screenplay uses various kinds of motifs and flash forwards that serve to interrupt the fabric of the narrative. Siddhartha often sees the world through the prism of a medical student, analyzing the anatomical features of people whom he sees or meets. At times, his mind, possessed by a blinding fury, races ahead in a screeching climax where he shoots his sister’s boss for attempting to take undue advantage of her. This is a modernist film of three friends who are very different; of two brothers who are very different; Siddhartha’s brother is a true blue revolutionary, a Naxalite in the early seventies. Siddhartha imagines himself to be a Che Guevara of sorts but cannot totally plunge himself into the life of an underground political activist. At heart, he is middle-class, decidedly so but aspiring towards the initiators of insurrection.

*Pratidwandi*, while communicating the urban milieu of the seventies in the metropolis,

does an effective job of subverting the narrative by the constant deviations that include flash backs, flash forwards and illusions. One cut is particularly interesting when the sister calls the brother to the terrace and we see a visual of a little sister calling her little brother; the time jump is startling and exquisitely cinematic and conveys the time worn dictum that our lives are composed of different strands of time.

This film has something of the flavour and fervor of the New Wave; if I were to be facetious, it was almost as if Ray (who has been generally critical of art being dwarfed by artifice) were doing a 'Sen' in his own inimitable way. Mrinal Sen who was long Ray's contemporary filmmaker and, in a sense, a rival of sorts, became enamoured of formalistic devices that often peppered his films<sup>7</sup>.

Ray has been fond of improvisation, of using the hand-held camera and rapid cutting in some of his 'urban quadrilogy' films. The *tour de force* is the sequence in *Pratidwandi* wherein Siddhartha, in an outburst of frustration, (after being kept waiting in inhuman conditions) overturns the table where he was to be interviewed. He walks out and the camera, mimetically moves apposite to his dramatic departure, joining hands with the editing and creates a montage of rapidly changing shots of the metropolis scarred by posters and graffiti. The sequence becomes a trifle blurred as it merges into the beautiful countryside viewed from the perspective of a journey by train.

This may seem like a climax but it is not the end as Ray uses yet another cinematic device to conclude his narrative. This is in keeping with the tone and tenor of his script which often keeps the viewer guessing while subtly providing details and incidents that prevent the text from degenerating into melodramatic hyperbole<sup>8</sup>.

The end of *Pratidwandi* does justice to the prescription of the realist theorist, Siegfried Kracauer who was very fond of open endings.

Ray ends *Pratidwandi* with a letter wherein, once again, there is a play of time and space. The letter is voiced even before it is written and the contents are shown before the writing; the film ends with the protagonist signing off, concluding a film with a distinctly elliptic narrative structure.

In *Ghare Baire* (The home and the world-1984), it is an ambitious presentation, somewhat flawed but replete with passages of great aesthetic beauty. Based on the novel by Tagore, the text is composed using a polyphony of voices, a hydra-headed narrative perspective. The film shows the perspectives of Bimala, the modern woman, Sandip, the revolutionary for whom the end justifies the means and Nikhilesh, the landowner with a sense of justice and responsibility.

"I have come through the fire" declares the voice of Bimala and one feels that this background narration is as arresting and evocative as in the Resnais films of the

early sixties<sup>9</sup>. The script evolves using familiar narrative techniques but the multiple voices contribute towards a shift from the simple, linear narrative.

*Ghare Baire* does not sustain the initial promise of its beginning, later lapsing into somewhat conventional story-telling but its stress on key moments like Bimala and Nikhilesh's difference of opinion, Bimala's singing lessons, her entry into the outer world with her husband and the signals of her infatuation with the Sandip persona – all merge art with artifice. This is a fairly linear narrative but by no means a simple, straightforward one.

Ray's last three films did not impress to the extent that his earlier films did but *Agantuk* (The outsider - 1992) has elements of dramaturgy that makes a virtue of ambiguity. The suspicion with which the outsider is viewed by the family is communicated to the audience in a subtle manner and this gives an unexpected flavour to the narrative. The denouement is significant for it seems that the director has used a microscope to analyze the urban middle class and shown it as unfeeling, self-centred and lacking in a generosity of spirit. Their realization of their own folly is the only redeeming feature that the director finds in the urban middle class of that time. As elsewhere, there is a distinct musical pattern in even these last films.

This quality of tunefulness is quite abstract; it is a product of Ray's meticulous organization. Right from the design of the sequence, there is a noticeable and unique pattern that is felt even in the editing and sound applications. Consider the film, *Charulata*. If one looks at the denouement, it is a longish sequence comprising the following:



The letter from Amal is shown on a small table, using a gently menacing crane shot that establishes the epistle as an index of foreboding ('coming events cast their shadows before'), forecasting Charu's volatile propinquity to Amal. Then, Bhupati's perusing of the letter and his innocent, unknowing remarks about Amal's plans and programmes are shown. Bhupati casually asks Charu to take a look at the letter. Then, he leaves to go outside.

Eventually, Charu goes to the letter and as she reads, she is overcome by a paroxysm of emotion and she breaks down screaming out her 'forbidden desire' for Amal. Suddenly Bhupati returns, unexpectedly, having forgotten something; and he is horrified at the revelation of Charu's love for Amal. Bhupati, in a situation of extreme dejection and shock, wanders about aimlessly in a phaeton<sup>10</sup>. When he returns, in a scene fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity, Charu, with fear and guilt writ large on her countenance, gestures to him to come inside. The elderly domestic help waits with a lamp in his hands. Bhupati enters but Ray freezes the moment even before Charu's and Bhupati's hands can meet, thus symbolizing "the broken nest". Words are insufficient to express the aesthetic pattern of this resonant *mise-en-scene*.

#### Notes :

1. Ray, in a few of his interviews, has himself made the comparison between the episodic recurrence of scenes in *Kanchenjanga* and the Western classical musical structure known as the 'rondo' wherein a principal theme (or refrain) alternates with one or more contrasting themes.
2. Ray is inspired, albeit indirectly, by the same signals of decay and degradation that prompted Eliot to dub the propensities of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Civilization as a *Wasteland* in the epic poem with the same rubric.
3. If Antonioni used architectonic metaphor to critique the alienation of European society in the '60s (in films like *La Notte*-1962 and *Leclisse*-1963), Ray's resonant dramaturgy and decoupage served to underline the hollowness of urban middle class Bengalis, often possessed of a supercilious world view.
4. The titles in *Aranyer Din Ratri* use the technique of masking to convey the spirit of adventure.
5. The average Bengali young man loves his poetry, his Rabindrasangeet, is an avid fan of Mohun Bagan or East Bengal football club, enjoys his 'rosogolla' and is intent on watching intellectual theatre too, besides doing his job.
6. Here one has used an allusion to Amitav Ghosh's 1995 novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*.
7. This is a reference to Mrinal Sen's proclivity for spiky syntax in his films of the seventies.

8. By making clear, at the outset, that Siddhartha had an outstation job waiting for him, Ray desists from unnecessary drama.
9. The opening lines of the background voice (Bimala) in *Ghare Baire* reminds one of the voice over / dialogues in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad*.
10. The Phaeton, a horse drawn carriage popular in the post Victorian era in Calcutta, is doubly symbolic of British Colonialism and a sense of being transported to a nowhere land; this is exactly what the alienated Bhupati must have been feeling.

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