Chapter 4

Contextualizing the contemporary: ACK now

In this chapter, we look at the last as well as the present phase of ACK, both as product and cultural phenomenon. I will not go into the detailed history of the product again, but try to understand, more in theoretical terms, what accounted for the decline of ACK as comic book literature/children’s literature/entertainment material. ‘Decline’ might at first seem to be a rather loaded word (often used in connection with grand historical process/es or its narrative markers, after Gibbon) for something as palpable and ‘ordinary’ as steep fall in sales figures. Nor do I claim that November 1991, when the ACK title on Jawaharlal Nehru came out and failed to reach break-even figures, was something of a watershed in recent Indian history. What I suggest instead is that an enquiry into the cultural conditions of this period, that began with notable changes in economic policies but went on to have far-reaching effects in terms of politics, public sphere, its agency and representation in media, would give us certain broad insights.

Obviously, no finality can be claimed about these insights as we are still very much in the middle of this ongoing process. Nevertheless, they appear to be significant not the least because they might explain the changes in the public career of a popular ‘edutainment’ item, but are instructive also as regards ideas of citizenship, governance, nation/nation-

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1 Although it is perhaps not impossible to enquire into its’ symptomatic implications, i.e. why Nehru as a figure would fail to strike a certain currency during the beginning of economic liberalization. But that would make the story too predictable, or even a tad portentous, and neither do I believe that it was generally true about the public appeal of Nehru in early 1990s. In fact, very recently a stadium newly built in New Delhi for Commonwealth Games has been named after him, the latest addition to the public properties (roads, buildings etc.) to be named after someone from the eponymous Nehru-Gandhi family. Reportedly, there are more than 700 such properties/memorials in India as of now.
state, and, more specifically, children as (political) subjects and childhood as a sociological phenomenon or practice. These notions, as intellectual ideas in their present form, admittedly, owe their origin mostly to (what is customarily clubbed together as) the ‘West’. Clearly the word, as used here, purports to be not only a shorthand for geographical reference but (crucially) a dominant history. But no longer can these concepts be claimed to be an exclusively Western preserve, if ever, and more so in what is being officially touted as a ‘globalized’ world. The importance of the present analysis, in a manner of speaking, lies in ways it tries to take a fresh look at the history of Indian media and politics from the viewpoint of popular culture in recent years, and if viable, rework our present understanding of some of the issues mentioned above.

‘New’ media boom: ‘new’ public sphere?

Post-liberalization, we have seen the new media (cable TV, digital media) boom that has had its unique career in India. Opening up new avenues of individual entrepreneurship, be it a dot com company or news or entertainment channel, inaugurated a wholly different set of expectations about the people, market and the state. They were ‘new’ in more than one sense. Not only were they using new language (computers would be a prime example) to address a niche audience, a new technocratic class, but also creating

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2 This is despite the occasional attempts to revive and re-evaluate ancient, say Sanskrit texts, on medicine, dramaturgy or pedagogy etc., not to speak of the valuable but ideologically dubious corpus of Orientalist scholarship.

3 Alarmingly, scholars like Sheldon Pollock, despite their valuable contributions in terms of scholarship, continue to sing to that tune. See S. Pollock, ‘Literary History, Region and Nation in South Asia: An Introductory Note’, in Social Scientist, 23.10/12 (Oct.-Dec. 1995), 2. But can such intellectual amnesia (so to speak) be seen without any complicity, willing or not, with the history of violence otherwise known as colonization?
new axes of merit and exclusion. These media companies were market-oriented in a sense different from the steel plants of the Nehruvian era. New jobs were created to meet technological demands where India often served as the hinterland of global business (as in outsourcing of software jobs, textile or more recently, call centers). Fascination for things or jobs ‘foreign’ decreased or was substantially revised (as in the popular ironic adaptation ‘phoren’ often encountered in Bollywood movies or advertisements). But far from replicating the western exemplar, the Indian market and ‘public’ (when used in common parlance, it often appears to be a new avatar of the ‘masses’ or the downtrodden in the 70’s leftist rhetoric although the two terms are not exactly intersubstitutive)\(^4\) have negotiated with capital inflow in ways that was not foreseen\(^5\).

The film *Swades* (2004), directed by Aashutosh Gowarikar (himself an actor in the early-mid 70’s ‘parallel cinema’) and starring Shahrukh Khan, shows a NASA-returned engineer going back to his foster-mother Kaveriamma and rural home that fits the standard description of a beleaguered third world village without electricity. In this village, post-office, telegraph and irrigation – the old *sarkari* hands have not disturbed the complete interiority of administration. Issues are decided by a privileged few having political clout, muscle and money power, or at best between the govt. official and the *sarpanch*. Cellphones happily co-exist with wrestling – a popular and old vocation from

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5 A particularly interesting, and humorous, example is how Punjabi *dhabas* used top-loading washing machines, then a technological marvel to the middle class, to make large amounts of *lassi*, in the late 1990s. See William Mozzarella, ‘Close Distance: Constructing the ‘Indian Consumer’, in A. Rajagopal ed., *The Indian Public Sphere: Structure and Transformation* (New Delhi: OUP, 2008), 245-259.
pre-colonial days. But things take an interesting turn when the light (actually, the generator) goes off on a video night\(^6\). Mohan (played by Khan) brings on his telescope. As the kids gaze at the stars and get ecstatic, they break into a song – led by the NRI scientist-hero. In what follows, under Mohan’s leadership, enthusiastic villagers succeed in bringing hydro-electricity to village. The hero decides to come back, rebuffing repeated offers from the US-based space research organization and gets hitched to a schoolteacher. If it sounds like a typical do-gooder story, compare it with a film having similar thematic overtones from the 1970s. In Shyam Benegal’s *Manthan*\(^7\), the young veterinary surgeon Dr. Rao (played by Girish Karnad) brings about a similar change when the villagers, under his able guidance, set up a dairy co-operative. Much as it disturbs the middlemen and muscle-weilding sarpanch, the co-operative brings about an economic revolution.

Though inspired by real events, there are noticeable differences between these two films\(^8\). Both talk of material progress and gradual evolution from the age-old feudal, casteist structure – to ‘modern’ India. Both, again, imagine self-sufficient villages and rural empowerment as illustrations of ideal governance. While *Manthan* tells the story of a nation-state realizing its socialist ideals and in that sense holds up the cause of the then

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\(^6\) I will not take up further intertextual complications. The video night and its whole paraphernalia (announcements from a hand-drawn rickshaw with a deliberately dramatized tone, also the sitting arrangements) is a reference to film-watching practice in earlier (symptomatically, pre-liberalization) days. Taking *Swades* as a film that could be typically watched by the multiplex audience, the whole scene could also be described as a nostalgic film-within-a film sequence and the film being shown is Naseer Hussain’s *Yaadon ki Baraat* (1973).

\(^7\) Made in 1976, this film won the National Film Award the following year. It was also the Academy Award entry for India in 1976.

\(^8\) *Swades* is loosely based on a US-returned couple’s involvement in bringing electricity to schools in Bilgaon, the backdrop of Narmada Bachao Andolan, as is *Manthan* based on the foundation of Amul Co-operative by Varghese Kurien in Anand, Gujarat.
Congress government in power, in the Gowarikar film the homebound NRI (Mohan obtains the precious Green Card at the beginning of the film) emerges as the savior. He feels the calling of motherland irresistible even as he repudiates any antiquarian idea of empty culture and tradition. If both these films can be taken to articulate a ‘developmental aesthetic’, a term used by Madhav Prasad in his discussion of Benegal films, the difference stems from a changed attitude to state as the herald of development in post-liberalization era. Swades seems to suggest that there is not much to be expected from either the official bureaucracy or the villagers caught in a vicious cycle. One of them hopes to acquire a visa to open a dhaba in US, the land of plenty. The capital of scientific knowledge is profitably maneuvered only when the feudal set-up gives way to a civil society of sorts – but that takes place only as an exception. The symbol of nation is evoked but shared by Mohan and villagers in completely different ways. Mohan rediscovers the charm of motherland from the vantage point of NRI diaspora; in the casket full of soil, spices and corn, a gift from his love-interest, and a Ramlila show. His conscience call does not make him a common villager at all – he stays most of the time in an air-conditioned caravan and sympathizes with other poor villagers as a part of his ‘Lonely Planet’ version of India tour. It is the imaginary of nation/motherland he is interested in, perceived from his own diasporic location. State is a third party here, honorable witness to the contract between the good citizen and civil society-in-waiting. The affective bond between the last two is a matter of personal moral choice imbued with a ‘multicultural’ Hinduism, unlike Benegal’s model of secular rights and duties.

Mohan picks up an argument with the sarpanch and local priest over this. What he says is atypical: that India as a country has fallen back because of the lack of concerted effort and (purportedly) a complacent rhetoric of ‘Indian tradition’ that often hides the real problems and lack of initiative.
Why do I discuss these films? Perhaps because they fit the bill of ‘serious cinema’ for the Indian middle class, much as ACK comics generates its appeal as serious/educative entertainment item. Probably more so because the mid-70’s comics-consuming child readers’ generation might have become the new suave citizen-heroes of Swades, an ironic expression for the nation rediscovered, late capitalist-style. The much-hyped ‘India Shining’ campaign by Bharatiya Janata Party failed to pull off electoral victory, but did strike a chord with the generation growing up in post-1990 India by offering a goal of individual(-ist) excellence and wealth, often proffering the dream of becoming future global power arbiters or an emergent strong economy (‘Asian tiger’).

‘Fall’ of ACK: Framing the context

Yet, 1991 is the year when ACK is forced to stop its production owing to steep fall in sales. Why does a consumer item fail? A blunt explanation would be the failure to address the changes in market economy, plus something else. Let me call this something else, for want of better words, a historical conjunction of various ideological factors that are either unfavorable (for the particular product), misunderstood (by the producers/consumers) or undervalued (the purported ‘message’/‘value’ borne out by the product) or a combination of all these. Its use and exchange-value, in the language of classical Marxian economics (applied here to a late capitalist context) go down. If ACK is a delightfully colored and handy entertainment item that is equally sensitive to

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10 This particular rhetoric has not lost its appeal. Newspapers enthusiastically follow the acquiring of Arcelor steel plant by Indian/British Mittal family, alcohol giant Vijay Mallya buying Mahatma Gandhi’s personal belongings at Sotheby’s or Ambanis moving up a few places in Forbes magazine’s rich people list.
pedagogic programme and the market, should it have been otherwise? Did ACK suddenly lose its marketability in face of a competition from similar products or was it due to certain structural changes in the field of Indian media\textsuperscript{11}? Is it possible to locate this decline in more particular and comprehensible terms, such as its repetitiveness as visual material or shifts in taste for consumable items made available to audience/children?

After 1947, however ironically, a gap was created since rallying for independence was out of the agenda. Media (at this point, only oral\textsuperscript{12} and print media) had to look for issues that it could deliberate on. Understandably, it was the nature or course of ‘development’ that became the hotbed of arguments. The debate was articulated by planning commissions and the press alike – namely, the pros and cons of industrialization in a vastly populated country with very unevenly spread federal structure. While the bureaucracy (and the intelligentsia led by the English-language press) decided the overall direction of government measures, the larger public (here the Hindi and regional language press often represented popular voice) either largely remained outside the purview of material benefit, or depending upon local and sectarian demands, became willy-nilly participants in state welfare\textsuperscript{13}. This model, best exemplified by the Nehruvian nation-state, was marked by a certain socialist outlook of sorts. Apart from diplomatic

\textsuperscript{11} The word ‘field’ is used in the sense of a network of interdependent formations (that, though relationally and sometimes hierarchically organized, nevertheless retain some laws of functioning particular each to its own, as in literary, economic or political field), after Bourdieu’s definition of the same. See P. Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

\textsuperscript{12} The efficacy of oral mode of communication has always been crucial. Historians such as Ranajit Guha and Shahid Amin have shown the role played by rumors and anecdotes in pre-colonial India. Word of mouth is a time-tested mode still in use, albeit camouflaged in some other media, as in TV advertisements where it appears as a reference or quotation (e.g. the ‘wise’ housewife buying the ‘best’ detergent and saving money for the family and the word going around) or political rallies.

\textsuperscript{13} I draw on Partha Chatterjee’s critique of Indian planning policies here. See Chatterjee, ‘Development Planning and the Indian State’, in \textit{State and Politics in India} (New Delhi: OUP, 1997), 271-297. Chatterjee’s argument rests on planning policies adopted by the state largely before the economic liberalization introduces a global market-logic.
strategies of realpolitik (e.g. alliance with Russia under Kruschev, signing of NAM), it points to an important contradiction in the matter of governance – personified by the towering public stature of Nehru himself as a statesman-freedom fighter-orator-scholar and a loving *chacha* to kids. Looked upon as an intellectual and visionary, he resembled the proverbial benevolent despot – a guardian or a father-figure than a shrewd machiavel. Nobody dared question his good intention. To the people on the streets, he was something like the patriarchal head of a feudal family – distant but revered. In other words, there was a strong sense of moral righteousness attached to his leadership, however debatable his political action or decisions\(^{14}\). Likewise, the institutions that one usually associates with the Nehruvian era are the public sector companies that were geared to yielding benefits for the common public and build a strong nation-state.

This nation-state followed a political logic from the anti-colonial nationalist days. Sudipta Kaviraj, tracing the genealogy of this nation-consciousness in the late 19\(^{th}\) century, calls it an *‘imaginary institution’*\(^{15}\). The nationalist consciousness turned a then-extant *‘fuzzy community’* (meaning a *‘pre-modern’* community of sorts) into a people united under a common banner, thus making them capable of *‘large action’*. But importantly, in place of multiple dimensions of provisional identity-formation (such as locality, caste, or religion) that were not mutually exclusive of each other, the new imaginary of the nation introduced attributes that turned these people into a governable population: territoriality

\(^{14}\) His position within the Congress party was similar too – known as a well-intentioned autocrat, but liberal in his personal views. He was always a cut above his fellow partymen and equally respected by his colleagues and leftists, then the principal political opposition. Nehru himself would often admit to getting embittered by the narrow sectarian clash of interests within the Congress party. This public charisma was somewhat curbed towards the end of his life, especially after the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

and enumerability. We will briefly note one more complexity of this Foucauldian moment. The birth of nation or national consciousness, taking our cue from Kaviraj, marked the beginning of a bounded homogeneous mass – what Anderson would call a ‘community in anonymity’ but also a finite one\(^\text{16}\) – the minimum necessary condition for making administration possible. The Indian nation, though composed of a very large and diversified population, was fated to become a (nation-) state from a very early date. And although the inimitably popular Mahatma Gandhi had an alternative vision of political formation, he lost out to popular mandate even within his own party.

With Gandhi’s demise, there was not much disagreement about the industrial policy that formed the core of Nehru’s vision of independent India. Indeed, it signaled the ‘new India’ for many. The extent to which the steel plants and bridges excited the popular imagination is visible in newspaper reports, books and films from this period\(^\text{17}\). One particularly interesting example is the title-song sequence in the Guru Dutt film Aar-Par (1954), an early noir, where the lead romantic pair is surrounded by women mixing cement and laying bricks against the growing Mumbai cityscape, or the new urban couple in Mr. and Mrs. 55 (Guru Dutt, 1955). Or recall the controversy sparked off by Nargis who denounced Ray’s Pather Panchali for not showing the ‘true’ India, meaning the new industries, metros and satellite townships. But this optimism was not shared by all. Leftists continued their litany of criticism against this model of mixed economy that failed to tackle widespread poverty but created income gaps that were getting ever wider.

\(^{16}\) Finitude is not a category Anderson associates with nation but with the apparatuses (census-map-museum) of state. See Chatterjee, ‘Anderson’s Utopia’, Diacritics 29.4 (1999), 128-134.

\(^{17}\) These included fiction as well as non-fictional books, like history or geography textbooks taught in public schools that would regularly feature chapters on ‘our rivers’, ‘our industries’ and the like. Films, again, would include documentaries from official bodies like the Films Division as well as Bollywood films having new urban heroes.
(with slogans like ‘yeh azaadi jhoota hai’). Another visible catastrophe was that of partition, and all of these found expression as early as 1952 in Ritwik Ghatak’s *Nagarik*.

The new cities brought hopes but along came the mafiosi, middlemen and unemployment. One can recall countless social commentary-films from these days, like *Neecha Nagar* (Chetan Anand, 1946), *Footpath* (Zia Sarhadi, 1953), *Shree 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1955) that responded to these diverse stimuli thrown up by modernity.

I keep citing examples from Hindi film industry (recently christened as ‘Bollywood’) for two reasons. One, notwithstanding the usual complaint that these films partially brought about a hegemony of Hindi language as the official language of India, these films have had (some sort of) a pan-Indian audience and can therefore be taken as having a credible representational value (of, and for, the palpable and ‘immediate’ popular voice).

Mumbai, the financial capital of India and a cosmopolitan city, forms the setting of many of these films – both as a microcosm of Indian urbanity or middle class and actual location – so much that it is indeed inviting to chart a chronicle of the life-in/of the-city as a recurring theme of these films. Second, because cinema is the modern technology/medium that has experienced the least time-lag in coming to India. More recently, there has been one additional factor. At least for the last ten years, no Indian

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18 Other prolific Indian film industries have been Tamil and Bengali. The issue of Hindi as ‘national’ language is important as this recently constructed language has had a checkered career in establishing its official claim. For a succinct discussion, see Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formations of Identity in India’, in S. Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution*, 127-166 (essay originally published in 1992). More recently though – one could say post-MTV – Bollywood has effectively given birth to a new urban kitsch ‘Hinglish’, often used in films, TV, advertisements, cellphone messages and digital interfaces like the Facebook or Twitter.

19 Certainly not in the sense of being un- or non-mediated, but as an art-form that might be seen as lacking in critical self-reflexivity for the elite audience or the scholar. Indeed, that has been the consistent criticism from the latter, other than not being ‘realistic’ enough. I would place myself here in the same league as Ashis Nandy who approvingly describes these films as the ‘slums’ eye-view of Indian politics’. Also see the introduction in Ravi S. Vasudevan ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), 1 - 36.
cultural/consumption item has grown more in terms of exportability than Bollywood – one more site for the ex-pat Indians to identify with and for non-Indians to marvel at. It has come to signify a ready equivalent of exotic wonders like the Taj Mahal. It is possible to argue that in the case of India, cinema is one mechanically reproduced form that has served up a realist aesthetic, re-defining and wryly usurping the lost aura of organic artforms.

Sixties onwards, politics in India has become more disjointed and a complicated force-field – owing to unrest within the Congress party, shortage of food, dissenting voices arising from various corners of the territory (e.g. Assam, Telengana, Naxalbari) as well as wars with neighbouring countries – just to name a few of the crises that resisted the formation of an active public sphere as in Western democracies. However, it is not my intention to attempt a detailed political narrative of the post-colonial India over the decades. I will restrict myself to relevant developments in the media that inaugurated new relationships between the institution of the state and citizenship as a lived practice, i.e., in other words, how ‘national populars’ formed and changed the course of governance as a function of constitutional democracy.

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21 The phrase takes its origin from the writings of Italian scholar-activist Antonio Gramsci for whom the ‘modern prince’, i.e. the Italian Communist Party, should have brought the peasant masses and the industrial urban social groups together to express a “collective will” but has failed to do so. For a discussion of the term and how it has been interpreted within the discipline of cultural studies (especially the Birmingham School), see D. Forgacs, ‘National-Popular: Genealogy of a Concept’, in S. During ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), 177-190. However, it should be noted that for Gramsci, the national-popular is not a universalizable concept or a general set of conditions at all.
From child-reader-citizen in making as a member of family-nation\(^{22}\) (i.e. in so far as being a member of a family marks the initial stage of entering the symbolic space of a nation) to consumer per se is an arc of experience (or personhood/figuration, viewed from the angle of production of childhood as cultural practice). These two figurations occupy different locations, denoting ‘progress’ on a horizontal plane, in the acknowledged (read Western) evolutionary narrative of modernity via capital. ACK, for a generation growing up in the 1970s and 80s, occupies a significant stage in this rite of passage by presenting a model of good or ethical consumption. That is not to say that consumption as such is a very recent cultural phenomenon in India, but that its cultural significance has decisively changed, say, from the days of Nehru era. I would gloss over some of the factors that might have contributed to this predicament since they have been dealt with elsewhere, in available political narratives of post-independence India that have been mentioned. Post-1960, the rationing system came as a state subsidy to tackle a considerable shortage of food. And with steady devaluation of Indian currency during the Indira Congress era, the Indian middle class neither could afford consumer items, nor, and this is equally important as a cultural trait, was such behavior considered desirable or in keeping with societal norms. In other words, consumption as an activity even in the late 1970s or early 1980s was inescapably a ‘social’ act, and not individual choice or right. Such a habitus stemmed directly from the political economic situation and was linked in turn to larger

\(^{22}\) I often use the words ‘citizen’, ‘public’, nation’, ‘family’ in combinations. I would continue to do so since these terms are related to particular social contexts and refuse to be bound by any easy definition, say within the structuralist-semiotic grids of Western variety. It is of methodological importance to me since such combinations often help us to better describe the mechanism or operation of these concepts in practice (even if provisionally, for the sake of discussion here) and also to note the difference from a corresponding first-world conception. More so because the advent of democracy or capitalism (pace Western definitions of the same) in India has been anything but historically similar, and needs further research before they can be theorized – one reason behind the recent proliferation of adjectival phrases like ‘another modernity’, ‘fractured modernity’, and so on.
contexts of governance and ideology (anti-Americanism, for instance, was stronger in Left-dominated corners of the country, but the official diplomatic stand was not far removed on this issue). Perhaps there was an element of Gandhian residue as well, or its legacy that survived in popular rhetoric.

The recent Rajkumar Hirani film, *Laagey Raho Munnabhai* (2009), is an intelligent and playful treatment of this sentiment. Hirani builds the satiric appeal of the film on the (essentially moral) assumption that, finally, after threescore and two years of independence, ‘Gandhism’ (universal, humanist values popularly associated with the figure of the Mahatma, such as honesty, tolerance and restraint) is dead. However, the dead Father of the Nation appears in the dream of an unlikely citizen of India, Munnabhai the strongman and petty criminal. Munna represents the common man on the street in so far as he has taken recourse to unlawful means but is good at heart. He is a Robin Hood of sorts and a comic travesty of the ‘angry young man’ of the 70s. Munna often fights his own conscience, breaks down and has taken to daydreaming about Bapu. The motif or metaphor of daydream (that exists only for Munna) is the precise realistic double-edged comic device that Hirani exploits to its best effect. It is both real and fantastic, comic and serious, madness and vision. Inspired by his conversations with Bapu (that often lands him in hilarious and troublesome situations; even his right-hand aid Circuit takes it to be an overbalance of humor or, as he puts it in the racy, hybrid parlance of the street urchin, ‘chemical locha’), the bhai takes to an even more unlikely job – he helps out people in desperation by giving them his version of Gandhian wisdom.

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23 Other than another ironic presence, the intaglio print on the 500-rupee note – pointed out to Munna by his aid and confidante Circuit. The ‘remainder’ is ironic since Gandhi is perceived as staunch supporter of the downtrodden and thus, against money-power.

24 A slang for goon.
(Gandhigiri) on a FM radio channel – a program that soon acquires high popularity. Incidentally, this film made the word Gandhigiri, a strange and aptly funny coinage (strange because the way it directly adds a suffix after the name: the suffix connotes whatever a follower of Gandhian principles learns and realizes in and through his/her life. The suffix used here instead stands for, and semantically short-circuits, a whole philosophy of life, a practice) so popular that it readily entered the vocabulary of everyday (political) speech. Even the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approvingly referred to it in a public gathering on a foreign tour. Again, my point in discussing this film and its brief aftermath is the extent to which the institution of state stands at a receiving end here (for the PM certainly was, willy-nilly, in recommending Gandhigiri as a desirable formula for citizenry) points to the length and direction that the Indian democracy has travelled. It was quite unthinkable in the days of Nehru when the state was both the leading force and legitimizing authority.

The nation-state of Nehruvian era has given place to something else qualitatively different – we will call it the emergence of a new ‘visual public’. This country-nation of post-liberal (and advanced capitalist, arguably) period has a niche symbolic value – having an external, identifiable, objectal trait as it were – more a fit object of nostalgia than imperative. State as a signifier of nation has assumed a certain exteriority, and hence detachability too. The two are no longer concomitant and/or synchronic (i.e. in the sense that the political life of the state in popular perception does not concur with the essentially mythic journey of the nation). But not that it has ceased to be a sacred symbol; for many it is still a touchy and closely guarded refuge. The controversy around the Bharat Mata painting by M. F. Hussain could be a case in point, though there was a
definite Hindu communal edge to it as well. Let me take a slightly more ‘secular’ example, this time from the fashion industry. Malini Ramani, a popular designer, sported a strappy, skin-hugging, knee-length dress in saffron, white and green stripes, complete with the blue *chakra* in the middle, at a fashion gathering in 2000. When her photograph (holding a glassful of beer in her right hand could have only added to the controversy) was published in newspapers and magazines, it drew wide attention at a national level. Eventually it led to police action against the designer and the dress was seized. Reportedly, there is still a case against her pending in the courts. Four years later, this incident had a re-run of sorts. A former Miss India model-turned-actress walked into the ramp with a tricolor dress but decided to go one up on Ramani this time. At the end of the ramp, she flung it open. In the rather amusing description by a gentleman, a local resident who was present among the audience: “She was wearing very less underneath.” All eyes fell out. Some protesters even complained that the police personnel present at the show did nothing to stop this disrespect shown to the flag. A local resident and aged ex-freedom fighter was vocal in his displeasure along predictable lines when he spoke to the media as were many others. I will end this discussion with one brief historical account of this topic, namely the public rights and restrictions regarding the Indian national flag. The Government of India passed an act that restricted the use and display of the national flag in 1971. Following this, only senior public officials and state institutions were allowed to hoist the flag on their premises but not ordinary citizens. The latter were allowed to do so, and wear tricolor badges, only on special days such as Republic Day, Independence Day and Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday. A PIL case was filed in 1995 demanding the right of every Indian national to obtain the right to fly the tricolor, provided they do it
‘respectfully’. After six years, the court ruled in its favor but imposed new specifications as well. The tricolor could be worn only on certain garments like T-shirts or caps, but not on swimsuits and evening gowns. Also, the flag cannot be printed or embroidered on articles for personal and casual use, such as cushion covers, handkerchiefs, pillows, napkins and dress material.

The discussion above, drawing on materials or sources not usually encountered in academic discussions, nevertheless betrays the tension around a major national symbol and a mark of state’s sovereignty. And it also shows how the citizen-public and the state might occasionally lock horns over the use of such symbols in public view, with the latter coming up with an anxious compromise – because a middle ground has to be reached between sensitivity to public sentiment or action and authority – adjudication over the issue. Laws like these are particularly supple and vulnerable balancing acts. What it goes to show is that the tricolor as a visual symbol or idea\(^{25}\) of shared (national) identity is in transition. But it comes with a rider: we should guard against any unnecessary enthusiasm over a citizenry passionately striving to lose its chains. A Delhi-based designer’s reaction on BBC on the same issue is quite ambivalent. While he asserts that Indians always wear the tricolor with pride, the colors themselves are not suited to the usual tones (what he means is pigmentation) of our skin and hence does not make one appear handsome unlike the more ‘sporty’ British or US flag. He concludes with this profoundly open-ended remark: “Our national colors don’t represent fashion.” Clearly, there is an element of

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\(^{25}\) The word ‘idea’, whether meaning figure, image or symbol, or in the sense of Platonic archetype (Form) or ideal prototype, comes from the Greek verb ‘idein’ or ‘to see’. The first recorded use of the word meaning something that has to do with a mental process or intellection occurs in mid-17th century. Before that, the word in recorded usage always had an irreducibly visual reference. For a brief discussion, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, 5-6.
indecision that he tries to hide under the ‘professional’ speak. But then, his view is probably closer to the average reaction of our times than the examples given earlier.

If Bollywood and satellite TV have occupied the focus of the recent academic attention as factors inaugurating notable changes in public sphere, perhaps it is time one should pay attention to later technologies that have already entered the everyday world of Indian citizen-public – the middle-class at any rate – namely mobile phones, computer and the internet. All of these have been more or less coterminous with economic liberalization in the Indian experience. Although these technologies have taken some time to become comparable with international standards, of late India has become an important global player. With one of the lowest cellphone tariffs in the world, telephony is now accessible to a large number of people and has proved to be a leveler among various economic brackets. Incidentally, India also boasts the highest number of DTH transmission providers. The number of internet users is increasing fast, especially among the urban population. But compared to many other countries, it is still a poor percentage. There are other aspects as well. The use of internet was introduced largely through technocratic white-collar professionals (and increased steadily owing to European and US-based companies outsourcing their work until the very recent economic meltdown) and a small academic community (with programs such as ERNET), but it has not experienced a sizeable growth.

On the other hand, the rise of the software sector has been largely dependent on financial calculations by MNCs abroad that hire cheap skilled labor for their own profit and thus arguably has given rise to a new version of colonialism. And the overwhelming
dominance of English as content language has resisted wide usage of the web\textsuperscript{26} in the suburbs or villages. As a technology it is still restricted to an (formally) educated audience and to specific commercial, academic or other utilitarian purposes (with stray exceptions, e.g., pornography and gaming for the urban youth or downloading films/music). Hence, the web remains minimally significant as a public medium or enabling technology for larger masses\textsuperscript{27}. But for those initiated, long-distance communication or accessing and sharing information – the latter still falls short of expectation generated by the recent Prasar Bharati RTI act – has become cheaper, faster and easier. It is possible for the internet user today to ignore geographical distance, the element or condition of bound territoriality as nation in other words, and get access to news or participate in movements – to imagine a different community from what is his/her citizenship following older official paradigms, almost by default (\textit{jus soli} or \textit{jus sanguinis}).

Now for the more specific theme of the Indian child’s position, perceived and/or represented in various media, and shifts therein. I should add the customary rejoinder that my discussion focuses more or less on the average middle-class urban/suburban child, 1970s onwards, who has the good fortune of being exposed to school education and other entertainment materials permissible\textsuperscript{28} within such income brackets. We have discussed on

\textsuperscript{26} For a brief discussion, see K. Gopinath, ‘Internet in India’, in Rajagopal, \textit{The Indian Public Sphere}, 291-311. Phenomena such as cyber warfare hit the headlines (in India) more because of novelty than their subversive potential.

\textsuperscript{27} For the selfsame reasons, I doubt whether the kind of visual community envisaged by theorists of digital culture such as Lev Manovich is \textit{fully} valid in case of India (although some of his insights, such as database as a ‘symbolic form’ or emergence of new models of authorship, remain generally valid). It is still a growing sector.

\textsuperscript{28} I mean a variety of items like toys, foodstuff such as Bournvita or Poppins lozenges, or color pastels etc., a sample of which is based on advertisements of children’s products in magazines and comic books such as ACK. I attempt to chart an account of their position as target audience and the possible ways of
an earlier occasion how the two major successful reading materials for children produced by India Book House\textsuperscript{29}, ACK comic books and Tinkle magazine, could be taken as representing a shift in attitude to child-subject. Here I try to elucidate it further. Shifts such as these are slow, uneven (as they are spread across various events and fields that do not easily lend themselves to definite periodization) and often apparently imperceptible, unless they are crystallized into laws which then serve as concrete historical markers. But convenient as they may be, such event-history approach belies the cultural logic, what takes place at the level of ‘structures of feeling’\textsuperscript{30} – an everyday process that might be elusive because it is ordinary.

\textsuperscript{29} The rights of these two products are now with ACK Media Ltd.

\textsuperscript{30} This phrase was famously coined by the Marxist literary-cultural scholar Raymond Williams in The Long Revolution (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), also a pioneer of cultural studies in England. Although now considered somewhat essentialist by theorists, Williams could nuancedly put his finger on the site of culture as a ‘popular’, everyday process and/or practice.
The changing culture of childhood in popular Hindi films

In an attempt to point at the direction of the changing attitude to child as a member (or an actor) in the family-society-nation triad, I take up three popular Hindi films. Each has a male child as the protagonist surrounded by one or more children as well as parents or father-figures\(^{31}\). Unlike most Bollywood films where children appear as part of family or minor sidekicks, i.e. to fulfill a designated function, these films feature children (or their problems) at the point of narrative focalization. With around thirty years’ gap between each of them, all three have been reasonably popular in their own days, winning awards and so on. The films are: Jagriti (Satyen Bose, 1954), Masoom (Shekhar Kapoor, 1983) and Taare Zamin Par (Aamir Khan, 2007)\(^{32}\). Each film, I would argue, allows narrative agency to child-protagonist in a way that is typical of its time. But when viewed together, one can see a thematic development – the shift in ‘culture of childhood\(^{33}\)’ in other words.

\(^{31}\) Although the appearance of children in Bollywood films, especially family dramas/melodramas, is quite common, films dealing almost exclusively with children or their problems are comparatively rare. The stray efforts by official bodies like the Children’s Film Society (although there are quite a few well-known directors who made films for children or young adults, such as Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Tapan Sinha, and more recently Vishal Bharadwaj or Rituparno Ghosh, both within or outside this enterprise) have hardly been enough.

\(^{32}\) Roughly translated as ‘The Awakening’, ‘The Innocent’, and ‘Stars on Earth’, respectively. Jagriti won the Filmfare award for best film. So did Taare Zameen Par in 2008 and also (what seems like a newly founded category) the National Film Award for best film on Family Welfare. Coming around 20 years after liberalization of economy, Taare has had 2 DVD editions, one for India by UTV Home Entertainment, another for abroad made the following year, and distributed by Walt Disney Home Entertainment (the first Indian film to have business collaboration with Disney). And although Masoom is primarily known to the Indian audience as his debut film, Shekhar Kapoor went on to become an internationally acclaimed director.

\(^{33}\) It is perhaps better to write ‘nature/culture of childhood’ since the popular train of thought would still associate the child-figure or the state of childhood with ‘nature’ – a kind of universal, pristine ‘essence’. It is possible to extend the child’s physical inability in need of nurture to a (general/generalizable) trope of being essentially ‘pre-modern’. We find innumerable references to childhood in racist-colonialist discourses that connote immaturity or even barbarism. For discussion, see Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy (New Delhi: OUP, 1983) who often draws inspiration from (psycho-)analysis, most notably in the case of Africa by Fanon.
*Jagriti* shows a spoilt kid from a middle-class family, Ajay, joining a residential boarding school much against his willingness. He is otherwise a lively kid, enjoying games and playing tricks on his neighbors. The hostel life takes away the bounty of nature but, as his uncle (the male head of the family) says, it should make a disciplined boy out of him. The notion of discipline here, as we will see, is a complex one – carrying different meanings for three members of Ajay’s family – and bound up with ideas of duty and sacrifice. Ajay has to leave his friends and the caring protection of his home and Ajay’s mother sacrifices the companionship of her only son since it is her duty to bring up his son properly. The uncle has already made a symbolic sacrifice by not getting married and deciding to take full responsibility of his sister-in-law and her son. He is a disciplinarian as he is affectionate (he sheds tears when Ajay takes leave of his mother and also when he takes leave of Ajay at the latter’s hostel) but it will be an embarrassment and a shame if he fails to bring up the kid properly that he is responsible for. Additionally, the uncle, being a senior citizen of a country that has lately been free of colonial rule, considers Ajay’s upbringing a sacred duty that he owes to his family and motherland. Discipline might be temporarily harsh but greater is the duty to bring up Ajay as a good citizen of nation-state.

After the initial adjustment problems, Ajay becomes popular with other hostel boys. Led by him, the boys continue to play tricks on the inefficient headmaster. However, things

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34 His father is deceased but as was the custom, Ajay and his mother stay with his uncle who is unmarried.
35 Although never spelt out as such, this is a typical source of moral authority.
36 One might find here a schematic civic parallel to Blakean journey of childhood from natural innocence (Ajay’s home and willful life he leads), to experience (hostel life), then onto a higher innocence (better citizen-in-making).
37 *Jagriti* is a well-made realist narrative. The boarding school is shown to be run by a corrupt and inefficient headmaster who enjoys his sumptuous meals more than his students and at their cost. Ajay
begin to change when a new headmaster, Shekhar (played by Abhi Bhattacharya who won the National award for the Best Supporting Actor for this role) replaces this corrupt and uncouth-looking headmaster. Shekhar brings in a whiff of fresh air with his unconventional, progressive approach to schooling. Resembling Tagore’s Shantiniketan, the liberal teacher of the ‘modern’ age takes his classes outside the claustrophobic confines of classrooms, eats with them at the same table, and takes them on an excursion tour so that the students become familiar with their own country. He also sings a song that literally translates as: “Come children let me show you a glimpse of Hindustan, Make a mark on your forehead (tilak) with this soil, this land of sacrifice ...”38. Fittingly, this part-historical and part-mythic-metaphorical journey is shown through a montage that signifies a practical, cognitive act for the students – ‘knowing’ India as motherland. He asks of his students to trust him fully so that he can make them usher forth a bright future 39. But his unconventional attitude and popularity with students soon become a

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38 The words are: “Aao bacche tumhe dikhaye jhaanki Hindusthan ki, Is mitti se tilak karo yeh dharti hai balidaan ki”. One could question why this song uses the communal word ‘Hindustan’ instead of ‘Bharat’, also a derivation from the more colonial usage ‘Hindostan’. Interestingly, the film was so popular that there was a Pakistani remake that virtually reproduced this song with the word ‘Pakistan’ replacing ‘Hindustan’. It is indeed tempting to translate the song in full. I will give a few samples instead. It takes them through the Himalayas, the “protector of the north(-ern boundary)”, the Bay of Bengal “that washes her (i.e. Bharat Mata, the popular feminized body politic) feet”, the banks of Ganges “with its many a people and their conversation speak of a quiet splendor”, and such “images of glory and pride”. Shekhar gives the students a lesson in the history and legends of India, starting with Rana Pratap and Padmini in Rajasthan, Shivaji’s exploits against the Mughals, the tragic story of Jalianwalabagh, finally ending with the greenery and sacrificing sons of Bengal (facing a statue of Netaji). The boys sing ‘Bandemataram’ in chorus at the end of every refrain. Fittingly, this part-historical and part-mythic-metaphorical journey is shown through a montage that signifies a practical, cognitive, and ethical undertaking for the students – ‘knowing’ their country.

39 Actually in so many words. Looking upon children as successful future citizens or constituents of a better society is very common in this era. One can cite film songs of similar import, such as ‘Nanneh
concern for other teachers. The conflict is amicably settled only after the school inspector praises him for his innovative teaching methods.

Meanwhile, another little story has been brewing. Ajay befriends a poor, handicapped boy with an angelic face who is every inch Ajay’s opposite – an ideal son and meritorious student. When Shakti meets with a car accident while trying to prevent a self-loathing Ajay from leaving the school and succumbs holding his hands at the hospital, it brings a permanent change in Ajay’s character. With Shekhar taking the responsibility of teaching him personally, Ajay ranks first in the school final examination and also leads his school football team to victory. The prodigal son has now become a model student and receives a medal. Shekhar now leaves the school for his new assignment. Surrounded by students, he breaks into a song for the last time as the camera pans up and down alternatively on Mahatma Gandhi’s photograph hung on the wall, the Indian map and the students: “We have salvaged the boat through the storm, Now the future lies safe in your hands …” If the title sequence started with boys in uniform doing calisthenics and parades in unison, the school, not unlike many others existing even now, has photographs/busts of the architects of ‘modern’ India such as Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, Bose and others. In an intimate gesture, the deceased student Shakti’s photograph is hung too, and garlanded. Ajay takes his prize before Shakti’s photo and dedicates his success to him. Of all the photos, Gandhi has the most distinct visual presence. On another occasion, the students celebrate Gandhiji’s birthday with a song: “You have brought independence to this country, O Saint of Sabarmati, you’ve done wonders…”. The song (and dance) element as a feature of Bollywood movies has often survived the movies themselves. For a semiotic/cultural analysis of this phenomenon, see A. Jaaware, ‘Who is that is singing?’ in Rajagopal, op. cit., pp. 151-168.

I have tried to translate the song almost verbatim mainly because it is pedagogic in intent, hence word-heavy. The Hindi original is: “Hum laaye hain kashti toofan se nikaal ke, Is desh ko raakhna mere bacchey samhal ke… ”.

40 Their passionate, committed friendship with strong emotional upheavals borders on homoeroticism. Part of Shakti’s appeal as a character (good-looking, lonesome, pure and hapless) has to do with the erotic feelings he evokes, also when he lies in his mother’s lap, looks deeply into her eyes, holds hands and sings of taking her to faraway abode of dreams. The gestures and lyrics inevitably remind one of countless similar romantic songs.

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the song at conclusion fulfils the promise with the hope for a better future. The children
have now achieved what was expected of them, becoming responsible mantle-bearers of
new India – the ‘generation next’ of the 1950s. A song of similar import from 1960s can
be mentioned here that portrays the predicament in clearer terms. This time sung by the
boy-citizen himself, the song “Nanna munna rahin hoon, Desh ka sipahi hoon…” from
Son of India (1962) shows him marching with an army cap, a flag on his shoulders and
ends with shots of Republic Day parade in front of India Gate in New Delhi.

Cut to 1980s. The imperative to bring up children only as model sons/daughters of
Mother India has lost its 50s-type urgency. The country has been going through some
rough patches, internal dissenting voices and communal tensions have had themselves
clearly heard, the middle-class nuclear family has emerged on the scene, and is much
afflicted by continuous price rise and corrupt governance. The Emergency, above
everything, has dashed the general faith in political leadership and the emergence of
coalition governments have left the people somewhat confused as to what extent they are
being targeted as vote-banks as inefficient bureaucratic operation has survived the spread
of an unevenly spread democratic structure. Much of these occupy the general
background of a film such as Masoom though they might not erupt upon the narrative
surface. In other words, the very fact that a film that sensitively handles the problems
within an upper-middle class Delhi family as an autonomous (familial/personal) issue
without any reference to country/nation, demonstrates the political context mentioned
above as a sort of negative boundary.
*Masoom* tells the story of an upwardly mobile nuclear family of an architect DK\(^{43}\) (played by Naseeruddin Shah) and Indu (Shabana Azmi) and their two daughters. Everything seems to be hunky dory between the couple before DK receives a phone call from his aged schoolteacher saying that the latter is in custody of a boy who is DK’s biological son out of wedlock from a previous affair. Now that the boy’s mother is dead, the teacher asks DK to fetch his son and take his responsibility. DK is disturbed and guilt-ridden\(^{44}\) and takes to excessive drinking. But being a liberal, he tells Indu the whole story when she asks him. Indu becomes furious and calls their marriage a sham. The daughters sense the tension brewing but remain silent. However, with the promise (to his wife) of providing shelter to a motherless boy for a few days and fulfill his fatherly duties, DK brings his son home. The cherubic Rahul turns out to be a sensitive, introvert and vulnerable child. Although he soon strikes a chord with the little girls, he is extremely hurt whenever Indu acts strange (she hardly talks to him, leaves the dinner table at his presence and makes her displeasure obvious at every possible occasion)\(^{45}\).

\(^{43}\) Possibly his acronym. But even Indu calls him DK – possibly an indicator of their class position and liberal outlook.

\(^{44}\) Although the root cause of his guilt is never disclosed, much as it is apparent in his neglect of usual duties or alcoholism, even in his recollection and monologues. Is it the past affair, is it the death of the girl he once was in love with but has neglected since, is it the boy who was born without his knowledge or is it the fact that the boy has not known paternal affection – but perhaps a little bit of all these.

\(^{45}\) The film, despite being careful in its treatment of a rather touchy issue in the heteronormative bourgeois family atmosphere and critiquing its hypocrisy at times, has a fair share of sentimentality. Of course, even the angry young man of 70s is always at his weakest before his mother and ready to forfeit everything, keeping alive a tradition that attaches a high emotional value to parent-child relation. Scholars have sometimes speculated as to what extent it is a survival from a now-lost or rare folk dramatic tradition that makes foregrounding of certain emotional states a formal protocol. Popular films, following this line of argument, respond to these erstwhile non-realist formal features through (pro-)filmic devices such as extreme close-ups and background music. *Masoom* resembles run-of-the-mill melodramas at times, e.g., when Rahul implores on finding his absent but extremely caring father about whom he dreams every night, to which DK always retains a visibly disturbed and guilt-ridden silence or, when Rahul makes an illustration of his imaginary father after his ‘uncle’, adding a pair of spectacles, and shows it to DK asking for his opinion. On another occasion, when Rahul tells Indu that she is wearing a saree that reminds him of his deceased mother, she shouts at him: “Listen carefully for once and all, that I am *not* your mother! I can *never* become your mother!” There is at least one more
Both DK and Indu are equally anxious to show their care (or disapproval) towards Rahul, respectively, which leaves the boy more confused and lonely. Once he makes a decorated cardboard house for Indu’s birthday. Indu is initially very pleased with the gift, but withdraws as soon as she comes to know who made it.

DK, in turn, continues to suffer from mental agony as he cannot share this socially embarrassing secret with friends and nor finds peace at home, becomes unmindful in his job and earns his boss’ ire. However, he makes an arrangement for a boarding school accommodation for Rahul in Nainital as per his promise to Indu. Rahul is not happy and grows more inconsolable as the day draws near. The film reaches its climax when he goes missing on a chilly winter night. After he is escorted home, Rahul confesses to Indu that he ran away after he found the truth about his father/uncle from a letter that arrived at DK’s office that morning. Indu is shaken this time; the pointlessness of her behavior dawns on her and she intercepts to bring Rahul back just in time before the train leaves for Nainital, thereby accepting her responsibility and winning back DK’s trust in her. It is a happy family situation once again, shelter for an unfortunate innocent provided for and the couple having grown more emotionally mature between themselves.

scene that many would find today both ideologically disturbing and politically incorrect. Indu has a ‘feminist’ friend (played by Tanuja), an independent, single woman who runs a dress materials shop and is known for not mincing her words however unpleasant the truth is. The latter decides to marry an army major, her ex-flame and a single father with children, when she is asked to take care of the motherless children. When Indu listens to her story, she expresses her surprise at that her friend has agreed to compromise a long-founded independence despite the children not being her biological offspring. Indu’s friend replies: “But my womanly pride had to give in before an appeal to the incomparable joys of motherhood!” Of course, this acts as a gloss to the main plot.

46 One cannot but mention an eternally favorite children’s song from this film, penned by Gulzar and set to tune by R. D. Burman: “Lakdi pe kathi, kathi pe ghoda etc.”. Gulzar’s song about a toy-horse written with a spirit of childlike lightheartedness is both aptly delightful and dramatic.
Just a few words before we move on to the next film. The child-protagonist in *Jagriti* had little choice in deciding his future that was both morally imperative and manifest in the ideal parent-teacher figure (Shekhar). It has a strong logocentric theme of growing up: Ajay has to mould himself in Shekhar’s image. In achieving what he does, he follows a pre-scribed destiny. As a bildungsroman, it has a tautological movement. There is nothing new (in being an exemplary student and future citizen) that is not old, and what is old (humanist virtues in a nation-state, articulated in new methods but only apparently) expresses itself anew. It is a lot like the song by Shekhar and his students on the tour where history and tradition are so blended in a symbiotic combine that they can only reciprocally reproduce one another.

*Masoom* draws the line differently. Nation as a frame of reference has now receded to the background. Its traces have been internalized and are expressed only through the conscience calls of an upwardly mobile white collar professional. DK is a successful citizen but equally bound by his duties to his teacher and the lost son – the national has now exchanged places with the social/moral. Or rather, the former (citizen of a maturing democracy) has extended its field to include virtues that are humanist and arguably universal (a loyal student, faithful husband and a responsible father). What passes off as normal is also a symptom of the normative. There is a certain telescoping of the national here along the lines of bourgeois liberal value-system that draws our attention away from its historically contingent character. The couple in *Masoom* is both exceptional (in terms of social class, wealth, prestige and liberal outlook, since 1980s is a decade marked by a
high rate of corruption and unemployment\textsuperscript{47} and prototypical (responsible, caring parents) and in that sense a model couple, at least towards the beginning.

The crisis (or taboo) is also twofold or operates at two levels. First, it is DK’s bigamy that threatens the sanctity of the nuclear family that was projected, during the Indira era, as the ideal and normative family structure\textsuperscript{48} -- hence its importance in the official nation-building task. Indu’s reaction certainly proves her commitment and possessiveness, but she hardly behaves like a liberal-minded person thereafter. Rather, she assumes a moral high ground on this issue\textsuperscript{49}. However, the film remains sympathetic to her sufferings (and self-pity) as well, parallel to DK’s self-loathing. Kapoor does not choose a side or become judgmental but focuses on the crisis that strains the couple’s relation, affects daily routine, and how the two daughters react to it – each according to her age and maturity. Such complexities are foreign to a film like \textit{Jagriti} – perhaps it is also a measure of the checkered journey of Indian nation-state. For the protagonist of \textit{Jagriti}, it is only a matter of time before he reaches the destination that \textit{everybody} approves of or already had. The home/family, school and nation thus form concentric circles, unlike

\textsuperscript{47} There are odd references to it every now and again. The cocktail parties and clubs are occasions for building right contacts that facilitate professional mobility and business deals. DK’s boss and his closest friend (Saeed Jaffrey) repeatedly refer to it as being a basic rule of the game. On the other hand, the hugely popular angry young man figure (that has become almost synonymous with Amitabh Bacchan) is always shown as a crusader against societal pressures, injustice and exploitation – a strong populist-moralist position that effectively stands for what the state cannot achieve within official bureaucratic means.

\textsuperscript{48} Incidentally, the family replicates the ‘Hum do, hamare do’ slogan regularly printed in newspapers and aired on radio/TV.

\textsuperscript{49} There are a host of popular Hindi films that deal with such familial problems from 70s and 80s, say those directed by Basu Bhattacharya, that point at the limits of nuclear family as harmonized conjugal unit.
*Masoom* where the interrelations and boundaries of these units are variable and contingent on (narrative) context\(^{50}\).

Now for the second problematic – namely, the extent to which the children appear in *Masoom* as having agency in whatever (representation in general and plot, the direction to which the film narrative moves) involves them. My argument is that all three children here, including the boy in search of his father, are allowed only *narrative* agency, meaning that their agency exists but only up to a point. That would imply two things. One, that more than many other Bollywood movies where the children appear only to populate the screen, add variety to it, or to augment some emotive-ideological investment (celebration of ‘family life’ being a signpost of ‘nation’/’tradition’, for instance), the children in this film occupy a central space in terms of narrative focalization and as problematic or theme. But they do not come across as ‘round characters’\(^{51}\). Their characterization is integral to the narration but its vector, so to speak, does not change or evolve in course of the narrative. They provide the occasion for narrative, are the declared or implied addressee, but themselves are comparable to catalysts or object-actants in the syntagmatic sense\(^{52}\). The narrative is more about middle-class *adult* taboo

\(^{50}\) The presence of school as ideological apparatus, for one, is negligible in the narrative of *Masoom*. And discipline as a civic habit has engulfed the dinner table too. But of course, the daughters are allowed their share of fun as it is an integral part of good liberal upbringing as well. They are free to watch *Chitrahaar*, a popular showcase of Hindi film songs from the Doordarshan days. There are such references to contemporary media/entertainment culture to add to the film’s contemporaneity. The younger daughter, the more childlike and bubblier of the two, keeps singing a song from the multi-starrer blockbuster *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1997) to herself and whenever she tries to please her parents.

\(^{51}\) On the distinction between flat and round characters in a fictional narrative, see E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927).

\(^{52}\) A. J. Griemias is known to be the proponent of the actantial model of structuralist analysis of narrative. Actants are structural units or axes of action – comparable to Propp’s ‘sphere of action’ – that take place in the narrative and help us analyze it retroactively, but not to be confused with the more traditional categories like point/s of view, character etc. An actant, following this model need not be active – as in this case.
and indecision involving a boy-child. The boy only acts once, towards the end, when he runs away. But on the whole it is his overwhelming incapacity to act that paradoxically adds the unique distinction to his role or narrative function, as the title of the film shows. His helplessness is his strength and valence.

One more thing remains to be said in terms of storytelling. All major adult characters in the movie are distinct from each other and they cannot, or do not, think and act in unison, even the best of friends – not to speak of the central couple whose relationship grows sour. Only the three children who do not carry the baggage of ‘personality’ – again a paradoxical or ‘default’ virtue – come together and form a bond. It is most distinctly visible when the play or sing together and act as a positive counterpoint to the troubled adults who dominate the screen-space. It is a major source of (somewhat voyeuristic) pleasure, but it would be a mistake to equate this narrative function with any optimistic idea regarding children’s agency. To the extent this film had or still has popular endorsement, my claim that it is representative of the spirit of the 1970s-80s – also the heydays of ACK. I have already indicated how the ideological frame of reference has moved from what it was in the decades immediately following India’s independence.

53 Of course, it would be wrong to say that this never happened in post-independence Indian literature or film. For example, Ray’s Apu Trilogy (made between 1955 and 1959), a film version of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s novels (published between 1929 and 1932) that first drew in international audience, is an exceptionally rich and powerful bildungsroman. But that is partly my point – it is exceptional – and for one Apu trilogy one can find a number of works where children’s presence is passive, having a witnessing function at best, or as predictable pre-histories subsumed within genres of revenge tragedy (the shoeshine boy who becomes Vijay in Deewar for instance), rags-to-riches stories, romantic love stories or such other popular narrative modes (the boy who joins the circus in the sentimental melodrama Mera Naam Joker). Even in Pather Panchali, Durga has more active presence than Apu and ideologically, both occupy the same position in the nature-culture dyad.

54 I am assuming that this essentially fictional work has a real referent or at least an indexical value, more so since it belongs to popular culture. Even the most trenchant critics of mass culture, say the Frankfurt School, have tended to agree on this. It is their (i.e. mass cultural products) reificatory function that they have diagnosed as objectionable or potentially damaging.
Before moving onto the next film, the hardest to comment on because we sit as both judges and spectators in this case and therefore can claim least critical distance, I would attempt to point out a few more implications of the growing interiorization of nation as an imaginary and its attendant effects on ideas of child-subject/childhood.

**Indian ‘nation’ and its children**

Arguably, (being) national as a mode of belonging replaced and/or subsumed earlier communitarian modes such as that of religion or kinship\(^{55}\), pace Benedict Anderson. Hence, it follows that given the overwhelming politico-historical reality or presence of nation-state, nation as an idea is deeply mental and widely shared – although the modalities in different parts of the globe might be different\(^ {56}\). Nation as a notional category is commonly considered to have been ‘invented’ (Renan, Hobsbawm and Rangers), or liminally existing as a discursive formation (Bhabha) and hence volatile in nature. Given the complexity of identity-formation as a historical-ideological process and subsequent recognition of this identity as being different from others’ – the minimum necessary condition for a nation to exist – how children might be implicated in this undertaking remains a debatable issue. But, as we have already seen while discussing the films above, they are never outside its purview.

\(^{55}\) The awareness about gender as an axis of differential belonging is more recent. Scholars are divided also about Marxism as another possible grand theoretical alternative. For a brief discussion on this issue, see Anderson, ‘Introduction’, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

\(^{56}\) Partha Chatterjee’s critique of Anderson in the Indian case is precisely this. See his *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and also ‘Anderson’s Utopia’ mentioned above. In the latter essay, Chatterjee calls our attention to how Anderson’s position, for classical nationalism and against ethnic minority/community, is a classic Western Enlightenment preserve or inheritance.
Consider the following from a public address delivered by a member of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (set up in India in 2007)\textsuperscript{57} at the National Convention on Displaced People in 2008: “The starting point to any discussion on the rights of Children, displaced or otherwise, is that children are entitled to and should enjoy all rights as other citizens in a country enjoy, irrespective of their statehood (in a federal context) or nationality. Therefore their rights are indivisible. In the context of displaced, migrant, or refugee children, the rights would be same as applicable to all children, who are so situated. Their region of origin, their domicile, their religion or nationality is secondary or irrelevant in the context. Children’s rights, it must be emphasized, are universal and fundamental.” Fair enough. But the last paragraph changes the context dramatically. I quote again: “…I think it is important to emphasize that the rights of children…should be enforced more stringently \underline{BECAUSE THEY ARE CHILDREN}, irrespective of where they come from or where they have to go. Their entitlement and their rights flow from the fact that they are the citizens of and in this nation. The State and we as fellow human beings, have the obligation to fulfill the same.” The borderline between a putatively universal humanist appeal and state dictate, as the sudden slip-up shows, is typically thin. The ethical language of care and protection is only a screen for what is actually a matter of ownership for the state, undertaken in the name of (humanist) morality. If here it is couched in the typical rhetoric of moral duty, let me take an example again from a very recent past to illustrate the other side of the coin – namely, the anxiety of state authority as regards the limit of this ownership.

\textsuperscript{57} Available at: http://www.ncpcr.gov.in/Universal_Rights_of_Children_and_Displacement_Dipa_Dixit.pdf.
We look at another example. A recent UN report, released by the Under-Secretary-General in charge of Children and Armed Conflict, drew angry remarks from the Indian government. The report, on the basis of alleged forced recruitment, training and use of children by Maoist armed troops, claimed that India is no different from many other countries in Asia and Africa endangered by civil war situations. Hence, the report maintained, India should have observed appropriate special legal sanctions and human rights standards prescribed by UN charter under those situations. The Indian government, on their part, reacted sharply by saying that such a comparison was totally uncalled for. Acceding to that claim would have put India’s position as an emergent global power and a mature democracy under jeopardy – an embarrassment to its prestige and sovereignty. The newspaper report in question ultimately took a nationalist (or patriotic) stand, albeit in a liberal advocatory tone. The writer concluded that although India’s position was not as bad (as African countries torn by ethnic conflicts), it should step up on its military operations as well as civic measures in the Naxalite/Maoist-inflicted areas to ensure a proper solution to a highly sensitive subject as children’s safety.

The controversy aside, the last report has a few significant implications for the present discussion. There are international bodies arbitrating on issues concerning children. It is assumed (as imperative) that a state provides for children within its territory. The arbiting body, however, acting on ethico-humanist impulses, is no different from the state when it comes to address children as political subjects but replicates the structure and ideology of any modern state on a quantitatively bigger scale. The next point follows from this.

59 For example, see the following formal recognition by the Indian state. Article 15 of Constitution (1949) declares states that the State allows no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or religion but on
More often than not, children as future (active) members of state or society demand a different kind of sensitivity. Their apparent (or biological) passivity is their particular mode of political participation – one can talk of rights to be given to them but not duties in return. It is a curious, if ironic, location that they occupy – they are to be unconditionally assisted or enabled that, however, presupposes a conditional inability or incapacity to act. As human individuals, they are always in potentia, but no less political beings because of that. As subjects, they are to be invested in power but only by suspending the usual exercise of power. Certainly, it is a very tenuous predicament, and the line between empathy to affective sympathy and subsequent control is a very tricky and slippery one. It is in this context that the next film I discuss assumes its importance.

**Representing childhood now: Taare Zameen Par**

*Taare Zameen Par* (translated by US distributor Disney Corp. as *Like Stars on Earth*) has a tagline, like many other consumption items do: ‘Every child is special.’ Produced and directed by Aamir Khan, this film tells the story of an eight-year old boy-child, Ishan Awasti (played by Darsheel Safary who was awarded for his performance and his instant

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60 Because of their supposed lack of ability to speak for themselves, they are represented by other authorities – the biological or adopted parents, institutions such as orphanage or school, and the state. This often leads to questions of provisional or potential authority and ownership.

61 There is a rival claim that the project was (formally the creative director) Amol Gupte’s brainchild that was eventually taken over by the more influential Khan, but we let that alone. The initial inspiration behind the story, going by newspaper reports, was from the famous film director Akira Kurosawa’s autobiography.
rise to fame could draw comparisons with similar child-stars in Hollywood such as Macaulay Kaulkin or Shirley Temple) who comes from an average middle-class household in Mumbai. Ishan is an introvert and imaginative kid who has his share of fun and frolic but, much to his parents’ discomfort, fares badly at school. Even at home, he delights in every possible mischief and is the perfect foil to his elder brother – an ideal son and model student. Very early in the film, the difference between Ishan and the rest of his family is highlighted through a musical cue. One day, when the English language teacher asks him to read a sentence, a visibly uneasy Ishan tells her that the letters are ‘dancing.’ When she curtly repeats her instruction, the boy, even more shaken, starts mumbling loudly that causes a roar of laughter in the class. Thrown out, he is happy to take a trip around, and watches every little thing that catches his fancy – the multitude of life in a busy metropolis. The film, more than any other in recent memory, indeed lends freshness in sympathizing with a childlike point-of-view.

Meanwhile, Ishan continues to bunk classes. When he is caught, the furious parents decide to send him to a boarding school. The headmistress of Ishan’s school only adds to the worry by suggesting that he should be sent to a ‘special’ school – the first time

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62 The camera clearly identifies with Ishan’s viewpoint and is sensitive to the richness and diversity of ordinary life in a big city. The title sequence is carefully done. It uses animated figures of fish, turtle, squid and various other organisms running against or chasing each other playfully. The credits are done in a fittingly childlike calligraphy. The shot which shows the protagonist for the first time, starts with a close-up of a closed waterbody full of greenish black mud and muck. As we enter the life under water and its vertical depth, Ishan’s shadow falls on it. Sitting before the question paper during a maths test, he imagines himself to be flying through space like Calvin (of the popular ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ comic strip by Bill Watterson where Calvin invents a persona called Spaceman Spook for such explorations).

63 As we have also seen with Jagriti, boarding school has a particular connotation for the Indian middle-class. It is known to be disciplinarian, but looked upon as a sort of punishment. Both Ajay and Ishan are pressurized into going there, since perhaps it is customary for a child of that age to be staying under the loving care and protection of his parents.

64 Obviously, she suggests that Ishan might be mentally/cerebrally challenged. Note how the word ‘special’ is uttered with a pejorative undertone by the headmistress and deemed as a social taboo by
the word being used in the course of the movie. But the new school hardly turns out to be a better experience and Ishan, though he befriends a classmate there, only grows more solipsistic, closing in on a permanent maladjustment. However, assistance comes in the form of ‘Nikummb Sir’ (Aamir Khan), an art teacher from a nearby informal school, who grows in popularity because of his novel, playful and friendly attitude inside and outside the classroom. Nikumbh continues with his unconventional teaching methods despite being criticized by other teachers, and soon begins to take interest in Ishan who is conspicuous by his lack of participation. Through his active intervention, Ishan is diagnosed as suffering from dyslexia much like Nikummb himself did in his childhood. What follows is somewhat predictable. Nikummb successfully persuades Ishan to rediscover the latter’s interest in art and crafts – where Ishan’s real talent lies – even as the former helps him with other (formal school) subjects through prescribed scientific methods. Ishan is awarded the first prize in an art fair and also fares well in his formal school exam held at the end of the year. The parents, who have already realized their mistake, are now overjoyed to see their son come out with flying colors. The movie ends

Ishan’s father who takes it to be an insult or embarrassment to his social position. Ironically, that is the accepted politically correct lingo.

He appears as a flute-playing, hip-shaking joker uttering doggerel verses and singing a joyous nonsense song. Perhaps it is rather unusual for a schoolteacher, but the song acts more as a metaphor that marks an important turn in the narrative.

The plot has a lot of similarity with Jagriti, as we have seen once before. While Shekhar was the headmaster of the school and could enforce his decisions officially, Nikummb uses humor as means of showing his disagreement. In a significant scene in Taare, when a teacher condescendingly tells him that unity, faith and discipline are the three principles that work in New Era School, Nikummb stands up, extends his right hand, and says with a smile: ‘Hail Hitler.’ Although the formal school pedagogy is criticized in the movie repeatedly, the producers start the film with a disclaimer about the schools where the film was actually shot (that the film does not criticize their teaching methods).

Typically, again, the father is shown to be more upset with his son and treats him harshly; the mother is more caring and sympathetic.
with a freeze shot of Ishan being tossed up in the air by Nikumbh, followed by a tribute to the ‘real stars’ – shots of children in myriad moods and activities.

*Taare*, being an unusual film in terms of theme and treatment (nevertheless full of optimism), opened to rave reviews in public media across regions and turned out to be both a critical and box-office success. Besides regular commercial screenings, it was shown by the International Dyslexia Association in the US and was selected as India’s official entry for the Academy Awards nominations in 2009. When another British film about Mumbai slum boys eventually won the award for the best motion picture and *Taare* did not make the shortlist, quite a few public figures expressed surprise and hinted at a long-standing tradition of covert favoritism. But controversies apart, let us try to assess what is really ‘special’ about the film and its plot. Children, whether within a family, school or any such public spaces, are always unique. They belong to that transitional stage\(^{68}\) that defies any homogenizing straightjacket, hence the insistence (and debates) on a ‘proper’ upbringing. Scholars have drawn our attention to the various ways in which children invent and/or preserve intimate spaces (i.e. settings or actual locations, not to be equated with a more abstruse conceptual term such as ‘site’) and perform other such acts of negotiating with predominantly adult environments/institutions\(^{69}\). Such everyday operations or (re-)arrangements – what Michel de Certeau calls ‘bricolage’\(^ {70}\) – are

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\(^{68}\) I am also including the young adults here. The standard UN definition of a child is someone who has not reached the age of 18 years.


\(^{70}\) The noted French structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss also uses the term bricolage/bricoleur in more or less the same sense in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) and before Certeau’s book was published.
instinctive and common among children, more common than what full-grown adults do. The boy in *Taare* is no exception, may be a touch more imaginative and gifted. And he is biologically ‘special’ in a technical sense, as we have already noted, as Nikumbh was in his childhood days or the children are in the Tulip school where he teaches. These cerebrally challenged children occupy screen space for a considerable period of time – a rare occurrence in Indian mainstream films. And at least equally important is the ‘art fair’ scene that portrays the schoolteachers with a healthy comic spirit. It has a potentially subversive bent that might initiate an apposite self-critique among the adult audience.

Admittedly, the film offers a timely criticism of the formal school education system that instills job hunting as foremost priority. But this liberal and topical reformism does not appear to dislodge, or forcefully criticize, the overall rhetoric of sentimentalism or care that is commonly associated with childhood. Rather, it reinforces that rhetoric with an act of balancing between nature and nurture. If ‘every child is special’, as the film’s punchline says, then the dancing letters need not be the symptom of a disease but a figment of playful fancy! If the parents/teachers treat Ishan’s ‘attitude’ (that is how a teacher describes his problem to his parents in his first school) as childish and therefore unfit for the routine-bound disciplines of school, then diagnosing it as a motor coordination problem does not work in favor of ‘childlikeness’ either. The fact that

71 The tables are turned in this particular scene. Students go around poking fun at their teachers who, for all their experience and formal education, turn out to be pathetic at making even simple illustrations on their own. Khan handles this scene admirably with a judicious sense of humor and balance.

72 Films promoting some social message or other, rather than pure entertainers, appear to be favorites with Khan. Starting with *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) to the most recent *3 Idiots* (2009), with the possible exception of *Lagaan* (2001) and to some extent *Ghajini* (2008), all contain criticisms of some middle-class values, especially the career-oriented competitiveness. In *Taare*, it is most conspicuous in the character of Ishan’s father.

73 Ashis Nandy points out (perceptively though in a characteristic sweeping fashion) that the whole gamut of adult response to childhood as a state of life or sociological phenomenon range between treating it as
Ishan turns out to be not like any child but exceptional (on two counts: precocious artist/craftsman and dyslexic) tends to rest the tagline (that appears on the DVD as well as the beginning of the movie) on unsure grounds. Or rather, I suggest that Taare advocates a more tolerant and discerning sensitivity to children – an improvement on the present (adult/familial) culture of instrumental care. It has a corrective and/or reformist agenda than a call to rethink the terms of childhood as social practice.

Clearly, what Taare advocates or appeals to, has a wider implication – for the middle-class culture of rearing children. It has a vision of the 21st century Indian nation, and also a ‘message’ for its citizens. The message has an important bearing on how the (adult) society should conduct itself in matters of upbringing its young members because it is indeed an important question relating one generation with the next, of responsible citizenship, and ultimately one of modernity. In many ways, a contention of Taare is that the present generation of parents is not modern enough, anxious as it might be in assuring the future of children. Explicit critiques of formal school education system or ‘job race’ point at that lack of flexibility. But again, as I have already noted above, it does not aim at formulating the questions anew or shift the grounds of present attitude to children as subjects. The film advocates suitable changes or adjustments – that would be beneficial to both generations and in turn bring on a better tomorrow for the country.

‘childish’ (unfit and socially unacceptable, even cognate with ‘madness’) and ‘childlike’ (funny, immature though adorable). See his essay ‘Reconstructing Childhood’, in Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias (New Delhi: OUP, 1987), 56-76.

One can think of it as a syllogistic proposition: every child is special, but Ishan is not like every child. They appear to be contradictory. Hence, either Ishan’s case amounts to a tautology (special child is special), or the argument has to shift its logical ground.
Not unlike *Massom* but surely in a distinct way, the discourse of nation is at the core of *Taare* without being spelt out. The question of nation as a community re-appears, but not with the same uphoric enthusiasm of *Jaagriti*, though the plots are remarkably similar. Because what has changed in between – to reiterate something I have mentioned before – is the socio-political profile of the middle-class following the onset of liberal economic moves, the significant outcome being a reformulation of the relation between the idea of nation, the public sphere (that still has the middle and upper-middle class at its helm), and public media. Before moving on to a general reflection on the area last mentioned, I would conclude the discussion of *Taare* with a couple more observations that seem to be relevant to our discussion in support of my argument. Once Nikumbh is shown (during the sentimental title song sequence that starts with the challenged schoolchildren) looking pensively at a young boy working at a tea-stall. The next shot shows him offering food to the boy that the latter eats up with a rather inexpressive face – in fact he looks away from Nikumbh and the camera. I dare say this humane and charitable act gels well with the consistent portrayal of (disadvantaged) children as unsung heroes, and only extends the overall sentimentality borne in the film.

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75 Rather, the link-up is easier because these two films are plot-wise so similar.

76 I might give what at first might seem a rather frivolous, and somewhat personal, example. A large number of people, including myself, received a mass-circulated SMS on the morning of 26th January, 2007 that was amusing and juicily scandalous but also, I confess, initially a little shocking as well. I do not remember the exact words now but it read something like: “Salute to Mother India! She is cool, she is sexy, and she feeds her children well etc.” Things would have surely been different had it fallen into the hands of an ardent RSS follower. But that apart, it showed the mindset of the 30-plus generation towards an erstwhile sacred symbol. The popular film of the same name from yesteryears would probably carry an entirely different set of connotations for the present generation.
My last point is a somewhat speculative take on the problem of dyslexia. I take this liberty to return to the issue of language as an entry point into the symbolic order of nation. If language is a major unifying or cementing element in forming a national community as Anderson says, and if, as Lacanian psychoanalysis seems to suggest, unconscious is structured like a language, then dyslexia might have a metaphorical or even indexical (or ‘metonymic’, as Russian Formalism would put it) value. Is Ishan’s incapacity, or biological difficulty, to learn the rules of language (both mother-tongue, the minimum necessary requirement and English, the ‘power’ language of the middle class/public sphere) is crucial because language as an enabling and empowering faculty points to something more than what meets the eye? Something that the parents and schoolteachers perceive but still miss the point? In other words, I am trying to suggest that, at least symptomatically, the grammar of nation eludes him even as Ishan tries hard to grasp it by heart – the biological problem has an ideological referent as well. A lot hinges on that because he is still in an impressionable age, i.e. yet to become a citizen. One might say that the problem is more general, say the order of civilization that becomes obscure for him – but nation is its historically particular form in an ex-colony

77 There were reports of numerous parents filling in doctors’ chambers, following the film, to check whether their children were actually dyslexic.

78 Language appears to be natural or a matter of inheritance that history often belies. However, that does not make language any less a primordial force having far-reaching effects, at least on face value. Cf. Anderson, “What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her (i.e. potential citizen) mother-tongue – is to the patriot.”, in Anderson, Imagined Communities, 154, and the first four chapters.

79 Both civilization and nation are universals or ideas. But the latter is less wide in scope since it usually has a marked territorial boundary and a putative ethnic homogeneity, although, as Anderson points out, “they might never meet.” Also, a nation is analytically amenable to the co-existence, or indeed, combination, limited set of principles that provide strength in bonding. Also see P. Chatterjee, ‘Anderson’s Utopia’.
like India. *Taare* looks forward to a nation more sensitive, egalitarian and accommodating towards her children because they are the future.

**That melee called ‘globalization’**

What are the equations in the post-liberalization national set-up? Although many had predicted a gradual withering away of the nation-state form in the new context of a globalized world, they have been proved wrong. Now, more than ever before, ethnic communities have been demanding territorial autonomy and often been successful in achieving their goal. Or worse – it has started civil wars that have been continuing on a daily basis in many corners of the globe – this even after the cold war has given way to a largely unipolar world. Closer home, such voices are getting stronger every day, whether in Kashmir, Darjeeling, or the Telengana region, even if we leave out the most recent Maoist uprising. The situation might indeed be confusing for the general public at times, because these numerically smaller communities sometimes appear smaller replicas of the same nation-state form. But could it really retain the same form of governance? If not, what would be an alternative? These are large questions to which wholesome answers are unlikely to be found even in the next few years. Leaving the theoretical explanations of these phenomena aside\(^{80}\), we will concentrate on something less ambitious – namely, the extent to which these might have played a part in the decline in the popular demand of ACK.

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\(^{80}\) Partha Chatterjee has been consistently dealing with this question in the Indian context for quite some time now, whether in response to other historians’ or anthropologists’ viewpoints, or on his own. See also two chapters in Sudipta Kaviraj’s recent collection of essays, titled ‘A State of Contradictions’ and ‘Government and Opposition: Fifty Years of Indian Independence’, in Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution*, 210-253.
Post-globalization, the traditional, or extant, communitarian impulses of the middle-class get thoroughly diffused. For example, one can think of a professional whose weekly routine involves visiting and mixing with a different community in his own country or abroad, or simply a 20-something young person who works at a call center and has to impersonate an imaginary foreign national. When an individual can (or has to, as in the second case) switch or trade identities, s/he is no longer compelled to form a part of the silent majority of the people-nation, at least it is not the (only) objective or even a priority. S/he is more keen to find a place of her own in the whirlpool of globalization. Being (merely) an Indian is no longer an assured refuge, or even satisfactory.

‘Secualrism’ as policy: a debated issue

Post-1980s, the Hindu right could offer a sufficiently inviting vision of a different kind of community, certainly an aggressive one. Its strength, arguably, lay in two features that have survived the development of state as the repository of political sovereignty, following a Western model, and as its sole dispensing authority. The first of these, as scholars have noted, is the survival, and indeed, successful mutation, of a social hierarchy (most conspicuous and consistently visible in caste structure acting as cementing force or political alliance/solidarity) despite the constitutional guarantee of egalitarianism. Only

81 The latest in this list to hit the popular media/entertainment industry is the Reality TV phenomenon. Reality shows have put almost everything, starting from daily habits to close interpersonal relationships, on trial in ways unheard and unthought of before. Such intimate media-friendliness, so to speak, is bound to have effects on identity-formation (although it is primarily for public display) and also, reformulate the shaping and patterns of affective communities.

82 The most recent formal recognition comes in the form of official approval (by the central government Group of Ministers appointed specially for this purpose) of a census, as well as preparation of biometric identity cards, that should show individual caste data.
very recently this domination has been at least partially challenged by the rise of Dalits as a recognizable political force. Again, this movement has yet been anything but a complete transformation. For example, only the Chamar community is said to have benefited from the rise of BSP as political party (and attendant privileges, in the form of blue/white collar jobs, allegedly not always by fair means of selection) in Uttar Pradesh. Another curious incident has been the recent mob violence by the Gujjar community of north India. They were demanding Scheduled Tribe status rather than the Scheduled Caste category to which they belonged since the Indian state has better provisions for STs in terms of jobs and other income opportunities etc.

The mythic/mythological appeals to communitarian solidarity signified a return of the so-called ‘fuzzy community’ referred to by Kaviraj, though a selective one. We need to dwell on this particular event for a moment as it is both of general importance to the recent political life of the nation-state as well as our particular topic. And unlike overwhelmingly secularized Western democratic societies, mythology has a notable presence in daily life of an Indian that has survived official bureaucratization. The present political power at the center, namely the Congress party, has also been equally willing to play this game to gain political advantage through populist moves. One can easily recall a controversy around a shipping channel project officially inaugurated in 2005. In spite of

83 And I don’t mention this only to criticize ACK or hold it responsible. As I see it, a thorough re-estimation of the product and the (Hindu nationalist) spirit is due not primarily as a critical and essentially corrective act of atonement (though it might have a relevance), but to understand the direction to which we have been moving – bearings on forms of political participation and governance.

84 At least that is the usual academic description. But the way popularized versions of Christianity is blended, in say the daily life of an average American, has hardly been thoroughly examined. What about the stand-up orator-preachers on TV channels or a long tradition of choir music being adapted as blues or jazz standards? I dare say that the American example is a particular modus of civic habits in a democracy that appears relatively ‘secular’ to someone in India, including academicians, the most obvious contention being the separation of the church and the state.
other names suggested by committees working on the project earlier, the channel was named ‘Set(h)usamudram’, obviously a reference to the widely held belief that Ram and his army built the original bridge there, to cross over to Ravana’s empire. Three petitions followed that objected to that project, claiming it would amount to desecration. Finally the Archeological Survey of India had to file an affidavit in the Supreme Court, saying that such stories were not true, meaning that there was no historical/archeological evidence. Several senior Congress leaders\textsuperscript{85} and ministers holding cabinet ranks, however, were highly critical of the legal move. Although the then opposition party BJP could not maneuver as much political leverage out of this as they might have wanted, the government was surely left in a tight spot. But the controversy apart, the incident proved the extent to which Puranic mythology was right at the core of popular (Hindu) mentality and that the secular character of the state was merely constitutional. But such official idiom mattered least when it came to practice, to lived forms of participation and belonging or using them to political advantage.

Perhaps I need one clarification. Twice I have used the term ‘fuzzy community’ in senses or historical contexts that are distinctly different from Kaviraj’s use of the term. Although I have pointed out the contexts on both occasions, first a post-liberalization predicament and the second a post-Hindu right phenomenon, I will use it for a third and last time\textsuperscript{86} -- to explicate a confusion of sorts that nonetheless has general applicability. In so doing, I try to answer a simple question: how secular is the Indian state? The answer holds a key

\textsuperscript{85} Including Ms. Sonia Gandhi, who commented that the affidavit needed corrections. People from academic community, too, rued the fact that such matters of faith had to be decided on the basis of scientific evidence. The project was inaugurated formally by the PM, Dr. Manmohan Singh.

\textsuperscript{86} This is not an apology but an indication of indebtedness, and I see no methodological problem in adapting the general and profusely ‘open’ term to suit my argument.
to ACK’s acceptability. Bringing my argument forward, I suggest that the anomalies of a constitutionally secular state that has managed to promote an ideology (though often subterranean, and hidden behind the governmental logic of modernity, better administration or protection of ethnic ‘minorities’) of Hindu majoritarianism despite its formal religion-neutrality, has been instrumental in the sustained popularity of ACK.

As a matter of historical record, the Indian Constitution (rather, the State authority that it represents) is bound not to make discrimination on religious grounds, as per Article 15 of 1949. However, the citizens are to practice their respective private religion but the State shall have limited arbiting power in these matters. It was through the 42nd amendment introduced in 1976 that the Preamble declared the Indian republic as secular. But such formal commitments notwithstanding, it has been pointed out, the role of Indian state in interpreting the word ‘secular’ as well as policies regarding religion, have been anything but consistent. Instead of going into detailed debates that have already been attended to, I will draw some observations that seem relevant for my purpose.

The most cogent conceptual argument as regards the definition of the word ‘secular’/ ‘secularism’ (the word does not have any ‘modern’ comprehensive equivalent in Indian

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87 As pointed out earlier, ACK issues have been formally released by state and cabinet ministers, judges, and a President. The political crises of Indian polity did not seem to have any effect on its popularity at all.

88 Again, the Preamble is not, strictly speaking, among legally justiciable parts of the Constitution. One major watershed in this case has been the 1994 S R Bommai vs. Union of India case, when the Supreme Court ruled that the Article 356, that makes provisions for dismissing particular state governments and imposition of President’s Rule, could be justifiably implemented if there is any perceived case of exercise of a deliberate non-secular course of action on behalf of the state government in question. Secularism, the court held, is a basic feature of the Constitution.

89 The debate was reignited following the Babari Musjid/ Ram Janambhoomi issue, but also in general. See T. Basu, S. and T. Sarkar et al, Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993), and R. Bhargava, ed. Secularism and Its Critics (New Delhi: OUP, 1998), especially the section titled ‘Secularism in India: The Recent Debates’, 297-542.
languages is, as I see it, by the noted anthropologist Talal Asad. I quote: “(secularism)…is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion” (italics and parenthesis original), and further, “a secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play certain structures of ambition and fear.” It becomes possible to explain or understand the discriminatory and careful measures carried out in the post-independence period by the Indian state within this definition. Whether as impractical and non-traditional marginalization of religion following Madan, instrumental division of religion as a way of life and as hardened ideology that is then exploited by the state in the name of modernity or nationalism following Nandy, or the detailed analysis of those practices and official laws having different contingent histories following Chatterjee, a careful look at the state viewpoint (or different ones, depending on the nature or urgency of particular problems in question) on this issue reveals two things. First, the Indian state has intervened on religious matters in a selective manner. Personal or community laws, whenever interpreted or acted upon, have been restricted to laws belonging to Hindus, thereby asserting (and effectively relegating) the position of other communities as

90 I mean a certain contemporary currency, available to the elite and the mass alike. Although old Sanskritic words like dharma-nirapekshata have been suggested, they hardly serve the purpose. They neither cover the whole range of implications of the word in its Western sense – although they might open up new conceptual grids or possibilities. Another such word, incidentally, is ‘politics’, often used in political speeches and pamphlets in English language but in Devanagari or such other scripts.

91 Although Chatterjee, Madan, or Nandy offer useful critiques of how the word/s continues to be reinterpreted, or even misinterpreted, in actual practice or policies in the Indian context as well as its deviations/differences from a corresponding Western model, they do not sufficiently define ‘secular’/’secularism’ as a conceptual category or as relating to a particular mode of practicing the self – whether individual or collective (both ‘community’ and the state).


93 All references are to the essays included in R. Bhargava ed., Secularism and its critics.
‘minorities’. This potentially promulgates the recognition of Hindus being the principal community living in India that follows a (more or less) uniform religious belief. Consequentially, it is little or no accident that the public elite having effective power of opinion in public sphere are also largely Hindus, unless their religious identity is set off or overtaken (in the eyes of public sphere) by other factors such as English education – a major indicator of claim to liberal modernity. The second point is related to this. Once again, the dominant Hindu community has been successful to hegemonize (and not surprisingly, also homogenize) the content of ‘national culture’. It is here that a product like ACK has been so effective in appealing to a large audience, where culture connotes not necessarily what is composite but popular – but ‘popular’ in a specific sense. It pertains to a certain mode of containment and packaging whereby what might belong to a particular sensibility can be projected as the image of the whole (national). In this respect, ACK perfectly mirrors, and can even be considered a logical outgrowth of, the state attitude that interprets neutrality as preferential protection for the sake of governance.

**Nation as imaginary: old and new models**

The new urban chic look that replaces the old nationalist realism (Benegal films could again serve as examples of the earlier variety, and also other ‘parallel films’ from 60s to early 90s) in the post-90s period certainly reflect a changed attitude in how nation is perceived and transmitted. Going back three or four decades, the mainstream Hindu

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94 The most recent example being the current HRD Minister’s (Mr. Kapil Sibal) ‘assurance’ that Madrasahs will fall outside the purview of the current Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 (RTE). This, however, did not fully allay the clerics’ fear, who demanded written amendment stating the same as only that would be indisputable as a record.
movies, whether one thinks of the more directly nationalist films such as Manoj Kumar films or the more carefree, cavalier heroes portrayed by Bachhan or Feroz Khan, the theme of moral righteousness is a persistent one. The angry anti-heroes portrayed by Bacchan are always tied to a ‘cause’ in the end. The rhetoric of family, individual exploits, social norms and transgressions never occur outside a perceptible national frame (and this, even when he would be solving mysteries hatched in faraway lands)\textsuperscript{95}. These, in turn, have important ideological functions in the crisis-ridden society of the times\textsuperscript{96}.

Another interesting presence is that of the city-space, usually Bombay, a ‘real’/metaphoric space (screen-space) that partially replaces another meta-symbol, nature\textsuperscript{97}. It is a space that is both inviting and unstable, and painfully modern\textsuperscript{98}. The

\textsuperscript{95} Such references present themselves in pure entertainers like \textit{Amar Akbar Anthony}, \textit{Desh Premee} (that shows a slum called Bharat Nagar ruled by mafia dons of four different communities) or a more crude \textit{Mard or Coolie}, but also in heist thrillers such as \textit{The Great Gambler} or \textit{Qurbani}, melodramas such as \textit{Muquaddar ka Sikandar}, and even romances like \textit{Kabhi Kabhie}. General themes of love, friendship, sacrifice or criminality often invoke the imaginary of nation (there are some exceptions, like the charismatic, westernized, but merciless mafia don who succumbs early in the movie of the same name) in direct or indirect ways.

\textsuperscript{96} Ashis Nandy’s contention that these films represent the ‘slums’ eye-view of politics’ merits further attention.

\textsuperscript{97} It is for any mainstream Hindi movie-watcher to note how the cityscape evolves from the days of \textit{Shree 420}, where the formally educated hero, a newcomer to the big city trying to earn his living, is surprised to find that even footpaths are on sale. He also learns the difference between \textit{kaam} and \textit{dhandha}, and becomes a gambler. He also tries hand at becoming a salesman of toothpowder and is able to draw that attention of a motley crowd that had gathered on the streets for some other purpose. Compare this with the changing backdrop in the popular song ‘Rotey Hu e Aatey Hai Sab...’ from the film \textit{Muquaddar ka Sikandar}, where the glimpses of the city are revealed through the eyes of the bike-riding hero. The bike-riding serves as an act of narration (or ‘focalization’ in the narratological sense) as he travels through the busy streets and multi-lane highways, past the vehicles, buildings, flyovers, street lamps and billboards. He stops once and reflects (a portentous shot that offers a momentary glimpse of all the three major characters) as a hearse van followed by a procession of mourners comes his way. Three objects that he encounters (and is shown to interact with intimate care) on the way are figurines, a Maharaja (Indian Airlines mascot) doll, and a little girl – all potential symbols of nation mobilized in different ways.

\textsuperscript{98} One cannot but turn to the insights offered by Marx on capital and bourgeois predicament (“all that is solid melts into the air” etc.), and Benjamin, chronicling the city-life as an image of modernity. Also see the latter’s essays on Baudelaire and S. Buck-Morss, ‘The Flaneur, the Sandwitchman, and the Whore’ in\textit{ New German Critique}, 39 (Autumn 1986), 96-140.
‘realist’ films, on the other hand, purports to show the seamier side of reality and this relation/distance between what is normative and ‘reality’ is stretched to limits. Consequently, the realism employed in this case is marked by squalid naturalism (films like *Ardh Satya* or *Paar*, for example, and this is what Nargis’s discomfort with *Pather Panchali* is, in some ways) but the norm it strives toward, is no less idealist – perhaps an ‘ideal real’ if such a thing is possible.\(^9^9\)

But the overall shiny ‘look’ or surface that now has become a ubiquitous mark (again, compare *Swadesh* to *Manthan*; the former also has a proclamatory subtitle: ‘We, the People’) of Bollywood films is symptomatic of a perceptible shift.\(^1^0^0\) It is not enough to dismiss this as a mere lack or loss of sensitivity among mainstream artists and filmmakers, i.e. dub it as another narrative of decline. Nor is it good enough to describe this as a postmodern celebration of surface because that introduces the dialectic again (as in a differential or binary structure) and one needs be wary of the surface-depth dualism that is potentially a moralist discourse. The shift occurs in the way/s we relate to nation. I have referred to this point earlier somewhat obliquely, but I try to expand it now as a possible explanation behind this shift.

Nation is often imagined through constructing a mythic, primordial past that is then linked to the present by means of narration. But that perfect past is concomitant with a temporality only amenable to memory.\(^1^0^1\) As Pierre Nora reminds us, there is no place for

\(^{99}\) Often referred to as a socialist utopia, it was certainly an imagination that had considerable appeal in pre-Soviet break-up era, even after Stalin.

\(^{100}\) Surely this is a quality that sets the recent ‘Bollywood’ apart from the erstwhile mainstream Bombay film industry as a phenomenon, not only as a matter of nomenclature.

\(^{101}\) As in the first page of the ACK issue on Rana Pratap where it is done through a mise-en-scene technique. See chapter 2 for additional discussion.
such a conception of time in the present that belongs to the regime of history.\textsuperscript{102} The symbol of nation (Nora calls it memory-nation) assumes its importance in being the last configuration – or a meta-imaginary – that could bridge the now-vanished culture of memory and the modern ‘acceleration’ of history. The once-intimate and sacred order of memory is invoked only through what he calls ‘sites of memory’.\textsuperscript{103} Coming after Nora, my suggestion is that we have witnessed a further transformation or mutation of this popular imaginary. Nation, once personified in the typically sacral icon like Bharat Mata, has become a ‘thing’ now – a fetish. The fetishistic ‘spirit’ in itself is not new, but what is recent is wearing it on one’s sleeve, so to speak. The reification of nation has lost its (normative) singular aura. Hence, it becomes possible to flaunt the nation-thing, put it on display and express one’s attachment or devotion to this spectacle.\textsuperscript{104} Once that detachment has taken place, the gritty realism of parallel films can be invoked only with implying a concomitant preachy moralism.

But Nora’s formulations might not be wholly applicable in a post-colonial situation like present India that has partially replicated the colonial bureaucratic order and where, as we have seen in the fictional representation in \textit{Swades}, such official sites of memory co-exist with actual (geographical-historical) locations bearing visible marks of colonial and pre-


\textsuperscript{103} Apart from vestigial survivals in the form of certain rituals (Hindu death rituals which are elaborate, each part having a ‘rite-of-passage’ function, could be an example). The sites of memory, however, points precisely to the extinction of ‘culture/environment of memory’.

\textsuperscript{104} To that extent, the song from the Salman Khan-starrer \textit{Judwaa}, discussed by Richard Davis, is a popular, and some might say perverse, parallel of \textit{bhakti}. See Davis, ed. \textit{Picturing the Nation} (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), ‘Introduction’, p. 2-3. I use the word ‘perverse’ not so much as personal judgment as to put a name to the spirit of iconoclasm present in Davis (who follows this example with the reference to the infamous Ram Rath Yatra of 1992) in tracing the biography of ‘Indian’ images, and Chris Pinney who rather fashionably describes such typical Bollywood song-and-dance phenomenon as ‘chromotopic delirium’. 
colonial times. If one travels to the city of Lucknow, Mysore or Delhi, one gets a sense of history (though not memory in the sense of a fundamentally different episteme that Nora means) that is informed equally by museums and archives on the one hand, and the ruins of palaces, forts and musjids on the other. And all of these are, again, often present in a city where shopping malls, multiplexes or international designer shops vie with other for space in full public visibility. Additionally, cities like Goa or Chandernagore would house very different architectural styles and monuments. Even a touristic view of these is likely to produce a sense of multiple, parallel histories, and a confused and chaotic sense at worst. Often, these monuments command a greater appeal because they are more intimate (directly amenable to sensation) and offer a more exciting alternative to browsing musty archival records. Oral accounts, whether provided by a local guide or cheap books recounting rumors and legends attached to particular places, and made available through small local enterprises, continue to survive. The exercise of memory simply does not have the same operationality here as in the West. In so far the business

105 Not to speak of a still more complex case, where these memorials are turned into expensive tourist accommodations or experience, such as the Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur, Rajasthan or Chunar Fort in Madhya Pradesh or specially designed Palace-on-Wheels tour.

106 These might seem like unorganized enterprises of negligible importance. But their narration would resemble other big-budget pedagogic ventures like programs aired on Fox History or Discovery channels.

107 One could argue, even within available Western approaches to this problematic, that Nora’s scheme does not leave much scope for memory as willed exercise and its phenomenological correlate – memory as experience. The order of memory could also be accessed through an experience of duration or longue durée. Nora’s idea of memory as a domain is not far removed from what Ricoeur calls an imagined and affective past recalled into existence. For Ricoeur, memory is singular – whether as sensation or willed act or an injunction – whereas remembrances are plural, hence he talks of a regime of remembrances. Nora makes memory appear like a mythic past or structure, an immanent pre-historical epoch. Ricoeur, on the other hand, is more interested in the act of remembrance. He talks of three broad types of memory put to use: repressed memory (pathological-therapeutic), manipulated memory (practical-pragmatic; ‘nation’ as invented community or content of individual identity would belong here), and forced memory (ethico-political; both in public act of history-writing and personal undertaking in mutual ‘talking cure’). See Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). But as a reviewer significantly points out, none of these two addresses the historical fact of colonialism even when talking of nation, official identity etc. Marx’s famous comment in ‘Theses on
of history writing sets out a discipline, and a certain cathectation or economy of memory is at stake, things cannot be more dissimilar. The importance of ACK lies in actively mobilizing this vocabulary of ‘personalized history’ to pedagogic ends. If a reader could take a trip to an imaginary past in the pages of four-color comics available at a local bookstore, what could be more effective? The ideological charge notwithstanding, the impulse to lose oneself in history that comes alive in action was and still is irresistible, sitting in the corner of a room or indulging in secret pleasures of comics hidden behind textbooks while the teacher outlines date-charts on the blackboard.

Visual (and) print cultures: old and new

We come back to our discussion about the new visual community that has emerged with economic liberalization. To a generation exposed to cartoon channels and animation films from various parts of the world broadcast on satellite TV networks, ACK has considerable historical value, if as a passé that has sacrificed visual style to thick content. ACK belongs to an early visual cultural mode of representation. It is an item where the mark of ‘tradition’ is evident, in its choice of tales and characters, flat illustration and paneling, décor and use of primary colors. The comics (other than ACK) published during the same period\(^{108}\) has that same look – one-dimensional, dull and cheap. In fact,

\[^{108}\text{I am thinking of mostly of the Manoj and Diamond Comics products, as also the Abid Soorti comics featuring Bahadur. Tintin and Asterix, available mostly in urban areas, had smaller audience before the former started getting translated in regional languages. It was usually a matter of certain popular comics getting transported to the third world, and they were mostly visually repetitive and simple, like Archie comics, or a standard pulp like Modesty Blaise. Somewhat exceptional was Flash Gordon, notable for its futuristic illustrations. The only Indian comics brand that followed the superhero mode with}\]

Feuerbach’ about the ideological complicity of philosophers’ interpretation of the world could still serve as a timely reminder.
that ‘pulp’ look and cheap materiality is inextricably bound up with its mass cultural nature and appeal – the covers done in garish colors being a ubiquitous feature and mark of identity.

The variety of cheap popular literary materials that find their ways to a bookstall typically located in or around railway stations, bus stops, and small, often semi-permanent, structures (second-hand book-stalls, for example) is intriguing. Thrillers, Gothic romances and supernatural/ ghost tales, religious teachings and sermons, recipe and self-help books, proverbs, astrology books, soft pornographies, made-easies, recommendations for daily behavior and practices by traditional and occult authorities – the list is almost as bewildering as the Chinese taxonomy of living creatures recounted by Borges. Collected by a myriad population on the run that cities attract, it constitutes a virtual ante-chamber of the official publishing industry. However, these books are in a league of their own and continue to thrive despite the book chains distribution network of the new market economy (sometimes thriving because of them as piracy often targets new, popular books released worldwide).

Unlike ACK, that used to be available in these book stores presumably because of their ‘pulpy’ look and cheap price, the relation of this motley literature to the imaginary of nation is tentative. Whereas ACK has made it to the racks of new chain stores (like adventous illustrations was Raj Comics, but it came a little later and had a niche following. I discuss this in more detail in an earlier chapter.

109 It is a quality one would associate with small provincial towns and suburbs across India and outside too. The category of masala paperback seems to be a residue of the plethora of popular literature surviving (and thriving) in many popular modes (e.g. quissa or dastaan literature) from pre-colonial period and those arriving with the inauguration of publishing industry (e.g. jassosi fiction). For discussions of how these genres evolved, especially in colonial north India, see F. Orsini, The Hindi Public Sphere (New Delhi: OUP, 2009), Print and Pleasure (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010), and V. Dalmia and S. Blackburn eds., India’s Literary History (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).
Landmark and Crossword, both owned by corporate houses that diversified with profits earned from garment, hospitality or real estate business) housed in air-conditioned malls in metros and satellite townships, the small bookstores have remained a part of the unorganized sector. A crucial reason seems to be the latter’s failure or unwillingness to mobilize the nationalist imaginary, as well as the contingent and limited ways of embracing the big-scale capitalist mode of production and management. In some sense, this subaltern literature has been more democratic – if we make a positive attribute of its putative failure in terms of profit or official recognition – since it has never introduced any hegemonic norm in spite of its potential role in creating and sustaining popular taste.

I come back to a point that has been raised earlier. In the fast-changing ‘globalized’ India, is it possible that the audience rejected ACK or grew out of it as more exciting materials became available? I am talking of the virtual explosion in the sphere of consumable popular visual materials – such as cartoons or animations that are formally proximate with ACK comics – available on cable TV channels or films. It is hard to give any simple answer, not only because any simple confirmation/rejection are always sweeping or indiscriminate, and one can cite examples in both cases. The new ‘visual public’ is still under-theorized. If one traces an iconological continuity, the audience of the epic/mythological serials should still be the mainstay of ACK audience. And though variety certainly increased, thereby increasing the possibility of niche audience or

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110 Being dependent on piracy and other such unofficial mechanisms, they also operate on a very low-profit margin. The target audience is wider but of a low economic profile. The strategy, one assumes, is to optimize on the number of products rather than standardizing and upgrading them. Nor is brand equity or ownership a priority, hence it falls outside the scope of property-driven business. It is indeed a well-thought idea of marketing, but escapes us because they do not have official recognition.
fansdom (e.g., followers of a particular brand of comics, DC or Marvel), the new materials often failed to ring a bell, as in the case of Virgin Comics. Graphic novels of different kind and degree of visual richness, whether imported or indigenous, have been appearing in the last few years (but still alien to many among the non-English speaking, non-urban community, and the industry is barely ten years old) but the market is still lukewarm. Graphic novels are still waiting to make headway for more or less the same reasons as other modern media are lagging behind, lack of infrastructure and English-language education, and it is hard to say at the moment whether such will be the state of things for some time to come. ‘Globalization’, as we have seen, has not meant a complete rejection of ‘tradition’ either – far from it. Often it has resulted in new bottling of what was old, as in Ekta Kapoor’s recent TV version of Mahabharat, or a new hybrid such as MTV India or many a TV advertisement, reappearance of the national imaginary as nostalgia as in films like Swades (Gowarikar, 2004) or Pardes (Subhash Ghai, 1997), chic sensationalisms (Vande Mataram sung in a different tune against a sunny London background in the family melodrama Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham, Karan Johar,

Quite a few ads respond to the changes brought by globalization intelligently. An ad for a particular flavor of Lehar potato chips (a brand owned by the US-based MNC PepsiCo) shows a village sarpanch catching his daughter’s suitor by the wrong foot when the latter offers as gift these chips that is ‘so good, so obviously international’ as a proof of his foreign residence (or a foreign job) to advance his candidacy as son-in-law. The message, that sets the idea of ‘international’/’inherently better’ quality against its ‘local’/’national’ production and availability, shows a national pride of sorts at play. A die-hard Marxist might object that what sells is ultimately a US multinational product but it does not seem to be sensitive to the different signals relaying on to each other. But one could also say, taking a cue from Barthes (who incidentally had moved away from his initial Marxist sympathies when he was writing Mythologies, a set of short essays composed between 1954 and 1956, that analyze such cultural micro-phenomena) that the relay is the message, at least at the level of performance. However, he uses the concept of ‘relay’ in a later essay on photographs. See how Barthes himself deals with the question of ‘political’ content in mythic utterance in ‘Myth as Depoliticized Speech’ in Mythologies (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, original Fr. edition published in 1957) and later ‘Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today’ in Image-Music-Text (London: Fontana, 1977). The Marxist question, for him, has to be addressed through linguistic/metalinguistic structure.
2001)\textsuperscript{112} or changes that do not amount to any change at all (Bollywood songs shot in Cape Town or Manhattan instead of Kashmir). Recent Indian animation films having mythological/ Puranic content (My Friend Ganesha, R. S. Ruia, 2007; Bal Hanuman, P. Sharma, 2007) is not much to speak of in terms of improvement on old-style representations visible in ACK, and an Indo-Japanese collaborative animation film on Ramayan (Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Ram, Y. Sako, 1992) follows the same iconographic style. In the gamut of new visual content items that often tries to re-imagine the ‘new’ in terms of the ‘old’, ACK comics serve as a standardized reference point – as a bankable vocabulary of iconic realism. Attempts at such re-inventions are being made also from within the ACK house itself. A new character (soon to be introduced) called Nina in comic book format, a modern young adult girl in her late teens, is out to explore India, a virtual anthropological tour reminiscent of two late ACKs – both illustrated by an artist conspicuous for being the only regular Muslim artist of these comic books in their prime\textsuperscript{113}. It remains to be seen whether the ACK ‘look’ is overtaken by competing alternatives in terms of iconographic syntax and mode of storytelling set on by an expanding horizon of visual cultural material in near future.

\textsuperscript{112} Indeed there has been a rise in melodramas since mid-1990s that somewhat laboriously but consistently reiterate ‘old’ family values, directed by the likes of Karan Johar and Suraj Barjatya. Quite a few of them have been major box-office earners.

\textsuperscript{113} Yusuf Bangalorewalla, a pen-name of Yusuf Lien. He drew titles such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Tansen and Mirabai. Reportedly, he has stopped drawing living characters as it is sinful in Islam but continues to do calligraphy. An instructive story recounted by him on appreciation of Arabic calligraphic art, is available on http://callygraphyislamic.com.