Chapter 4: Possibilities of Political Mobilization

I

This chapter looks at the narrative and representational strategies that come into being for the express purpose of inscribing the middle class as a subject of politics and a harbinger of change within Bombay cinema. In the films that I look at in the following sections, the spatial outlay of the city and its peripheries approximates in varying degrees the first perceptual framework that I outline at the beginning of the previous chapter. If the city embedded in a dense network of alternative hierarchies of power was refracted through the perceptual categories of the haptic and the violent in the previous chapter, where time is caught in the dense and unpredictable present, here the perceptual framework reorganizes those same elements and energies to produce spaces as amenable to middle class intervention. The future appears in this framework as one that can be brought about solely by the mediation of the middle class. Permissible resolutions are premised on the reclamation of space and time for the middle class. For this both the city and its peripheries have to be intercepted within a different framework of intelligibility. The contesting parties for the different kinds of space here correspond loosely to the inhabitants of the experiential, dense, chaotic lived city and the abstract, planned city respectively. But then again the films in my second chapter bear evidence of a lived city that constitutes the habitat of the new middle classes and reveal the experiential crises faced by its protagonists as individuals, or as an imagined collective, caught in the process of wresting space. Their attempts to make this space their own, and conversely, to come into their own in this space are thwarted by various obstacles posed by the very existence of other spaces that can neither be controlled nor contained. These spaces irrupt onto the diagnostically space of the films as critical disruptions in various forms depending on the genre. The city is besieged by segments coded as others to the middle class on various axes of evaluation.

In Ram Gopal Varma’s films body horror (the depraved bodies of the possessed) co-exists with threats to private space from a predatory underclass. For Bhandarkar’s films ‘othering’ is premised on what is perceived as a bankruptcy of values or a depreciation of cultural capital. Several unlikely threats to the norm
also make the consolidation of a middle class milieu precarious. For example for the almost exactly similar characters portrayed by Konkona Sen Sharma in *Page 3* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2005) and *Life in a...Metro* (Anurag Basu, 2007), the discovery that her potential partners are gay posits an obstacle to couple formation. On the other hand, characters played by Sen Sharma in a succession of films also provide a transtextual continuum across the films locating the protagonist in a specific class milieu with specific aspirations, a similar set of values and makes her subject to specific anxieties. Placing the woman as the ‘everyman’ in these films also functions as a token gesture indicating the progressive dispensation of the middle class and helps to justify its hegemonic aspirations.

The theme of forming or sustaining a couple in the face of obstacles presented by the complexity of life in the city is not new to Bombay cinema. However, the specific nature and contours of the problems in each period map out new concerns and crises facing the couple. While romantic or conjugal liaisons forged across class disappear altogether from the mainstream (*Aziz Mirza’s Chalte Chalte*, 2003, was probably the last film that dealt with this theme) new kinds of alliances materialize, for example, in *Band, Baaja, Baaraat* (Maneesh Sharma, 2010), where two young people from widely different backgrounds come together through a business venture as wedding planners who specialize in kitsch.

The divide between the classes in the city is also not a new phenomenon. The reformist impulse of the ‘50s had also mapped the city in terms of its segregation between the clean contours of an industrialized, efficiently planned city and the experiential city of pavement dwellers, labourers, beggars, vagrants and thieves. Rashmi Varma describes Bombay in *Shri 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1955) as a space where “[t]he cleaner lines of a Fordist city of manufacture and industry, [co-exist with] a nefarious, floating world of greed, speculation, and ostentation that has little fidelity to national development, compris[ing] the city’s cartographic matrix in the film.”

232 The potential for redemption in *Shri 420*, as well as in several other films of the period, was in the “ideal of socialist urban space (flat, uniform,  

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unadorned)—an aesthetic that symbolized a productive state economy and collective, universal citizenship—[which] redeems postcolonial urbanism from capitalist frenzy based on speculation.”

Class contest in the films in this chapter is distinct in its own claims and resolutions that have resonances with the socio-political transformations in the contemporary period, and determine the ways in which the films interpret the city in the present in a way amenable to its manipulation in the future.

These films were produced in the same period in which the city was being represented in a series of films that also sought to render it habitable for the middle classes by borrowing and modifying the representational apparatus set in place by the gangland genre. *Black Friday* (Anurag Kashyap, 2004), *Shoot out at Lokhandwala* (Apoorva Lakhia, 2007), *Aamir* (Raj Kumar Gupta, 2008), *A Wednesday* (Neeraj Pandey, 2008) are instances in which the city is reclaimed from a pervasive sense of dread and brought under a regime of surveillance and control. Bombay cinema in this sense was struggling to address and recuperate within its representational framework the uncertainty of everyday existence that had taken root following the serial bomb blasts of 1993 (perceived as a repercussion to the carnage of Muslims following the Babri Masjid demolition), and the successive explosions inside buses and local trains over the period of 2002–03 (seen as a backlash to the anti-Muslim pogrom set in motion in the wake of the Godhra train burning). This was one kind of transparency that these films were striving to assimilate within their field of representation, a transparency of information that could enable interception and neutralization of future attacks on the city.

Before we proceed it will be useful to recall once again that the very idea of contested spaces is premised largely on an opposition between planned, ordered, abstracted space and dense, lived, experiential, chaotic space. Gyan Prakash in

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233 Ibid. p. 71
234 See *Mumbai Post 26/11: An Alternate Perspective*, (eds.) Ram Punyani and Shabnam Hashmi, 2010, for a detailed account of the culture of suspicion, and state pleas of secrecy for the sake of security that led to the obfuscation of facts in the 2008 terrorist attacks on Bombay.
*Mumbai Fables* follows the trajectory of this contestation over spaces in Bombay through the MARG\(^{236}\) initiatives towards building an “orderly and efficient urban society.”\(^{237}\) The publications by MARG and the Journal of the Indian Institute for Architects (JIIA) as early as 1945 were already expressing grave concern over the inadequacies of the Bombay Municipal Corporation in addressing problems of “slums, filth, overcrowding, and traffic congestion [...] Instead of eradicating the disease at the center, the fungus [was] being allowed to spread outward.”\(^{238}\) The inaugural issue of MARG’s official journal, published in 1946 and sub-titled ‘Planning and Dreaming,’ consolidated this conceptualization of a planned city that would function like a well-oiled machine, an organic unit, in stark contrast to the BMC’s approach that only sought to manage the symptoms of difference. In subsequent discourses about urban planning, efficiency and organization became the operative terms. Prakash reads this tendency as aligned with Lefebvre’s understanding of conceptualization and representation of space in terms of “ideologies linked to production relations” where “[s]pecific forms of society and the lived experience of space appear through the lens of concepts and codes appropriate for the dominant social order.”\(^{239}\) In contrast to the transparency sought in the films of surveillance and control, the transparency demanded by the films in the following sections pertains to a visible and organic linkage between relations of production and the functioning of the machinery of the government. These are requisites that were categorically resisted by the dense, violent spaces of the gangland films, for example.

The 1980s and ’90s were in effect a time of gradual disinclination of the middle class from the Congress party caused chiefly by what was perceived as its vote bank dominated politics prioritizing Muslims and the lower classes and castes.

The culmination of this dissociation was in the large scale upheaval in 1990 against the recommendations of the Mandal Commission for caste-based reservations in government jobs and educational institutions. The relevant point for my analysis is that the repeated policy restructurings of successive coalitions

\(^{236}\) MARG literally means path or road in Hindi, but it is also an acronym for Modern Architectural Research Group.

\(^{237}\) Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, p.253

\(^{238}\) Ibid. p.258 quoted from JIIA January 1945, 1–2.

\(^{239}\) Ibid. p.260
in power in India since the liberalization has accorded a primacy to a certain kind of middle class politics that was co-constituted along with its self-definition in this period. Of course the economic conditions for the constitution of the ‘consumer-citizen’ middle classes were only made possible through opportunities opened up by the liberalization. But rather than consider the state as an external mechanism shifting gears in a liberalized economy to favourably benefit an existing ‘middle-class’ social formation, I would like to emphasize, following Leela Fernandes, that the very conception of a new addressee in terms of political address can also be roughly traced back to this moment. As Fernandes points out through several local and pan-Indian examples:

The contours of new middle class politics have reshaped narratives of middle class alienation and protest through the production of a new model of citizenship, one that rests on a continual struggle to reclaim the terms of democratic politics from subordinated social groups. This hegemonic role of the liberalizing middle class coexists with and is challenged by numerous forms of political mobilization of marginalized caste and class groups in contemporary India.240

The forms and strategies taken by these negotiations and their underlying presumptions in the larger project of reclaiming space are my chief concerns. Again, none of this is to imply that there was a monolithic homogeneous new middle class on the ascendant. On the contrary, a closer look at various local and state level political ensembles, for instance the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, would reveal the diffuse and at times contradictory nature of political alliances formed by the middle classes that defy any comprehensive categorization of the middle class as a political entity. The commonality that I wish to propose is, on the other hand, in the nature of its demands ranging across both local and national concerns, articulated chiefly in terms of its distinction from contesting classes. That politics itself would appear as a recurrent site of reform in film after film of this period is already apprehensible in Thomas Blom Hansen’s observation about the middle class’ perception of a “plebianization of the political field” in which, “from the

240 Leela Fernandes, India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform, 2006, p.182.
1960s onwards, the public construction of politics has increasingly been transformed toward that of an ‘immoral vocation,’ a site of unprincipled pragmatism, corruption, nepotism and greed—in brief, as the profane antithesis to the sublime qualities of the cultural realm.”\textsuperscript{241} But the possible means through which reforms can be instituted underwent a significant change commensurate with the changing sites of politics. The practice of politics in this period relied upon increased visibility through newspapers, television, cell phone campaigns, and other media which had proliferated following liberalization.\textsuperscript{242} Even while the direct participation of the middle classes in the electoral processes of democracy was seen to be minimal in statistical terms, these indirect mechanisms would acquire the potency and capacity to replicate state effects through platforms of dissemination that often relied on their alliance with economic forces.\textsuperscript{243}

It is within this discursive domain that the films in the following four sections address the issues and concerns of the middle class and posit it as an able political subject.

II The Suddenly Sexualized Politics of Yuva

Yuva (Mani Ratnam, 2004) is symptomatic of the narrative reorganization that could effectively accommodate different kinds of spaces, albeit hierarchically and thus allowing one to subsume the other. Like Rang De Basanti, (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006, taken up for discussion a little later in this chapter) Yuva was meant to instigate Indian youth to participate in politics. Yuva’s three protagonists are Lallan Singh (Abhishek Bachchan) a migrant from Bihar, married to a Bengali woman Shashi, who is inducted into carrying out the dirty work of violence, intimidation, abduction and assassination for corrupt MLA Prasenjit Bhattacharya; Michael Mukherjee (Ajay Devgan) a prominent idealistic student

\textsuperscript{241} Quoted in Fernandes, India’s New Middle Class p. 184, originally from Thomas Blom Hansen’s The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p.8

\textsuperscript{242} “In other words,” claims Fernandes, “as the expansion of democracy has enabled subordinated groups to gain access to political power, groups such as the new middle class have been able to find ways to circumvent such formal processes and reconstitute the political mechanisms that provide access to the state.” India’s New Middle Class, p.175

\textsuperscript{243} As a pertinent example one can cite the ‘Jaago Re! One Billion Votes’ campaign instituted by Tata Tea in collaboration with a Bangalore based NGO Janaagraha, which was aimed specifically at motivating the country’s youth with a target of procuring one billion voters for the Assembly elections.
leader from Presidency College; and Arjun Balachandran (Vivek Oberoi) a Mechanical Engineering graduate who wishes to settle in the United States. First, let me put in some brief observations on the city that appears in Yuva. The choice of Calcutta over Bombay as Yuva’s locale helps the film on the one hand to lay out the political and communitarian milieus without either the representational accumulation of the density of city space crystallized in the gangster films on the one hand, or the incumbence of the specific valences of urban communitarian investment in the figure of the outcast hero on the other. Yuva was also made simultaneously in Tamil with the name Aaytha Ezhuthu which itself had Chennai as its locale. The significance of the transposition has perhaps not so much to do with Calcutta (or Chennai for that matter) but the fact that it is not Mumbai (by this time already overdetermined, as far as Bombay cinema is concerned, with the spectre of a gangland Bombay in the domain of representation, and the equally deeply entrenched aggression of the Shiv Sena in the socio-political sphere, which Bombay cinema is attempting to negotiate in certain ways discussed in the previous chapter). The remove is necessary, one might argue, specifically because the film seeks to interpret its present differentially from the gangworld films. More significantly, the remove allows Yuva to calibrate its context of youth participation in politics by borrowing from the immediate history of Calcutta’s student politics by placing one of its three central protagonists Michael Mukherjee, a student of Physics in Presidency College: historically significant because of its robust political culture, not only since the Naxalite movement of the ’70s, but also specifically because of the persistent opposition it has posed to the oppressive practices of the left front government in West Bengal and its student wing the SFI through an unaffiliated Independent Consolidation formed in 1989 which dominated the Students’ Union till 2009. Howrah Bridge as a symbolic visual marker of the city constantly punctuates and qualifies the city-line at all significant narrative junctures of the film, even when the actual geography of Calcutta and any degree of cognizance of real life practices (pre-electoral rallies are usually held at the Maidan, for instance) renders
their occurrence somewhat implausible.\textsuperscript{244} Additional touches of local authenticity are provided by the tortured ‘Bengali’ accent of corrupt politician Prasenjit, the casting of Rani Mukherjee as Lallan’s Bengali wife, and the recurrence of Victoria Memorial and shots of mud idols at Kumartuli.

\textit{Yuva}’s narrative organization juggles three separate narrative trajectories centred upon its three protagonists. The first shot of the film travels along the railings of the Howrah Bridge whipping past in accelerated motion and plunges us \textit{in medias res} in the thick of the narrative where the radically segregated lives of the three protagonists entwine and conjoin. The management and seguing of the three disparate milieus associated with its triad of protagonists is implicit in the way the interconnectivity of the three is conceived and mapped out subsequently in the film. All three are caught in cross-cuts in this opening sequence: Lallan appears in extreme close up inside a red van talking to another man driving the car about problems in his married life. Michael is on a motorbike with his girlfriend Radhika, who says her uncle and aunt are looking for a suitable groom for her. Arjun gets off a tram following Mira in a futile attempt to convince her that he is really in love with her. This persistent talk about troubled conjugality, that seems extraneous to the turn of events that all three men are imminently going to be embroiled in, incidentally posits one of the central strategies of managing politics in Mani Ratnam, and I will look at it in closer detail a little later. The cross-cuts here are repeated, gradually enmeshing the three in each other’s line of vision or action. Lallan and his companion are clearly following Michael, who is framed through the windscreen of their car. Michael drops off Radhika and turns his bike around. Mira abandons Arjun and leaves in a taxi, and the camera pans back with him. Arjun in turn stops Michael on his bike, clammers on and pleads him to follow the taxi with Mira in it. The conversations about conjugality continue. Michael and Arjun catch up with Mira’s taxi, halt; Arjun gets off and runs after Mira; Lallan stops his van briefly and then drives past the two of them to pursue Michael. Just as Arjun, swinging from the railing of the bridge, begins to declare

\textsuperscript{244} This is not peculiar to \textit{Yuva}, but can also be observed also in a film like \textit{The Namesake} (Mira Nair, 2007) where the protagonists travelling from the airport quite incongruously cross the Howrah Bridge in their drive back home to South Calcutta.
his love for Mira, the camera catches Michael on his bike; Arjun yells ‘I love you’; the fender of Lallan’s car moves into the frame which already has Michael in it; Lallan points his gun out of the window at Michael; the camera from Arjun’s elevated point of view catches Michael’s bike and Lallan’s car moving rapidly into frame, Lallan fires three bullets into Michael; Arjun turns around at the sound of the gunshots—for the first time all three inhabit the same frame and are irretrievably tied together by this chain of events. 

Yuva suspends its brief introductory segment at this point by turning its focus back on Lallan. Lallan at the left window of his jeep turns back in extreme close-up, pleased at having neatly dispatched the shooting, the frame freezes in stylized black and white as the words “Lallan’s Story—Sometime Back” appear on it.

The peculiarity of the narrative organization in Mani Ratnam has been unpacked by Madhava Prasad in his argument about the necessity of this introductory segment that he calls ‘fragment B’, or fB. In his analysis, fragment B is that part of the narrative that plunges us in the thick of things, of event/s, whose portent is not yet narratively integrated into the main storyline. fB functions as a rupture in an order of things not yet introduced in the film. The following narrative sections, ‘segment A’ and ‘segment B’ helps us makes sense of fB in retrospect. fB is followed by segment A which proceeds as a self-contained narrative but for the unsettling presence of fragment B. In fact it is this very self-sufficiency of segment A that this particular narrative structuring seeks to redress with the insertion of fB. As a premonition of things to come, fB hovers over segment A, a haunting spectre that only begins to make sense once the narrative shifts into segment B. It is segment B that introduces the politicized present in this scheme, as a strain which cannot be contained in the unchanging cyclicality of the narrative in segment A. The disjointed fragment B which allows us a glimpse of the historically grounded political crises, thus in effect eases the transition from one narrative segment (segment A) into the other (segment B).

With the excision of fragment B, what is lost is the “masking effect [italicized in the original] that conceals the break between the two narrative trajectories that

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245 In Prasad’s example of an earlier film by Mani Ratnam, Roja (1992), a dreaded terrorist in captured by the Indian Army in a chase sequence in the forests of Kashmir.
each have their own resolution [italics mine]. Elaborating on the function of fB in ‘ideologically rehabilitating’ segment A, Prasad shows how it acts to harness the pleasures inherent to segment A “to another narrative process and staging […] Thus the potentially metaphoric relation between the two segments [A and B] is pre-empted and the first segment [A] is integrated into a new syntagmatic order as a subordinate element.” Prasad thus reads this particular textual organization with fragment B as evidence of an ambition of an emerging film form to take over the dominant form in a process of ideological reform. My interest however lies in the content of the form as it appears in Yuva’s segment A split into three parallel narratives. My field of enquiry thus is largely confined to what in Jameson’s schema would be the level of the political which limits itself to reconstructing the individual work as a symbolic act that invents imaginary or formal solutions to tensions unresolvable in their own particular historical moment. While this limits the scope of my enquiry, it provides the platform that I require to establish necessary connections between political rhetoric specific to this period and its reproduction within the domain of representation in cinema. Additionally, Prasad’s argument was formulated at a time when the process of formal subsumption was still looming on the horizon; its mechanism was yet to be clarified. In the time period that I am concentrating upon, the processes of globalization are strong enough to have minimized the temporal gap between economic and cultural production to the point where economic processes directly encroach upon the field of cultural production. The addressee of the cinema of this period is squarely identified as the beneficiaries and agents of the processes of economic liberalization notwithstanding the extreme contradictions generated in the wake of liberalization. Yuva’s particular merit lies in the splitting of segment A into three different narratives which recount and collate the back stories for each of its three protagonists to this moment of convergence. Each establishes the starkly differentiated social circumstances of its respective protagonist. Each story is

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246 Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film p. 224
247 Ibid. p. 230.
centred by its own narrative of conjugality. Each prepares the ground for the proclamation of the individual role of the protagonist in question in the overarching scheme of political mobilization for the final segment in the time of simultaneity engulfing the three of them (once their back stories are aligned upto the moment of the break). The seguing of time therefore manages seamlessly the delegation of hierarchized space (and its implication in terms of rightful access to politics) in Yuva. The specific tactility of spaces constructed by the shooting styles of each of the three segments also facilitates cognitive access into the differential ordering of spaces.

Each character is provided with a backlog that grounds their present choices and their future capabilities within the narrative economy of Yuva. The representational economy of the film by contrast undertakes another agenda altogether. It is the constant weaving of conjugal spaces with the political on the one hand and the displacement of narrative crises onto the domain of the conjugal on the other that relieves the pressure of the political in Yuva and eases the management of its complexities and contradictions. Turns of events are validated and made meaningful by their mirroring in the conjugal domain. This is not contrary to Mani Ratnam’s other work, most notably Roja (1992), Bombay (1995), or Raavan (2010) that similarly displaces the weight of the political on the circumscribed conjugal domain. This is not merely the stuff of social melodrama where national concerns are mapped onto the familial as an allegorical or metonymic act. Rather, it functions as a series of mise-en-abymes, mirroring devices that absorb and deflect the charge of the political onto another sphere altogether.

Ratnam depends on negotiations and transactions between the domestic and the political, bringing together two discontinuous structures of violence in a seamless homology. Ratnam’s films do not necessarily address the political at a metaphoric remove. Issues in their topicality are explored squarely within the diagetic universe of the film. The calibration of the social melodrama in Ratnam lies in the foregrounding of the conjugal and poses the political as a question of the equilibrium of conjugal sexuality.

Lallan’s section opens through a series of visceral shots where prison inmates play a violently aggressive game of kabaddi as they thrash about in a muddy courtyard.
It takes several men to hold Lallan down at the end of his turn at baiting his opponents in the game. He is led away to the prison office and informed that his prison term has ended. Lallan goes to his in-laws and takes his wife Shashi back with him in spite of her parents’ objections, and their turbulent conjugal drama presumably picks up from where it had left off before he was incarcerated. Lallan’s brother Gopal seeks his help in a job where he is required to intimidate some young men who are opposing the party in power. Gopal explains the stakes and the crisis at bay. The by-elections are imminent. Urban college students (i.e. Michael and his companions—Bhardwaj, Vishnu and Trilok) have infiltrated village politics and are building opposition. The MLA for the ruling party, Prasenjit Bhattacharya, wants a massive and peaceful turnout at his rally. Shashi violently opposes this incursion by Gopal into their domestic space; she does not want Lallan to become a thug. Lallan beats her and turns her out of the house. But they reconcile when he finds out that she’s pregnant. The ad hoc resolutions in Lallan’s story are thus enabled by a series of slippages between the home and the world. Two almost back to back song sequences encapsulate the mechanism of this transference of erotic charge onto the political domain and conversely render the political charge pleasurably erotic. The first merely consists of a montage of scenes from their conjugal life segued directly onto a sequence where Lallan and Ravi beat up a group of college students in a coffee house (called Ashraf Hotel in the film, but bearing an unmistakable resemblance to the Presidency haunt, the College Street Coffee House) and get them arrested for vandalism, thus making way for an uninterrupted and well-attended pre-electoral rally for MLA Prasenjit, and by this act earns a gas trading license for himself. The second song ‘Dol Dol’ compresses scenes capturing moments in Lallan’s rise to prominence as a thug in direct correspondence with scenes capturing the consolidation of his relationship with wife Shashi. This song has a music-video-like montage in which Lallan and gang celebrate the inauguration of their gas trading shop and pose self-reflexively for the camera in successive mobile tableaux, Lallan is framed in a 360 degree low angle shot under the towering pylon head of the ubiquitous Hooghly bridge, Lallan and Shashi dance on a boat on the Hooghly river to the apparently non-diagetic soundtrack (i.e. to the song that continues to accompany this montage), a tableau of naked mud idols of Kali at Kumortuli is suddenly infiltrated by Lallan
and his gang who appear and pose in dapper suits and sunglasses. One of the most
telling instances of the constant series of displacements of the political into the
conjugal appears towards the very end of the song where Lallan is shown
kidnapping a student (this sequence would be unpacked further in Michael’s back-
story) in his jeep, straddling him and beating him up. It is followed directly by a
twinning shot of Lallan straddling Shashi on their marital bed to strip an old saree
off her in order to drape a new one that he has just bought for her.
In Michael’s back-story Michael and his friends enter a shopping mall, ambush
MLA Prasenjit’s nephew and his cronies, and beat them up. In the following
sequence Michael corners his girlfriend Radhika in a mock ambush inside a train
compartment. The pattern continues as Michael and his vast army of followers
storm a village at night to rescue an opposition leader who had been abducted
from his bed at night and left to die at the bottom of a freshly dug out well. In the
morning that follows, Michael playfully abducts Radhika from a classroom where
she is teaching French. They travel on the bus to the countryside and to the site of
the students’ political agitation.
For Arjun, whose space is represented in a distinctly different style, Calcutta is
introduced in accelerated-motion shots of a drive along the Victoria Memorial, in
which the tail-lights of speeding cars blurring into luminous streaks at dusk is cut
in rhythm to the syncopated beats of diacgetic music from a discotheque.\textsuperscript{248} A shot
transition to the discotheque follows, where Arjun meets Mira on the dance floor.
Arjun’s segment is wholly dominated by the anticipation of the conjugal; shots are
divided equally between Arjun and Mira while they pursue their individual lives
and sporadically meet. Their respective spaces—Arjun’s home, Mira’s hostel,
Arjun standing in a queue outside the US consulate waiting for a visa, Mira on the
street with her friends, are interspersed with their meetings, in cafes, on the street,
on a deserted beach (where they spend a weekend, this section is compressed into
a highly stylized music-video-like montage to a song)—remain unscathed by the
political and focus on the possible romantic liaison developing between them.
Arjun’s is still an empty space awaiting nomination into the political sphere and
consequently a resolution in the sphere of the conjugal is indefinitely deferred for

\textsuperscript{248} Probably shot at Tantra, the discotheque at Park Hotel, but referred to as ‘Someplace Else’ the
morning after by Arjun on the phone to Mira.
him (Mira is waiting for her imminent betrothal and marriage in Kanpur, her hometown, and doesn’t take Arjun’s proposals seriously).

For all practical purposes, Yuva is about the induction of Arjun into electoral politics, where Lallan represents a rogue element that needs to be delegitimized and eliminated, while Michael serves to relay the political charge gathered around his figure onto Arjun. In terms of reclaiming time, this could be read as a strategy of mobilizing a socialist past represented by Michael to legitimize and make way for a neoliberal future for a new constituency represented by Arjun, while cleansing the contaminated present of the nexus between politics and a rogue milieu represented by Lallan. Michael negates Lallan’s place in the scheme on every count. He proves to be more proficient in Lallan’s rhetoric of violence, when he overpowers and admonishes Prasenjit’s nephew, informing him that the student body would retaliate acts of aggression and intimidation in equal measure, “mama se kehna ab student politics mein ayenge, haath payr bhi torenge, aap ek ko maroge, hum paanch ko marenge” (tell your uncle, students are going to join politics, they’ll break arms and legs as well, you’ll beat up one, we’ll retaliate by beating up five of yours). Michael literally territorializes the spaces that are common to him and Lallan when he intervenes into the mall or the village (Lallan and his brother Gopal hail from an unnamed village in Bihar). The village is anonymous, but for its significance in the metropolitan scheme of politics. Michael and his friends travel into it, an unspecified series of rural spaces, indoctrinate the people, and literally nominate candidates for Panchayat elections. In the village that Michael and Radhika visit after the abduction-rescue sequence, Vishnu’s sister, a resident of the village, is persuaded to file for candidacy. At the climax, the change in the social order is choreographed to the seductive beats of A.R. Rahman’s theme song ‘Dakka laga bukka’ which accompanies the ambitious political coup ousting the corrupt old order. This meaningless bit of lyric, punctuated with forceful utterances of “hath jaa, hath jaa” (make way, make way) gains crescendo as Michael bodily shoves Prasenjit out of his path inside the parliament. The song is also picturized with shots of Michael’s pre-electoral campaign in a succession of villages to “clean up politics.” There too, it is choreographed to an army of students descending upon the village in a cavalcade
of trucks and jeeps, and leaping into the air in choreographed unison. The sheer volume of the crowd that accompanies Michael functions in its nominative capacity. Both Lallan and Arjun are taken aback by Michaels’s massive following. In the last sequence of Lallan’s segment he stares in disbelief as Michael’s hordes, having already ransacked his house and beaten up his brother Gopal, swarm past his gas delivery van on their way out. Arjun actually expresses surprise at the number of visitors that assemble at the hospital to see Michael after he has been shot. The additional ethical charge accruing to Michael derives from the reference to his father, who had devoted his entire life to “petitions, litigations and suo motos” in his pursuit of “desbhakti “and “samajseva” (patriotism and social work). A continuity and lineage with the past is established for Michael by this reference to the progressivist reformism of an earlier era. Michael’s following is an unquestionable fact, a readymade constituency that he bequeaths upon Arjun, when Arjun volunteers to stand for candidacy in the by-elections. The investment in Michael is thus delivered onto a form of politics that echoes the economics of equal opportunity where of course some are more equal than others. Lallan’s conjugal unit collapses even after he decides to retreat to his village with his wife Shashi. Shashi sits waiting for him on a train as Lallan faces the consequences to his own actions. He kills his brother Gopal, is beaten up by Michael on the same bridge where the film started, and is sent back to prison on multiple charges of violence and murder. As for Arjun, Mira returns from Kanpur only after this transition, and more importantly because of it (she was convinced of his earnestness from watching his interviews on news). The political and the conjugal reach coterminous conclusions in Yuva.

III Lagaan and Rang De Basanti: Re-orienting History

It is possible to trace a historical trajectory of the process through which reconfigurations of the Indian economy with the introduction of foreign brands, the explosion of available commodities, and the stress on consumption that followed were reinterpreted as being inherently nationalistic in character. Mazzarella charts out the political, economic and cultural context in which the concepts of ‘Swadeshi’ and globalized consumerism converged in political discourse in the late ’90s that sought to address the fact or even the necessity of
globalization. The fusion entailed, for all practical purposes, the overcoming of a longstanding apparent contradiction between the two. On the one hand, the ‘swadeshi’ movement initiated in 1919 by M.K. Gandhi was intrinsically related to the idea of self-rule or swaraj. The prefix swa-(or self) linked the two in an overarching discourse of sovereignty (both political and over the self) where mastery over one’s bodily and material desires was deemed to be the necessary path to overturning the very foundations of foreign domination. The term Swadeshi was resuscitated in 1997–98 through Bharatiya Janata Party’s Swadeshi Jagaran Manch which became the platform for vociferous arguments for and against the necessity of globalization for the purposes of strengthening the national economy. The BJP itself was alarmingly frank in admitting that Swadeshi was but their “electoral compulsion” while “[l]iberalization, foreign investments etc.” were unavoidable “necessities.”  

It is the continued process of negotiations over and the increased calibration of this contiguity perceived between globalized consumerism, and the notion of Swadeshi as a shorthand for patriotism, pride in one’s country and oneself, that provide the discursive framework within which we must locate our next two films.

For this section I juxtapose and read two films Lagaan (2001), directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar and Rang De Basanti (2006) by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, taking my cue from Pheng Cheah that “contemporary revivals of postcolonial nationalism that are primarily instances of negative identification in defence against neocolonial globalization should therefore be seen as weak repetitions of the earlier phase of negative identification in decolonization that initially united people into a nation.”  

However in the two films that I have selected the invocation of a colonial past is motivated less as a defence to neocolonialism than as a means of justifying one’s entry into the networks of global capital. In this too, Cheah would contend, “a metropolitan cultural politics [espousing] a hands off approach to a museumized cultural other leaves the neocolonial staging of that

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249 As put by BJP General Secretary N. Govindan in October 1997, quoted in Mazarella’s Shovelling Smoke p.10 — Mazarella’s own thesis focuses on the role of the Indian marketing and advertising sector as cultural consultants that strove to capture “the single market […] increasingly appearing as an infinitely divisible mosaic of “culture areas,” in which consumers [had] to be approached by means of culturally appropriate messages.” Ibid. p.16

other—fundamentalism, ethnicism, patriarchal nationalism—untouched.”

So my choice stems not so much from the fact that both films deal with the colonial period in their respective imaginaries of anticolonial resistance, but because both films use history read primarily as a chronological trajectory towards decolonization and the establishment of the nation-state as a *fait accompli*, and project semblances between this past and the present to iron out the creases of the present moment. Of course, in the same move, the past too, already valorized in its anticolonial fervour, is strategically and anachronistically produced as being driven by contemporary concerns and structures of thought to validate present choices and dispensations. These concerns persist in the subtexts of individual agency, talent, meritocracy, equal opportunity, and the universality of aspirations that permeate both films.

Both *Lagaan* and *Rang De Basanti* have been grade A Box Office Hits which means they had overwhelming reception in metropolitan centres. Both were chosen in their respective years of release to represent India in the ‘Foreign Film’ category of the Academy Awards. In this sense both films bear the burden of representing history not only for the purposes of consolidating the nation within the geographical territory of India, but also the aesthetic burden of representing the authentic Indian film on an international platform. A cursory glance at the list of films entered in this category through the years would reveal a marked shift from those culturally endorsed by the state (by filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, M.S Sathyu, or Shyam Benegal) to those that gradually came to represent the category of the Indian film in a global market for cultural commodities. The replacement of the state by the forces of global economics as the purveyor of a national culture is in keeping with Cheah’s claims about a “nontranscendable moving ground across the globe in which political, cultural and economic forces are brought into relation [to] constrain, alter and bleed into each other without return to form and deform the postcolonial nation state [which] finds itself persistently modulating from being an agent for resisting international capital to being a collaborator of global economic restructuring”.

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251 Ibid. p.290  
252 Ibid. p.324
(a) *Hum bhi hai team mein*\textsuperscript{253}: The Politics of *Lagaan*

*Lagaan* (2001), is the story of Champaner, a village in colonial India circa 1893, in which the villagers play and win a cricket match against the British, thus winning a wager with Captain Russell, the cantonment officer, the stakes being that their defeat will result in a tripling of the annual land tax (or *lagaan*) and their victory will mean an exemption for three consecutive years for them and all other villages in the province. The villagers are secretly coached to play the Englishman’s game by Elizabeth, Captain Russell’s sister, who also falls in love with Bhuwan, the central protagonist.

In the process, *Lagaan* constructs a curious heterotopia of sorts (Foucault’s term\textsuperscript{254} used as a shorthand here for a spatial ‘other’ projected back in time, an ‘other’ which is very much constitutive to the present day nation) to address the contemporary desire for an integrated nation, India. *Lagaan* accomplishes the realization of this desire by transposing the site of forming and consolidating a nation back in history, and uses the act of resisting the colonizer as a convenient catalyst to erase the internal inequalities and conflicting desires of the constituent peoples of the nation in the making.\textsuperscript{255} The idea of this ideal nation that embraces and accords equal participatory rights to all its citizens is congealed in the course of the villagers preparing for the decisive match. Here, the discrete struggle by the villagers confined to the village of Champaner is nothing if not a “contribution made by the people on their own”\textsuperscript{256} i.e. independent of either any elitist nationalist imperative;\textsuperscript{257} nor is it assimilated into any larger movement towards

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\textsuperscript{253} “*Hum bhi hai team mein*” (we are part of the team as well) is the catchline for a range of Samsung products that hinges on cricket fervour; it makes the possession of a particular brand of high-end consumer durables the condition for inclusion in an essentially post globalization nationalism, the nation crystallized in ‘team Samsung’ which is apparently co-terminous with all the citizens of India. It perfectly illustrates the logic of the spectacle of a televisual cricket-nationalism and its currency within a particular privileged class in the way it is deployed in *Lagaan*.

\textsuperscript{254} Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, (Tr.) Jay Miskowiec, 1986.

\textsuperscript{255} The integration in the past thus also manages the crises of contemporary India split along differences of class, caste, religion, and regional claims for secession or autonomy.

\textsuperscript{256} A phrase used by Ranajit Guha in ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’ in *Subaltern Studies I*, 1982, p. 3

\textsuperscript{257} This nationalist teleology reiterates what Nissim Mannathukkaren calls “the Gandhian united front strategy manoeuvre in which the united struggles for class, caste and justice were postponed till such time as the freedom of the nation was attained,” in ‘Subalterns, Cricket and the ‘Nation’: the Silences of *Lagaan*’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2001, p.4581

What it proposes in effect, though, is to preserve the existing “status-quo—against any radical change in the social setup” even after the transfer of power. Thus it is essentially “a statement
decolonization. The fact that *Lagaan* also articulates a claim to unravel the unacknowledged fissures of a monolithic elitist-nationalist historiography becomes explicit in the voice-over at the end that laments that “in spite of this historical victory, Bhuwan’s name got lost somewhere in the pages of history.” In this section we will try to see how *Lagaan* thus seeking to situate itself in the peripheries and aporias of historiography, ironically posits and perpetuates the rhetoric of a modern nation, India, as a geographical territory, crystallized and consolidated in a pan-Indian ‘imagined community.’

The conjunction of cricket and film is especially significant in terms of Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ as both are sites of contemporary nationalist discourse, where the nation is consolidated in popular mass imagination through a visual counterpart of Anderson’s idea of a common language.

A student from UCLA writes in a review of *Lagaan* that Champaner, most definitely alludes to Gandhi’s peasant mobilization drive at Champaran. Thus at one level *Lagaan* is an allegory of India’s freedom struggle mapped along chronological signposts placed into the narrative of the film. Permanent Settlement and its attendant system of land tax form the backdrop against which the wager is staked. Movements for indigenization and cottage-industry are represented through the women of the village working as a collective to put together pads and leg-guards for the men. The outcast(e) Harijan (represented by Kachra, an untouchable who resides at the periphery of the village) is absorbed into the community at the very last instant. The film’s abridgement of the history of India’s freedom struggle is concluded with the British Cantonment being removed from Champaner. As the last horse bearing the Union Jack ambles away, a village elder (played by A.K.Hangal) confesses that he had never dreamt of seeing the day they would be free of the British. A voiceover compresses the historical gap (between 1893, the year *Lagaan* is placed in and 1947, the year against mass participatory democracy and in favour of the idea of trusteeship, the landlords and princes acting in the economic sphere, Gandhi and company in the political” T. V. Satyanurthy quoted by Mannathukkaren, p. 4586, footnote 16.

Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s concept.

A common language is absent in India because of its multiple languages and levels of illiteracy, a point also taken up by Ashish Nandy in *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games*. New Delhi; New York: Viking, 1989.
India gains Independence) by announcing the imminence of decolonization. *Lagaan* thus by no means seeks to be a pedagogic historical exercise, an act of excavating the past. But it can be productive to take account of the narrative and representational strategies through which it mobilizes issues and forms of engagement not grounded in the specific historical juncture of 1893 but are robustly animated by a contemporary rhetoric of national integration.  

Champaner is conceived as a pre-lapsarian communitarian village, organized along the traditional and self-contained *homo hierarchicus* model which naturalizes a differential status for different orders of caste and gender as pre-given. The visual style for representing this ideal village consciously refers to the classic nationalist socialist melodramas of the 1950s exemplified in films like *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) or *Do Bega Zameen* (Bimal Roy, 1953), for example, in the picturization and choreography of the song in which the villagers welcome the appearance of rain clouds in the sky. *Lagaan* thus also consciously canonizes itself by using this intertextuality as an authentic filter through which one must visualize the ideal India, only in this case the Nehruvian socialist dream of the future as it appeared in 1950s Bombay cinema is rendered into a golden past in *Lagaan*.

Paradoxically though, Champaner is not shown to be entrenched in inter-village ties of caste or kinship and instead, with the subsequent consolidation of a cricket team, the village is gradually re-organized on the tenets of humanity, brotherhood, democracy, equality and fraternity. The villagers, with the exception of Kachra the outcast, and one Muslim family consisting of Ishmael and his father, have no obvious markers of caste or class. In spite of the debates provoked by *Lagaan* which foreground the fact that leadership is invested in the film in the figure of Bhuwan, a Brahmin (this is the central thrust of a series of articles published in

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260 An official counterpart for this rhetoric of national integration can be found in the tv-slots created by Lok Seva Sanchar, for instance, proof to a homogenizing jingoistic amnesia, that smoothes out the faultlines between various registers of resistance and appropriates and defangs oppositional minority voices.

261 *Homo hierarchicus* is a term used by Louis Dumont to illustrate how the Indian-caste system does not exclude the untouchables who are instead accorded a place and function in the lowermost rung of the caste hierarchy, and the entire system accords specific functions and statuses to specific castes determined by birth. (*Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, 1966, Tr. Mark Sainsbury, 1970)
Himal\textsuperscript{262}, Bhuwan in fact has no discernible caste markers in the film. While selecting the team, Bhuwan rationalizes his choices by reciting an inventory of special skills for each individual member of the team, qualities that derive from but eventually supersede their caste or class once they are recognized, translated and appropriated into the new secular, democratic roster of citizenship. “Aadmi mein hunar bhi honaa chaahiye” (a man must have some talent) says Bhuwan, thus ‘hunar’ translatable as skill or talent becomes a rational qualifier of merit—and thus Goli is selected for his proficiency with the sling-shot, Bhura because his expertise lies in catching hens, Bagha because of his “jadibuti si takat” (the strength of medicinal herbs), Tipu because “woh bahot honshiyar hai” (he is sharp), and the vaid because of his doctoring skills. The moment of crystallization for this apparent meritocracy and its inconsistencies arrives when Kachra is inducted into the team by Bhuwan on the rationale that excluding him on the grounds of untouchability would blemish the very idea of humanity.\textsuperscript{263} But the religio-mythological precedent that Bhuwan conflates with this plea, that Lord Ram himself had accepted food tasted by an untouchable, lays bare the elitist logic of this inclusion. Kachra, as an untouchable, remains marked by an epistemic inferiority since his value as a bowler derives from a serendipitous physical deformity in his arm that enables him to throw googlies. He is not granted equal active agency, he is instructed to throw the ball with his disabled arm, and is inducted only because of his disability. And by a convenient accident, it is not Kachra but Bhuwan who implicates himself in history as an active agent when Bhuwan replaces Kachra as the batsman who plays the winning shot. This is where Lagaan falters most visibly from its inclusive agenda.

To return to Lagaan’s production of a past informed by present investments in both cricket and nationalism and their curious interface in the film—a pervasive nationalist consciousness is manifest at large in the villagers in their political will

\textsuperscript{262} The debate was led chiefly by S. Anand (in ‘Eating with Our Fingers, Watching Hindi Cinema, and Consuming Cricket’) who argues that Bhuwan is represented in Lagaan as a naturalized Brahmin with sole significant agency. Anand argues further that Lagaan naturalizes a caste supremacy which holds sway in present day India in the selection of the national cricket team as well. However as I point out in the section above Anand provides no evidence to support how one can assert that Bhuwan is a Brahmin in the film.

\textsuperscript{263} “Yeh insaaniyat ke naam pe kalank hai” (It taints the very name of humanity) says Bhuwan.
and the perspective they seem to have of their historical situation. The ironsmith says the English ought to go back to “the frozen little island” they came from. A Sikh who has defected from service in the British Army comes to Champaran and asks to join the cricket team as a means of waging war against the British. It culminates in the final moments of the film where a massive audience of villagers cheer Bhuwan’s team on to victory—“brothers… get rid of lagaan.” The fact that the antagonism of the villagers in Lagaan is directed not against Raja Puran Singh but invested unconditionally against the British has been identified by Nissim Mannathukkaren as a flagrant disregard for history. He argues that the peasant was a “‘subject of history’ in his own right and [was] capable of identifying his oppressor even when acting within the ‘moral economy’ of tradition,” which calls for their formal allegiance to the local Raja, or king. Thukkaren’s objection is also directed toward an earlier essay by Boria Majumdar who argues that the linkage between cricket and nationalism dates back at least to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and that cricket “became the mirror through which an Indian identity asserted itself” and was “appropriated for purposes of resistance against the colonial state.” Majumdar himself tends to accept Lagaan’s reification and dehistoricization of cricket at face value. He argues that Lagaan represents with historical accuracy the idea of an integrated Indian team (and an incipient nationalist consciousness by extension), though historical evidence would reveal that cricket provided a site for the embedding of communal identities.

264 This argument appears in ‘Subalterns, Cricket and the ‘Nation’: the Silences of Lagaan’ (in Economic and Political Weekly, 2001) where Mannathukkaren further elaborates that Lagaan absolves the Raja “of any part in the oppression of peasants by attributing his position to the compulsions of the colonial power” and reduces “the multi-faceted (class, caste, race, gender) nature of exploitation of the colonized to only a single factor —the external oppressor in the form of the colonial state and the struggle against exploitation to only the struggle for the nation.” (p.4581) For historical instances of reaction to the Permanent Settlement Act he cites Ranajit Guha who documents “no fewer than 110 agrarian disturbances in many forms and on a scale ranging from local riots to war like campaigns spread over a period of 117 years, from 1783.” p. 4582

265 Ibid. p. 4582


267 Ibid. p.3400

268 Majumdar calls Lagaan, the “first and crucial cinematic tribute to India’s buried cricket history” (p.3400) and substantiates the film’s historical accuracy by putting together a list of ‘exact’ similitudes between everything that concerns cricket in Lagaan and disparate moments in the history of cricket in India from as early as 1890 (when a Bengali sports journal describes cricket as a game not dissimilar to ‘danda gulli’) to the fact that Palwankar Baloo of the Indian cricket team, a “chammar by birth” is a “slow spin bowler […] as is Kachra in the film” (p.3401). Majumdar only finds the insinuation of match-fixing in the film a little anachronistic.
in the Indian psyche in a manner designed by the colonizers even before a coherent national identity could take root. Arjun Appadurai argues that rather than being the site of encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, cricket in colonial India had implications of “another kind of loyalty (to the Empire) fostered by cricket” in which princes “were quick to see cricket as another extension of their royal traditions, and they absorbed such sports as polo, rifle shooting, golf and cricket into their traditional aristocratic repertoires. This permitted them to offer new kinds of spectacle to their subjects.” In cricket “[a]s in many other areas, including art, etiquette, language, and conduct […] a complex system of hegemonizing and hierarchizing values and practices evolved jointly in the metropolis and its colonies.” Even in the case of a non-aristocratic cricket played by Indian teams against the British, cricket was “a communally organized game, [where] construction of a national identity, the construction of such social categories was a part of the colonial sociology of rule.” “As far back as the first clubs organized by Parsis in Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century, membership in religious communities became the salient principle around which Indians banded together to play cricket as Hindus, Parsis, Muslims, Europeans, and eventually “the Rest” (a label for the communally unmarked groups brought together into cricket teams) were organized into cricket clubs[…] Thus cricket was an important arena in which players as well as crowds learned to think of themselves as Hindu, Muslim and Parsi in contrast with the Europeans.” The classifications thus were in the same vein as census classifications, control of religious endowments and the formation of separate electorates and they pervaded “Indian self-conceptions […] in politics and cultural life.” “There had to be other parallel entities in the colonies against which the English nation state could play […] thus, India had to be invented at least for the purposes of colonial cricket.”

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269 This point is taken up and elaborated by Mannathukkaren.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid. p. 98
273 Ibid. pp. 97–98
274 Ibid. pp. 97–98
275 Ibid. p. 99
Cricket in *Lagaan* is also explicitly denied the status of leisure. It is the one and only site in which the colonized in *Lagaan* confronts the colonizer in terms of a militant nationalism invested in the discourse of ‘*bahubal*’ (physical might). Does cricket then become a simulacrum for active resistance? Within the symbolic economy of *Lagaan*, cricket becomes indeed the site for a bloody confrontation. The umpires for the match are brought over from Kanpur to ensure neutral judgement; but nonetheless it doesn’t save the Champaner team from being wounded repeatedly and intentionally by the British with the cricket ball. Colonial violence thus bypasses even the safeguards put in place by the idea of rational fair play thus further consolidating the significance of cricket as a means of resisting colonial oppression itself.

*Lagaan*’s cricket match thus clearly enacts a utopia of integration that cannot be attained in the present, an enactment facilitated by embodying the threat in the British. But the film also puts some other issues and desires into play, creating the space for a post-colonial reading of the ways in which the villagers of Champaner negotiate their encounter with colonialism. Most significant of these is the way in which the villagers appropriate and distort the regimented form of cricket, an Englishman’s game, such that the difference between the races is no longer a convenient administrative tool, but an act of transgression and violation of the colonizer’s sense of self. Bhaba’s notion of mimicry operating as a distorting mirror, a negative transparency, is extremely useful in understanding this transgression, where Ghuran’s war cry of “*Jai Bajrangbali, toro dushman ki nali*” (Hail Bajrangbali, vanquish the enemy), or the way Goli rotates his arm before delivering a ball, which is utterly confounding in its otherness to the British batsman, and more specifically, the “grunting sound” that Captain Russell alerts his batsman to—are decidedly acts of vindication by the colonized marked as animalistic, sub-human and barbaric because they subvert the colonizer’s civilizing mission. But then again Bhuwan’s claim to see cricket as nothing but a ritualized form of ‘*gilli-danda*’ merely inverts rather than subverting the

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276. The British are established as oppressors in the classic master slave binary with no room for doubt, clearly delineated and graphically realized when Russell kicks Arjan saying “*tum saale ghulamlog hamesha hamare jute ke niche hi rahoge*”(You damned slaves will forever remain under our boots).

colonizer’s discourse of superiority by taking away both its originary authenticity and its authority, from the site of cricket at least.

In *Lagaan*’s melodramatic scheme, the woman as the repository of the nation within a familial domain is also inventively split into two. This dispersal of desire between Gauri (the village belle) and Elizabeth (the ‘gori’ or White woman) as perfectly mirroring each other throughout the length of the film is perhaps the most telling clue to the cultural mobility of the polyglot, cosmopolitan addressee of the film. In *Lagaan* we witness the programmatic masculinization of the colonized people to the extent that Bhuwan can lay claim to both Elizabeth and Gauri.

It is also the feminine gaze that mobilizes Bhuwan in his virility, athleticism, and militancy in the film. For a brief moment there is the collation of the feminine gaze inscribed in the viewership of cricket, when before the last ball of the match, Bhuwan poses with his bat raised. Shots of Bhuwan and the footfalls of the bowler in slow-motion is intercut with flashbacks in which his mother tells him he has uncannily taken after his father, especially in his tendency to speak the harsh truth and also of Gauri saying “*bharosa hai mohe, tujhpe, teri himmat pe*” (I have faith, in you, in your courage). Gauri and Elizabeth mirror each other mouthing “Bhuwan, *samhalke*” and “steady Bhuwan steady” respectively.

Elements from contemporary televisual cricket commentary e.g. *gendaazi, seemarakshan*, etc. proliferate in Elizabeth, Bhuwan and the team’s discussions of cricket, its rules and strategies. Anachronistic visual vignettes, borrowed from a contemporary viewership of cricket, often infiltrate the film, as in the case of the impromptu stretcher that the villagers fashion to carry Ishmael off the field when he is injured by the ball. A nationalist fervour common to the televisual audience of international cricket, which effectively unites the nation while also reaching out to narrowcast dispersed communities across the globe, is mobilized by *Lagaan*.

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278 This particular sexual economy is co-extensive with Partha Chatterjee’s argument in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993) of the compartmentalization of the categories of the traditional and the modern, the material and the spiritual, the personal and the political, the state and the family made possible only by the encounter with modernity faced by a colonized nation; and the consequent investment in the woman as both the repository and embodiment of the former categories in which the colonized, deprived of political agency, asserts its spiritual sovereignty.
enabling it to include an hour-long one day match into the film’s running time. Incidentally, at the matches for the ICCI Trophy following the release of Lagaan, Ghuran was made the official mascot as part of a corporate marketing strategy to co-opt the viewership of Hindi popular cinema into the viewership for cricket.

Two modes of address co-exist in Lagaan: the first, of the classic realist melodrama interspersed with music and choreographed songs, which undergoes a smooth seamless transition into the televisual mode of the second. Though there are no obvious giveaways like the low-angle shot taken from a camera installed in the wicket there are instances of a new urban visual rhetoric, like the sightline of the village at night that looks like the classic metropolitan cityline, which is used to punctuate each event significant for the progression of the plot. The transition from the melodramatic to the live sports telecast mode accompanies the transition of the village from divine to political will. It is only when Bhuwan assumes political agency that the divine register made redundant under colonial subjugation is restored. The nation is allowed to retain its heterogeneity (strewn throughout the film in the form of Bhura’s daily strife with the village kids compared to the Mahabharata’s epic war, Bhuwan and Deva touching a bit of earth off the field to their heads, breaking a coconut on the cricket bat before commencing play, the temple as the site of refuge and wish fulfillment, Radha-Krishna idolized beyond the trope of romance, the ironsmith smelting a sword, ‘Durga mai ki jai’ (Hail Durga, the mother) as another war cry besides ‘Jai Bajrangbali’, the bhajan phrased ‘bhakti ko shakti do’ (give power to the faithful) sung by the collective body of villagers on the night before the final day of the match once and only once it has been proved able of claiming political will and agency. To clinch the transition with an undeniable note of finality, the rain that the villagers have been yearning and praying for eludes their destiny till after the victory in the cricket-match.

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279 The nation becomes the only desired political form, limited and sovereign, transforming fatality into continuity—as defined by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 1991.

280 But then again, all these remnants are curiously redolent of contemporary right wing Hindutva and the practices that it has selectively appropriated and legitimized.
(b) *Rang De Basanti*

If *Lagaan* constructs a crisis heterotopia of sorts as a site for political participation by proxy, *Rang De Basanti* (henceforth *RDB*) is significant in laying bare the actual mechanics of reorienting history, and producing a specific understanding of the past to consolidate a vision of the nation through the medium of cinema and in creating a community effect in another sense. My intention here again is not to point out whatever discrepancies there might be concerning the facticities of the history that either film represents but to explore precisely how history is reconfigured and represented in them.

In *RDB*, Sue McKinley, a British filmmaker, comes to Delhi to shoot a ‘documentary’ (a term that Sue herself uses in *RDB*, though her film in effect is a narrativized reconstruction of events from her grandfather’s journal) about Indian freedom fighters Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Ashfaqullah Khan, Shivaram Rajguru, and Ram Prasad Bismil, based on the journals kept by her grandfather Mc Kinley, a jailer under the British government, who had been in charge of the execution of Bismil and Khan. Helped by her Indian friend Sonia, Sue holds auditions on the campus of Delhi University but is unable to find the spirit of patriotism and self-sacrifice in the young men and women auditioning for the part that would help them connect with and bring out the characters of the revolutionaries in her film. Sonia, in an attempt to cheer up Sue takes her to ‘school’—her pet name for a night-time haunt of her friends where a bunch of rowdy youngsters are having an impromptu party by bonfire. It is here that Sue is introduced to Aslam, Karan, Sukhi and DJ (short for Daljeet) who are ex-students of the university. Laxman Pande, an activist member of a right wing party, who is eventually cast in the role of Ramprasad Bismil in Sue’s film, appears with a group of aggressive fellow party members who interrupt the gathering. They reproach the youth for defacing a heritage site (in fact, the ‘school’ or ‘paathshala’ site constructed for the film bear marked architectural semblances with Jantar Mantar) and the ‘obscenity’ of their ‘western culture’. As Sue leaves with the rest of the gang on bikes and jeeps, accompanied by screaming.

__281__ An astronomical observatory located in New Delhi built circa 1724 by Maharaja Jai Singh II.
guitars on the soundtrack, the highway illuminated in streaks from the glare of their headlights, Sue watches DJ heading the cavalcade on a motorbike morph into the unlikely figure of Chandrasekhar Azad in front of her eyes. As the night progresses, Sue finds herself imagining the youth assembled round the table, in a dhaba run by DJ’s mother, as her revolutionaries ‘The Young Guns of India’ (the title of her documentary) in a series of dissolves that show them in character: Aslam as Ashfaquallah Khan, Karan as Bhagat Singh, Sukhi as Shivaram Rajguru, DJ as Chandrasekhar Azad and Sonia as Durga Vohra. The film is made, but Sonia’s fiancé Ajay Singh Rathore, a Flight Lieutenant in the Indian Air Force dies tragically when his MiG plane crashes during a flight test. The youngsters, along with Ajay’s mother, hold candle light vigils in Delhi demanding investigation into the financial scam behind the acquisition of the faulty aircrafts. But seeing no results, Sonia and her friends decide to kill the minister responsible. When the ministry, on national media, calls the assassination an act of terrorism under investigation, the young men take over a radio station at gunpoint to tell their story to the entire nation, garnering massive public support as a result. The men themselves are apprehended and gunned down by the police at the radio station.

The opening sequence of RDB shows Bismil and Ashfaq in their cells on the day of their execution, accompanied by James Mc Kinley’s voiceover on the soundtrack grounding the sequence in his point of view. Though it appears to be an autonomous flashback, it is only later that we recognize it as a preview of the film Sue travels to Delhi to make. This film within the film is tinted in yellow, as an indicator of a feel of pastness, likening it to extant footage in sepia excavated from an archive. The apparently free floating status of this ‘documentary’ and its function in reconstructing history becomes significant if we take account of the gaze within which this figuration becomes authentic. Sue Mc Kinley’s gaze, as that of a privileged outsider thus effectively enframes this retelling twice over. The presence of the white woman—Sue in RDB and Elizabeth in Lagaan—is crucial in transforming the protagonists by their mediating gaze, and also because they too are transformed precisely in terms of the difference that marks out India in this scheme. Elizabeth in love with Bhuvan learns to speak Hindi, Sue is
already fluent. She leaves her job in London after being told by her boss that the film she proposes has no market (Sue is advised that “Gandhi sells…even Robin hood”). She swears back—teri maa ki aankh in Hindi. It is precisely because her own gaze is contrary that she can see her “grandfather’s journal” and the “eyewitness” “real conversations” contained in it materialized, made real in the wayward youth. It is in fact her documenting eye that makes the transition possible. But while it is the curious mediation of Sue’s film that mobilizes the protagonists into acknowledging their responsibility (as Indians, as citizens and as new age revolutionaries) and realizing their true potential, it is RDB’s immaculate suturing of shots (cross cut, superimposed or presented in split screen) of the revolutionaries from Sue’s film with the exact moments at which the youth collectively decide to assassinate the minister, carry out the shooting, and finally lie dying shot and bloodied inside the radio station that a perfect correspondence is established between the two moments, between the two sets of characters, and the nature of motivation and agency between the two sets of acts.

RDB’s narrative and formal finesse lies—first: in establishing on the one hand this exact one to one correspondence between repressive colonial rule and the faulty state machinery of the present day; between the assassination of Deputy Superintendent of Police J. P. Saunders by the revolutionaries and that of the corrupt minister, and between the execution by hanging of the freedom fighters and the death of the young men in police gunfire. On the other, a similar purchase between the youth and the characters they play—helps resolve antagonisms arising from their social locations and political allegiances by means of the solidarity forged in the past in the context of armed struggle against colonizers (much in the strain of Lagaan’s resolution of differences). Aslam is chided at home by his conservative Muslim father and brother for fraternizing outside the community. Aslam responds that he cannot internalize their relentless hatred for others and storms up the stairs to his room. The door opens, in sepia, temporally transposed to a terrace where his brothers in arms, no longer segregated by communitarian

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282 ‘Teri maa ki aankh’ (Your mother’s eye) is also what the first chapter is called on the DVD of the film.
283 Not to be read as a pun on the ‘ankh’ or eye in the expletive appearing in the footnote above, which is merely a modifier for the vagina.
conflicts, wait for him. Yet later, right wing activist Laxman, who plays Bismil in Sue’s film, refuses to eat at the same table as Aslam (who plays Ashfaqullah Khan) because he is Muslim. The sequence is immediately followed to Bismil and Aslam sharing a meal the evening before the Kakori train robbery in Sue’s film and the communitarian differences are resolved in their shared commitment to the cause of freedom. The strain persists and builds up momentum—the past painstakingly put together by Sue in spite of all strife is emphatically brought back by *RDB* to qualify and comment upon the present at the climax. At the RAF crackdown on the candle light vigil held for Ajay’s death Laxman rescues and carries Aslam away to safety, and later apologizes to him at his home where he lies in bed injured and their camaraderie continues to the very last scene where they die lying side by side holding hands. Sue’s film thus in effect mobilizes, apprehends, dictates and determines the very possibilities of the final and desirable solution in each case. *RDB* also perhaps self-reflexively anticipates its own strategy in a sequence early in the film where a fight breaks out between Laxman and Aslam and soon involves the rest. When Sue reacts by pulling down all the pictures and production notes lining the walls of her room and decides to give up on her attempt to make the documentary altogether the warring group ‘stages’ a truce for Sue, posing in a mock family album like tableaux, promising to hold peace till the film is made.

The one to one correspondence between the past and present characters and contexts in *RDB* does involve some meticulous doctoring of history to maintain the equilibrium of the narrative as well as the marketing imperatives of the film. Curiously enough, in the film within the film Chandrashekhar Azad (played by Aamir Khan, the star vehicle of the film) conveniently replaces Sukhdev Thapar as the third member of the trio (Sukhdev, along with Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajguru) that assassinated J.P. Saunders in 1928, and was subsequently hanged on 23rd March 1931. Azad had shot himself dead a few days earlier, on the 27th of February after having shot and injured S.S.P. John Nott Bower so as not to be taken alive.

*RDB*’s retelling of history becomes especially interesting considering the chord it had managed to strike with the youth and the nation at large replicating to a large
extent the effect of the radio-address within the film itself—which brings us to the second observation we must make about RDB: the film enframes the problem as that of corruption in the governmental bureaucracy, i.e. as an inadequate implementation of the very modalities of parliamentary democracy. The machinery of the state is perceived to be in the wrong hands, but is in itself beyond interrogation, if anything the state is perceived to be too lenient in redressing corruption. In a brilliant marketing move RDB was released on 26th January 2006 to coincide with the Republic Day. The film urged the youth of the country to get their hands dirty and cleanse the system. The extraordinary response it generated from the youth in the public domain in the form of blogs, campaigns, protests, and public demonstrations on various issues in a “rhetoric inspired by RDB” focused on “government inefficiency” highlighting the plight of democracy in 2006” where the state was soundly “critiqued for ignoring concerns of the middle class, especially on issues relating to the provision of public services like housing, education and jobs.”

Ex-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee congratulated director Mehra quoting a song from the film “Aag hai mujhmen kahi” (There is a fire somewhere within me). Critics were unanimous in lauding the film on similar lines: “Rather than look towards external issues, the camera zooms into the heart of urban India and takes a tough stand against contemporary values, where the youth live in a moral wasteland, aimlessly drifting through a meaningless existence based on consumerism and material success.” Responses to the film from various quarters thus bring to light the striking affinities resonating between the pronounced class concerns in the rhetoric of politics in RDB and the contemporary modalities of middle class civic protests.

It is in this context that we must consider the third move undertaken by RDB in that it addressed the split between global consumerism and concern for the country by making its protagonists the very generation critiqued for its lack of

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284 Meghana Dilip, ‘Rang De Basanti: Consumption, Citizenship and the Public Sphere’ p.39.
ideals and investment in the interests of the country, a generation marked as being single-mindedly self obsessed and career oriented. This is a theme squarely taken up by the peripateian turn of events following which Karan would refuse the offer given by his MLA father to go study abroad, and would kill him upon finding out his involvement in the MiG transactions. It is Karan’s voice that the film ends with, urging the youth to get out of their inertia and join politics, the civil services, armed forces, and clean the system from the inside out. *RDB* thus creates a form of political activism for the consumer generation, closing the gap between the market and pro-active politics for the new generation, by positing its protagonists as the new responsible citizens.

Meghana Dilip in her paper ‘Rang De Basanti: Consumption, Citizenship and the Public Sphere’ analyzes the visual style and narrative organization of *RDB* for what she calls its ‘emotional realism’ and the ways in which it enabled audience identification in the youth to this astonishing degree by “focusing on the concern of youngsters, operating from their perspective and speaking their language; *[RDB]* conveyed the mindset of urban and educated youngsters in post-independent India” 287 The extraordinary feat achieved by *RDB* in her reading is “a distinctive case in which the consumption of a super commodified cinematic product revitalized citizenship among the youth in India” 288 and “helped expand the public sphere and promote participative democracy.” 289 Her astonishment owes to the fact that *RDB* was successful in positing itself as a ‘social’ film (by which Dilip means a project motivated by what in an earlier parlance could be called a reformist impulse divorced from commercial concerns) in spite of the unprecedented degree of publicity and marketing undertaken to launch *RDB* (estimated at approximately 10 crores, which was 40% of the film’s total budget, and the largest to be ever allocated to marketing in Indian cinema till date) and product placements within and around the film itself. However, my interest lies more specifically in the discursive atmosphere within which *RDB* could accomplish a seamless slippage between practices of consumption and political

287 Meghana Dilip, ‘Rang De Basanti’, p. 15  
288 Ibid. p. 7 — Again Dilip qualifies ‘citizenship’ as “participation of young audiences in social or political life of India, whether electronically through blogging/lobbying or in public life through social activism/political participation on all issues of public interest” p.18  
289 Ibid. p.39
intervention. It was in effect the convergence of a consumerist momentum that was apprehended and recast as politics in \textit{RDB}. In a telling quote, Kamlesh Pandey who co-wrote the script for \textit{RDB} says of Bhagat Singh and his associates "They were young, fun-loving pranksters apart from just being patriotic, which has always been overlooked in other movies."\textsuperscript{290} Irrespective of the truth of the claim and avoiding taking recourse to any kind of stubborn deification of national ‘heroes’ or ‘martyrs’ that forecloses one’s receptivity to claims of this kind, it is important to note that this quote, in contrast to my reading above, reveals the necessity of a reverse validation of the historical characters in \textit{RDB} that makes possible its ‘emotional realism’.

The youth night-crawling on bikes and jeeps, drinking beer and Coca-Cola and clad in a range of fashionable casual wear (the clothes brand Provogue launched a special limited edition of \textit{Rang de Basanti} clothing and merchandise targeting the youth of India for its Fall Winter Collection 2005\textsuperscript{291}) learn to literally appropriate and embody the anticolonial past through Sue’s film, as it joins their repertoire as a series of equal and interchangeable individual choices not embedded in or weighed down by any other socio-economic considerations. The publicity campaigns for \textit{RDB} as well as the very conceptualization of \textit{RDB} relied on this integration—“from the use of the graffiti wall in the publicity designs reflecting youth attitude and rebellion; to ensuring a seamless personality fit with the brands associated with the film.”\textsuperscript{292} Coca Cola launched special edition bottles “packaged with a wrap-around label featuring the key art of the film—a bunch of friends who decide to accept responsibility for change taking pride in their beliefs, thus propagating Coca-Cola’s key message ‘Piyo sar utha ke’ (or ‘Drink with your head held high’)” establishing a clever association between the physical act of knocking back a bottle of coke and a sense of pride in one’s self and country, as


\textsuperscript{292} “The tagline of \textit{RDB} is ‘a generation awakens’, and the entire marketing focus went into ensuring that every piece of communication reflected this theme’ from ‘The ‘Rang De Basanti’ Marketing Revolution’ http://www.indiantelevision.com/release/y2k6/feb/febrel37.htm
part of a campaign covering “television commercials, print advertisements and radio spots thus merging the [sic] Coca-Cola the brand and RDB the movie.”

The replacement of one series of signs by another (Ftv, a fashion channel which the young men watch and rate the models walking down the ramp is replaced by news reports on Ajay Rathore’s death, the statements given by the government and the protest march) is as fluid as the replacement of one order of engagement, one mode of entitlement by the other. Delhi in RDB is introduced along Sue’s cab ride into the city through a mapping of the nation’s monuments such as India Gate, Red Fort and Shahid Minar. In their drunken revelries the youth circle the same monuments, mock saluting the Gate and the martyrs’ column as they circle around them in their jeep and motorbikes. The designated spaces are reclaimed near the climax not only as the site for the candlelight vigil but in the oblique rendering of the youth as the nation’s present day martyrs.

RDB’s greatest feat is perhaps in being able to directly appropriate the final threshold of possible symbolic excess of nationalist affect without the mediation of the state through the martyrdom of the protagonists of the film (as against the young carefree hero of Lakshya, 2004, Farhan Akhtar, who enlists himself in the army). Its success was evident in the robust afterlife of the mode of public protest it produced which was deployed under various occasions in demonstrations in the Priyadarshini Mattoo and Jessica Lall murder cases. However, and more alarmingly, it was equally deployed in pro-merit anti-reservation demonstrations in countless IITs all over the country. These demonstrations calling for access to institutions on the basis of pure merit unqualified by contexts such as social, cultural and environmental factors, while resuscitating the anti-Mandal sentiment of the early ’90s, had found a rhetoric more suited to the civil society. The candlelit wakes that took the place of the self-immolations of the earlier decades had found their provenance and inspiration from an unlikely source in Rang De

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293 Meghna Dilip, ‘Rang De Basanti’ p. 65
In fact the integration of Coke’s marketing campaigns aligning its desirability with affect generated by a film has had earliest precedences in Subhash Ghai’s Taal and Yadein where Ghai was also said to have recovered “40% of the production costs […] through product placements […] at a time when producers were battling with increased production costs and were exploring alternate sources of funding such as television, online, music, international and direct-to-home distribution, digital download and on-demand viewing rights.” From Chaiti Sen ‘Brand Placement in Bollywood’ p.30
Basanti. I have discussed the discursive reach of this pro-meritocracy argument with reference to the sudden visibility of disabilities in chapter five below. Its indomitable traces, however, can be excavated in the subtext of hunar or talent dominating Lagaan on the one hand and the constitution of the deserving citizen to the nation in Rang de Basanti on the other.

IV Welcome to Sajjanpur and Well Done Abba: The Predicament of the Developmental Aesthetic

The middle classes caught on the cusp of transition in the small towns and suburbs had begun to appear in mainstream films like Bunty aur Babli (Shaad Ali, 2005) as well as in the lower budget endeavours (engendered by the space of the multiplex and having their own ensemble of character actors) that explored the pace of life, the specificities and peculiarities of their locales, and the contours of material aspirations of its protagonists in films like Main, Meri Patni...Aur Woh! (Chandan Arora, 2005) or Manorama Six Feet Under (Navdeep Singh, 2007). The films that I take up for analysis in this last section, though, owe their lineage to the post FFC ‘New Indian Cinema’ of an earlier era and face a problem of enunciation caused by this very lineage.

In an insightful reading of Benegal’s Welcome to Sajjanpur (2008) and Well Done Abba (2010), Meheli Sen locates the crux of the problem as one of uneven development that Benegal undertakes to unravel in his darkly satiric forays into the stuff and substance of social realism of an earlier era. In the same move, the films also become strident critiques of the limits of the ‘postcolonial developmental imperatives’ of the state:

That large transformative processes—modernity, capitalism, globalization, etc. traverse distinct spatial and temporal constellations in a highly uneven manner has now become an axiomatic formulation in humanities and social science research. Perhaps, it is fitting that Benegal would choose to explore these incomplete, contested processes in the “in-between-ness” of provincial india. What makes Benegal’s exploration of the semi rural province especially effective is his attention to detail; spatially, both Sajjanpur and Chikatpalli are made concrete through a density of visual and aural signs that fulfill demands of verisimilitude, despite being largely...
shot on studio sets. From the bustling village square in the former, to the grimy, graffiti-covered walls in the latter, each location is imbued with a plethora of details that speak to the filmmaker’s commitment to a certain kind of realism. Additionally, while the villages themselves are fictive, Benegal gives us clear regional markers—Sajjanpur is located in the state of Madhya Pradesh while Chikatpalli is close to the southern city of Hyderabad; dialects, patterns and inflections of speech, clothing and demeanor also signpost regional identities of characters in each film.

While Sen captures the nuances of the unmistakable symptoms of the starkly bipolar economy of late capitalism in a site of underdevelopment where the libidinal economy around commodities percolate the everyday desires of the not so affluent residents of both Sajjanpur and Chikatpalli, it might be productive to turn our lens on the problem of representation instead to diagnose a deeper malady behind this conundrum.

The problem with depicting the rural in its unmitigated and unmediated form had already posed itself as a problem in the FFC era, where the insertion of the educated middle class protagonist as the bearer of the spectator’s gaze had been necessary on the one hand to allay the political charge. In the post-globalization phase, when the FFC moment is clearly and definitely past, and the hotbed of social realism has found an alternative site in the disenfranchised lower classes of the urban, the primary problem of populating the hinterland as something other, something more palpable, something that allows for some cognitive space beyond a predictable Manichean binary of the corrupt, violent, aggressive and regressive

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295 As Sen Elaborates further, “In other words, the visceral, affective discourses of globality have rendered the divide between those who consume and those who cannot, spectacular. Chikatpalli is incompletely, unevenly, even fitfully, integrated in the global economy—it is only a village in many ways—but, the markers of a new kind of desire are everywhere. Thus, the families of Muskaan’s potential grooms do not simply ask for dowry; they demand specific consumer goods such as plasma televisions and refrigerators that have three doors. Everyone in the film inhabits this rapidly changing universe of desire: from Vikas Jha (Ravi Kishan) the government Subengineer who wants his new bride to “get” bigger breasts, so that he can “honeymoon” in five star hotels with swimming pools, to Sakina’s mother (Preeti Nigam), who believes that marriage to a Dubai-based sheikh will translate into wealth and happiness for her daughter. Beleaguered inspector Reddy’s (Rajit Kapur) wife constantly heckles him for not augmenting his meager government-mandated salary with kickbacks. Everyone in Chikatpalli participates in this libidinal domain where new goods, products, services, and technologies cast an inescapable spell.”Ibid. pp.18–19
backwaters of the nation becomes also a problem of (film) language. If I may reiterate my earlier point, it was precisely at this juncture with the passing of the FFC moment that the specificity of the local which had once substantiated the object language of the nation in its regional hinterlands (in Shyam Benegal’s Ankur, 1974 or Nishant, 1975) began to be put emphatically within qualifying parentheses: of the young novelist Mahadev Kushwaha in Welcome to Sajjanpur (Shyam Benegal, 2008), a series of events narrated by driver Arman Ali to his boss over the duration of a long drive from Bombay to Pune about his misadventures with the governmental system of disbursement of loans for rural development in Well Done Abba (Shyam Benegal, 2010), the reminiscences of three university students Siddharth, Geeta and Vikram in Hazaaron Khwaishen Aisi (Sudhir Mishra, 2005) the TRP battles of news networks in Peepli LI[V]E (Anusha Rizvi, 2010), or within the montage of the epistolary videos and documentary footage of Dhobi Ghat (Kiran Rao, 2010).

Before we concentrate on the problem of convergence between language (in all its nuances here: local, regional, inflected with a specific historical charge, bearing the weight of authenticating the nation) per se and the language of social realism vis a vis the direction it seems to have taken in the late ’90s, Colin Mc Cabe’s formulation about the classic realist text which does away with all traces of the production of the text becomes relevant as far as the status of subjective speech in cinema is concerned. Favouring histoire over discours (or loosely, favouring a narrative positing itself as the sole possible explication of ideological leanings that can be identified and named) the text there would avoid foregrounding a voice or agency in addressing the spectator directly but would instead rely on presenting a reality that would, as such, speak for itself. Thus the characters constructed or the speech rendered within the text becomes inviolable in the sense that they are naturalized without drawing attention to their constructedness or fictional status. Mc Cabe’s argument is chiefly with regard to the literary novels of the nineteenth century (George Eliot et al) in which the structure of the text is such that the various discourses constituting the text are organized in a hierarchy. Of these, the metalanguage has the privilege of being the bearer of truth, is unreflexive by

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design or execution, and has the power to comment on the veracity of the other subservient discourses which occur as ‘object languages.’ The metalanguage which posits them in such a manner should not however be conflated with the author’s voice either, since unlike that of the author, the metalanguage cannot be named at any level and must remain invisible. The object languages occur most prominently within quotation marks as speech (or even thoughts attributable to characters) and are therefore contextual and material in being articulated by characters with definite class, gender, regional or ideological identities. In this light, the specificity of regions in the centralized project of the FFC aesthetic was characterized by object languages or enunciations weighed down by their purportedly feudal context. Prasad’s example of the specific status of the dialect in its subservient status to general dialogue in the debate over Ankur’s script points to the objectification of the regional in the state’s gaze. It is of course still possible to resuscitate this older debate that attests to the hierarchization of the region as a subset of the pan-Indian (Hindi) popular in a fortuitous déjà vu over Mangal Pandey: The Rising (Ketan Mehta, 2005) for which Piyush Mishra expressed ire in an open letter addressed to the director (circulated widely on the Internet) at being credited for ‘dialect writing’ rather than ‘dialogue’. However in the era of globalization the association of regionalism with the feudal persists; alongside it the constant production of the local in all its specificities, rites, rituals, clothes, dialects, folk songs, etc. as an inexhaustible resource of consumable difference also becomes inevitable in a fetish of the local.

The ‘fetish of the local,’ as a phrase, is used by Willemen albeit with a somewhat different meaning. In Willemen’s argument it refers to the specificity of cinema itself as a medium and the capacity of particular texts to foreground

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297 Mac Cabe holds that these subservient discourses can also actually contradict each other, for example, in the case of a detective novel.
298 When one draws a cinematic analogy to this arrangement of the metalanguage and object language in classic realist cinema, the primacy of the image track points to its status as metalanguage which provides the framework for accessing the soundtrack which becomes one of the object languages. Lapsley and Westlake, commenting on Mac Cabe, argue that within the documentary film, it is often the voiceover which acquires the status of the ‘metalanguage’ while there is a clear inversion of these terms for the fiction film where the image track gains primacy over the voice/sound track. See Robert Lapsley and Richard Westlake, Film Theory: An Introduction, 1988, p. 171.
extremely specific contextual details in order to mobilize informed work on the part of the audience to unpack often contradictory semiotic impulses that do not allow for a unilinear reading and by extension—any unified suturing or putting together of the viewing subject. Willemen argues that this possibility, rather than being inherent in a text, is in fact released by the audience and is thus by default applicable to any text whatsoever irrespective of the intentions of its enunciator/s. In our context, the fetish of the local appears in Bombay cinema at this juncture, to signify it as a product of not only Indian origin i.e. resplendent in its authentic staging of ethnic particularities but also in being the repository of the possible enunciatory (or in the case of cinema, representational) modes of Indian cinema.

*Welcome to Sajjanpur* starts conventionally with an aerial shot of the village, panning over the lay of the land to cut to and focus on the yard of aspiring novelist Mahadev Kushwaha’s house where he talks directly to the camera, to us. A monologue that stretches well over six minutes into the film introduces us to the history of Sajjanpur and Mahadev’s own particular predicament as a writer. The ironic renaming of what used to be Durjanpur to Sajjanpur by Pandit Nehru himself on a visit to the village bears evidence of the (officious, optimistic but ultimately ineffectual) categorical reordering of the nation necessary for the reformist impetus of the period immediately following independence. Mahadev’s own elaboration-by-examples of this act that he likens to the renaming of Bambai as Mumbai, Calcutta as Kolkata and Madras as Chennai, however, points to a more topical anxiety about the increasing vernacular identarianism locatable to a far later moment in politics. Mahadev’s description of his village as a backward outpost however cogently inventories the terms on which Sajjanpur has since then failed to live up to the ideal of the “full-fledged developed village,” which the government files claim it is, for it has neither “formal education,” “mode of communication,” nor “technology of communication” (all these phrases appear in English in Mahadev’s original monologue). Funnily enough, these are precisely the gaps that Mahadev’s outmoded job as a letter writer serves to bridge. It is writing that acts as the necessary communicative mode to the outside world, as missives to and from the state (through the several letters that he is commissioned to write to the District
Collector, and as creative intervention that brings about social change (Mahadev pens the script for a street theatre on the subject of land appropriation for the construction of a car factory in an incisive critique of industrialization and modernization; he also writes the campaign song for Munnibai, thus enabling Sajjanpur’s passage to normative democracy). Mahadev’s writing acts as the framing device that makes sense of the world around him and as the sole means of developing an affective access into the way of life of his milieu. Mahadev describes how he learned to abandon the ‘machine like’ diction of college learning and inflect his own emotions to better touch the hearts of the recipients of his letters. His ‘pearl-like’ handwriting is soon qualitatively calibrated as much by the hyperbolic excesses of dialogue he gleefully quotes from Shahrukh Khan films, as it is by the baroque language of romance that Mahadev absorbs from his afternoon readings of a translated volume of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (which simultaneously infuses romance into the love letters he pens for compounder Ramkumar to Shobharani, the widowed daughter-in-law of ex-army-man Subedar Singh, and colours Mahadev’s own fantasies about his childhood sweetheart Kamala who is now married to a migrant labourer working in Bombay).

The jocular scripting of Mahadev’s sincere confession as a writer lacking an appropriate ‘subject’ for the novel that he aspires to write brings us closer to the heart of the problem. He had considered moving to Bambai, says Mahadev, with its tall high rises, long cars, and fair maidens but there too writers in their frustration are tearing their shirts and filmmakers are remaking the same films over and over again. The devotional is no longer an appropriate category for the villages though the region around Sajjanpur does not lack the potential. Mahadev’s earnest confessional transports us to the 700-800 years old Sharda temple where its two dead devotees are still believed to be offering pujas everyday. It is accompanied on the visual track by shots of the temple with its long queue of devotees and progresses onto other potentially appropriate topics. The visual track embarks on an anthropological tour of Chitrakoot Ghat by the bank of the Ganges, the existence of the venerated two and a half inch Ramayana, the forty feet tall Bajrangbali, and the fact that most names in Sajjanpur start with Ram, given that Ram is believed to have passed through the region during the period of his exile—but all these subjects are deemed unsuitable for narrativization by Mahadev’s
voiceover. The marketability of the religious, says Mahadev, has been seriously jeopardized in light of the excess of devotional channels on cable television with holy men chanting pithy philosophies round the clock. And thus Mahadev has been reduced to a mechanical secular scribe in the face of an imminent ‘ISD, STD, SMS, MMS’ revolution in conjunction with the growing rate of literacy still awaiting entry into Sajjanpur. Mahadev’s ‘anchoring’ thus cannily appropriates and pre-empts the developmental rhetoric (and possibly our imagination of the rural backwaters) and turns it on its head as the camera, and we with it, follow Mahadev bicycling to work and hence embark on a tour of the state of the real in Sajjanpur.

We are rapidly introduced to what could have been an idiosyncratic cast of rural staples reinvented here for the dark humour of harshly critical satire. Mahadev’s letter writing assignments allow him and us an access, as witnesses, into the complexities and networks of social, economic and political relationships that the film refuses to reduce to the neatly circumscribed and narratively micromanaged ‘fetish of the local’. While acting as a conduit of our gaze into the stubborn residues caused by the inequities of development, it also allays shock by framing it in what we retrospectively understand as Mahadev’s fictive account and the comforting distance that humour provides. Ramsingh, the aggressive local big man who has entered his wife Jamnabai as a candidate for the post of Sarpanch, commissions successive letters to the local District Collector to eliminate competition: one alleging that Salim Mohammad, a muslim candidate is a Pakistani spy working for ISI; another pleading the cancellation of candidacy for Munnibai the eunuch on the pretext that it will blight the honour of the village. The extent of the practices of violent intimidation and manipulation of judicial processes become starkly clear not only in the latter half of the film when newly elected sarpanch Munnibai is murdered by Ramsingh and his uncle in full daylight but also at Ramsingh’s very first appearance in the film when coaxed by Mahadev he blithely recounts the circumstances under which his wife is facing a ‘trumped up’ murder charge. Apparently Ramsingh’s wife was interrupted in her pious routine of ‘pujapath’ (ritual prayers) by a sound coming from the stables. Upon investigation, she discovered a young naked girl straddling her innocent son in an
act of diabolic witchery, following which the girl allegedly slit her own throat with a scythe in a clear case of ‘suicide’.

*Welcome to Sajjanpur* brings to the fore the impossibility of scripting neat conclusions by proffering dual endings, one contained within the pages of Mahadev’s novel, which is the film itself, as a fictive account of the village and the other in the concluding segment where Mahadev (his real name is Sachdev as it turns out) retells the ‘real’ turn of events to his publisher. While Munnibai appears to have survived and thrived resplendently within the structure of electoral democracy as an able MLA, the progressivist romance between Shobharani and Ramkumar (it is the magic of Mahadev’s pen that has brought about the first ‘love marriage’ in Sajjanpur, turning a widow into a bride, Ramkumar tells Mahadev) meet a violently gory end as they are executed by hanging by their kinsfolk in an act of honour killing. The mediation of the pen, and by extension, the director’s camera, is not always adequate to the job of resolving the crises of uneven development.

Benegal’s next film, *Well Done Abba* is a satirical exposé of bureaucratic corruption in the system of implementation of welfare schemes for the rural poor. Arman Ali, the narrator of the film, like Mahadev in *Welcome to Sajjanpur*, is on the cusp of becoming a fully modernized citizen. Like Mahadev, he functions as a participant observer in our stead to traverse the complexities of transforming economic and social relations that he finds Chikatpalli, his hometown, is mired in when he returns at the pleading of his younger brother Rehman Ali to arrange a nikah (betrothal) for his daughter Muskan, whom he had left behind.

The film opens in the chrome and glass interior of a corporate office in Bombay, ironically named Solutions, where a contrite Arman confronted by his boss Rohan Kapur, produces excuses for his prolonged absence. Arman offers to truthfully recount the whole story while driving his boss to a meeting in Pune. The film follows the turn of events narrated by Arman punctuated by shots of their car on the contours of the Bombay-Pune highway with explanations and comments from Arman segueing the narrative together. The visual track initiated by Arman’s account transports us to Chikatpalli, a village close to the city of Hyderabad, which, like Sajjanpur, is also caught in the process of uneven development.
Making his way home on a cycle cart, Arman asks his driver to decipher the deluge of posters, hoardings and election campaign graffiti covering the walls. This is precisely where the problem of language returns as a peripheral but persistent leitmotif in Benegal’s second satire. Arman cannot read, and he constantly suppresses or makes excuses for this inability to the cart driver, and later to a man urinating on the wall of his house whom he asks to read aloud to him the contents of the poster for Kapil Dhara Yojna (advertising the government scheme for financing water wells for the poor), and yet later to a bank clerk at the loan counter. Arman by his own admission feels bewildered and besieged in the tug of war between vernacular regionalisms that constantly demand that he be able to read Marathi in Mumbai, Telegu in Andhra, Tamil in Chennai and Urdu in his own hometown Chikatpalli. Ironically, to his chagrin, Arman soon finds that another order of fluency is required of him to negotiate the maze of government bureaucracy in Chikatpalli, and painstakingly educates himself in the local vocabulary of euphemisms for different orders of bribes and commissions that need to be paid to government officials, engineers, and various other cogs in the wheel that sustain the entire economy that has been generated around the machinery of disbursement of benefits to the poor. The offerings range from material endorsements like buying a tank full of petrol for the local Sarpanch’s husband who takes Arman to the local tehsildar’s office, or the gift of his own fake Swiss watch (that he had bought from Victoria Terminus in Bombay) for the head clerk at the tehsildar’s office, and extends to a range of absurd appellations for bribes in cash signifying percentages of the well money which he is required to hand out—“service tax,” “20 deepavali, 5 dussehra,” “15 ghanta,” “5 tola”—and similarly cryptic names for different denominations of currency notes (where a peela, or yellow, Gandhi turns out to be a 500 rupee note).

The problem of water shortage, which was but mentioned in passing in Sajjanpur, here provides the background for the plot. Upon arriving home, Arman immediately discovers that the scarcity of water has already radically reconfigured the practices of everyday customs of civility in Chikatpalli. His cart driver asks for some drinking water and is rebuked harshly by Muskaan who says she has to travel three kilometres to fetch water. Arman learns that his brother Rehman and his wife Salma had been exploiting this opportunity by stealing water in the dead
of the night from neighbouring wells to sell. However on their last enterprise, they were intercepted by the constables that Kallan Khan had stationed to guard his well. Following this event, they have become fugitives from the law and have disappeared altogether. It is at this juncture that the writing on the wall for Kapil Dhara Yojna, a government sanctioned scheme for the construction of wells, begins to, in Arman’s words, ‘haunt his dreams’ and ‘speak to him’ as the miraculous solution to all his problems. It would guarantee good harvest, which in turn would ensure a suitable groom for Muskaan, and protect his land which if left to its barren state Arman apprehends his brother Rehan will sell off the moment Muskaan departs for her in-laws. After his misadventures with the inherently corrupt and thoroughly compromised process of acquiring a loan—where with each installment that Arman manages to obtain the dues to be paid in the form of bribes exhaust the actual amount disbursed—Arman is left with a chalk circle on dry ground instead of the well of his dreams. It is at this point that the hapless Arman, with the help of his daughter Muskaan decide to confront the system on its own terms. Arman lodges a complaint with the local police station declaring the theft of his well backed by the manufactured evidence of its construction that he had acquired in the process of applying for successive instalments of the loan. From this point onwards Well Done Abba works for a substitution of the maze of informal favours and transactions and the obstruction and obfuscation of the processes of disbursal of state largesse with an alternative paradigm of transparency and efficiency, stock taking and execution. The porosities of the faulty system become visible through Arman’s attempt to lodge an FIR at the police station and the stages of investigation it sets into motion specifically because the state lacks the language to acknowledge the inevitable fissures in the system. The transparency of representation that was deliberately elided in Welcome to Sajjanpur through its double enunciation thus becomes in Well Done Abba the very modality of redressing inequities. Significant here is the fact that the film had more than compensated for Arman’s bumbling incapacity for language in his daughter Muskaan, a student in the 12th standard, who is eloquent, opinionated and soon forms a romantic liaison with Rehan’s creditor Arif Ali. Arif himself had studied at a polytechnic while working part time as a typist outside the Law Court in Allahabad but had to
discontinue his education and return to Chikatpalli to his father after his mother’s demise. Unlike all potential grooms that Arman looks up for Muskan, Arif is the only one who wants her to continue studying. Muskan and Arif’s romance, appropriately, blooms through text messages and calls on their mobile phones in the extremely literary and ornate rhetoric of formal Urdu. Thus, once the chain of action is initiated to align Chikatpalli along constitutional lines, Muskaan and Arif Ali become, by default, its percipient arbiters. Armed with lessons recalled by Muskaan from Civic Science lessons in school (that a complainant has the right to investigate into the state of enquiry of her complaint, for instance) and legal knowledge gleaned by Arif while working as a typist outside a court of law, they mobilize the Right to Information Act to identify fellow sufferers from Chikatpalli and start agitating for their ‘stolen’ wells, at first outside the police station and subsequently at the office of the Irrigation Minister. The issue is taken up by a bank of television news reporters and the opposition party at the Legislative Assembly forcing the minister to mobilize a host of corollary welfare schemes (labourers and peasants registered under Employment Guarantee schemes, women under Anganwadis, sedentary officials and engineers from government service and PWD offices) to expedite the completion of all the wells before the imminent elections. In a fitting finale recounted by Arman, the minister holds a commemorative function in Chikatpalli to honour the participants in the water well project, at which the stage erected along with all the dignitaries assembled upon it collapse to the collective glee of the villagers. *Well Done Abba* reveals a greater faith in the substitution of one language by another.

Let me however state here that the problem of film language that I have attempted to locate as the predicament of the developmental aesthetic is not of the same order as the obsessive insistence on language that I read in my analysis of the films above. It does however bring the two together in a reflexive acknowledgement of the problem of bridging the distance between its subject and its addressee who for all practical purposes is located in the multiplex.