

2007-01-01

Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

Rashmi Sawhney

Technological University Dublin, rashmi.sawhney@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschmedbk>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sawhney, R. (2007) 'Apotheosis or Apparition: Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema', *Film Studies* (special issue on 'Visualising the City' ed. Marcus, A.), Winter (11): 1-13.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Media at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)



1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53

Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

• Rashmi Sawhney

In the text *City Flicks* (2004), Moinak Biswas suggests that contemporary Indian cinema puts an end to the representative tropes of east/west, city/country, police/criminal.¹ Ravi Vasudevan expresses a similar view, stating that the 'image of a depressed and dystopian urban subjectivity only conjures the most fleeting of residual utopian energies in its reference to a country idyll as an object of longing'.² The changing representation of village and city in Indian films over the last twenty years or so has roughly coincided with the state and corporate-led drive towards a 'globalised' and 'liberalised' India. In Indian films, the city and the village have 'performed' the narrative of national identity, particularly within a developmental or modernising role. This paper examines the representation of urban and rural India, and therefore of the Indian nation, in two films made by women at the turn of the decade marking liberalisation.³ Aruna Raje's *Rihaee* (1988) and Sai Paranjpye's *Disha* (1990) are films which, by virtue of their thematic and formal treatment, to some extent, enable the conceptualisation of the aesthetics of women's cinema in India. The two films thematically bridge a moment of disjuncture in Indian socio-cultural history in the late 1980s and early 1990s, recreating an imaginary cinematic nation combining past and future visions of development. This paper argues that *Disha* and *Rihaee* portray a vision of modernity which is markedly feminised in the Indian context through their visualisation of city and village. By way of discussion of these two films, it raises questions about the theorising of Indian women's cinema and hopes to draw attention to the frequently overlooked

perspectives of women filmmakers on the much studied issue of the modern Indian nation.⁴

Nation and Theories of Indian Cinema

Cinema and the nation exhibit a strange relationship in India. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to conceptualise an Indian national cinema, in the way it is conceptualised in many Western nations.⁵ On the other hand, most Indian films, across the twenty odd languages of production, display a significant engagement with visualising the nation.⁶ The nation as seen by Indian cinema is an entity which results from, as well as enacts and contains, the dialectic between modernising and traditionalising forces. Madhava Prasad uses Fredric Jameson's term 'ideologeme' to describe the pervasiveness of the tradition-modernity binary in Indian films.⁷ Indeed, much of the scholarship of Indian cinema has emphasised the dominance of viewing cinema through the framework of the nation-state, and therefore, as an enactment of the process of modernisation.⁸

The viewing of Indian cinema as a contestation over the form of the nation-state is supported, either directly or tangentially, by, what could be identified as the three main schools of Indian film criticism: the experimentalists, the traditionalists, and the third, for want of a better word, the specificists. The first, represented by film-makers and critics like Chidananda Das Gupta, Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Kumar Shahni, aspires to an 'evolved' form of film-making that draws from the realist as well as the avant-garde traditions of Western films, along with influences from Indian folk traditions. Their concept of

- Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

1 cinematic sophistication is influenced by a desire
2 to be locally grounded, yet at the same time
3 to fashion a cinema in line with the 'national'
4 avant-gardes of Europe. The second group,
5 spearheaded by political scientists and
6 psychoanalysts like Ashis Nandy and Sudhir
7 Kakar, see the Indian cinema as a 'slum's eye
8 view' of Indian politics⁹, or as the enactment
9 of a collective democratic fantasy¹⁰.

10 The third group, whose role in the last fifteen
11 years or so, in pointing out the specificity of
12 Indian cinema has been very significant, has
13 instilled a new contemporariness to the study of
14 Indian films, freeing it from the association
15 between a 'pre-modern' form and a 'third world'
16 aesthetic, as well as from the romanticising of
17 tradition.¹¹ In the work emanating from this
18 group, the cinema has been seen as a formal
19 encoding of national identity using theories of
20 modernity, and linking politics and history with
21 aesthetics. While a number of scholars have been
22 associated with this venture, the work presented
23 by Madhava Prasad and Sumita Chakravarty is
24 particularly significant for this essay. Prasad
25 and Chakravarty both identify a site of struggle,
26 unresolvedness, in the form of Indian films –
27 Chakravarty describes this through the metaphor
28 of the 'bahurupi' or the masquerade, a changing
29 and fluid entity;¹² Prasad calls it the process of
30 'passive revolution' – a condition that generates
31 (or tries to) an equilibrium through the
32 opposition between the drive to modernisation
33 and a simultaneous disavowal of modernity on
34 an ideological plane.¹³ Both authors emphasise
35 the form of the nation-state as the form in
36 question, which reveals (and is revealed through)
37 the form of the Hindi film. The nation-state,
38 therefore, is seen as a constituent of a number of
39 forces that endow it with a fluidity, a transitoriness
40 – however, one that withholds the process of real
41 change, which has the potential to bring about a
42 transformation in the form of the nation-state.
43 However, it can be debated that the micro-processes
44 which generate fluidity and impermanence, also
45 generate new sites of meaning within the larger
46 umbrella of national identity, which eventually
47 lead to the evolution of newer political formations
48 as well as newer forms of expression.
49
50
51
52
53

Migration, Modernity, and Transitions

One such process is the process of migration. Migration has been one of the central themes in the social history of India over the last century or so. When migrations acquire significant volume, they trigger off corresponding social transformations in a society, affecting the character of the nation-state, demography, civic society, politics, economy, culture, language and people. The act of migration in cinema, or the journey from the village to city, and from the city to the village, is a narrative device which performs the complex negotiations involved in arriving at a fictive understanding of national modernity and identity. The protagonist's journey is a crucial component of narrative cinema and has been pictured as traversing geographic barriers, boundaries of nationality, race, class, caste, or gender, metaphysical encounters with the self, or fantastical forays into outer-space and imaginary lands.¹⁴ Journeys have played an especially critical role as mediators between familiar and unfamiliar territories, including those between tradition and modernity, self and other, real and imaginary. It is for this reason that the representation of the rural and the urban, as well as the representation of migration by women filmmakers becomes exciting in its potential to generate a women's notion of self and society.

The conventional idea of progress in cinema is of moving from village to city, and more recently, from India to the West, or to 'modern' East Asian locations like Singapore and Hong Kong. The village, as bearer of tradition, takes on a dual symbolism – first, as that which must be left behind to attain a modern state of being, and second, as the psychological fantasy of the innocent state of existence, the paradise lost. The city, on the other hand, symbolizes the attractions and threats inherent in discovery, isolation, uprooting, and the adventure of illicit romance. The upward mobility or *sanskritisation* that the move from the village to city promises is visualized through greater material possessions – accrued through the loss of innocence, through hard work, as well as physical and emotional exploitation. Within the city-village binary, the

1 matter of romance and sex takes on much
2 significance. The men (and sometimes, women)
3 who go out into the city are permitted, often
4 expected, to engage in amorous or sexual
5 relationships, while the village and its residents
6 are imagined as naturally chaste, at least in the
7 memory of those who once belonged to it.

8 For Hindi cinema, Bombay is *the* city of fantasy.
9 The two hundred year history of modern Bombay,
10 a relatively young city in the Indian context, from
11 a cluster of fishing villages (reclaimed to form
12 a single land mass in the first part of the
13 nineteenth century) to a centre of colonial
14 trading power, and later, as the commercial and
15 entertainment capital of India has established
16 Bombay as the ultimate urban location for Hindi
17 cinema. Over the years Bombay has come to be
18 seen as a multicultural city, having been
19 influenced by the cultures of the Parsi, Christian,
20 Muslim, Sindhi and Hindu communities, as well
21 as by the Portuguese and the British, which gives
22 rise to a synthesis that is uniquely 'Bambaiya'¹⁵,
23 and for the purpose of cinema, glamourised.
24 Moreover, some of India's biggest working-class
25 and trade union movements developed in the
26 textile mills of Bombay and the large flux of
27 migrants from villages all across India has
28 further strengthened its working-class
29 characteristic.

30 Both films under discussion here look at the
31 social and ethical issues generated by economic
32 migration; however, instead of evoking the
33 conventional binaries between modern/
34 traditional, hostile/nurturing, or masculine/
35 feminine these films re-arrange such hierarchies
36 to present an alternative vision of modern India.
37 Significantly, in comparison with other urban-
38 centric films made around the same period, and
39 subsequently in the 1990s, *Disha* and *Rihaee*
40 represent the city as the periphery of the Indian
41 village, marking a shift in the location of
42 development and modernity. The structural shift
43 in the hierarchy of location, modernity, and
44 therefore of power, suggested by these films
45 enables migration to be seen as a fluid concept,
46 a journey between old and new, loss and
47 discovery, and the consequent transformations
48 enacted thereof.

An emphasis on the *process* of transformation
can open up the nation to readings which inhabit
the spaces between new/old or loss/discovery
inherent to migration. The journey itself contains
multiple viewpoints which open up plural
interpretation. Such spaces are what Homi Bhabha
describes as 'liminal' or 'interstitial', occupying
a space between contesting cultural traditions,
historical periods, and critical methodologies¹⁶.
Bhabha suggests that these liminal spaces are
hybrid sites that witness the production of cultural
meaning. Although his arguments are made in
the context of essentialist readings of nationhood
which attempt to define and naturalise 'third
world' nations by means of homogenous, holistic,
and historical traditions that define and ensure
their subordinate status, they could also be useful
to look at the nation as a microcosm of
demographic power structures. Bhabha's
argument can be appropriated in the Indian
context to highlight the dynamic between city
and village and the 'liminal' spaces between
them as sites where identities are performed and
contested. The journey between village and city
assumes importance as a trajectory of 'performance'
of change, as seen in the case of *Disha*.

***Disha* ('The Uprooted Ones')**

Sai Paranjpye's film *Disha* (1990) is inspired by
a real-life incident in Naigaom, a village in
Maharashtra, where a man who spent sixteen
years digging a well on an arid patch of land was
declared mad by his fellow villagers. When at last
he struck water and transformed the economic
possibilities of the village, he was lauded as a
hero. While Paranjpye identifies the source of her
story-idea as a real incident in the village of
Naigaom, the screen name chosen for the
cinematic village is Bakuli¹⁷. *Disha* is a film about
two migrant labourers from Bakuli who go to
Bombay in search of work; one of them
(Vasant/Nana Patekar) stays on in Bombay, while
the other (Soma/Raghuveer Yadav) returns to
Bakuli when his brother (Parshu/Om Puri) strikes
water in his well (Figure 1). The film depicts the
conflict between a longing for home and the
compulsions of economic migration.



• Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53



• Fig. 1: 'Parshu's Well', *Disha* (1990).

The title of the film means 'direction' and it offers a critique of the industry-based model of socio-economic development adopted in the early years of independence by the Jawaharlal Nehru led Congress government. Any historical account of Indian cinema is testimony to the immense bearing of the Nehruvian era on Indian cinema.¹⁸ New post-independence films began the project of visualising the nation in alignment with Nehru's developmental philosophy, and this trend in cinema was dominant until the student unrest and anti-corruption movements of the mid 1970s. In 1975, the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi imposed an emergency, which lasted for almost two years. By this time Indian cinema reflected the citizen's loss of faith in state machinery, and films where the protagonist took the law in his/her hands became popular.¹⁹ The industrial sector was not functioning as promised and this resulted in a community of

disillusioned workers. Further, industrialization had spurred rural migration to cities, generating new problems for civic governance. At the same time the success of the green revolution had renewed the hope of developing India as a strong agriculture-based economy. In the Punjab, the Green Revolution had created prosperous farming communities. Many of these communities then migrated to Canada, on the invitation of the Canadian government, which wanted to benefit from the knowledge of these farmers. Such social circumstances had in a way, compelled Rajiv Gandhi to re-examine Congress policies and public propaganda by the mid-1980s. As a result, the Congress government began to consider a more humanistic approach to development. The new vision of the Indian government can be captured through Rajiv Gandhi's foreword to the Seventh Planning Commission Report, published in November 1985:

1 In the final analysis, development is not just about
2 factories, dams and roads. Development is basically
3 about people. The goal is the people's material, cultural
4 and spiritual fulfilment. The human factor, the human
5 context, is of supreme value. We must pay much greater
6 attention to these questions in future.²⁰
7

8
9 *Disha* develops this idea of a people-centric
10 development, rather than an economic or
11 industry-based model of development by
12 positioning the village as the site of action.

13 Although the idea of village India being the
14 'real' India has been a feature of Indian discourse
15 and policy for a long time, the socio-economic
16 trend that emerged in the late 1980s and early
17 1990s had put this belief into question, and this
18 perception also influenced films. According to
19 film historian Firoze Rangoonwala, the period
20 between 1981 and 1992 represents the 'age
21 of violence' in Indian cinema²¹. The genre of
22 the 'vigilante women films' of the 1980s
23 subsequently gave way to other violent films
24 like *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Tezaab* (1988),
25 *Parinda* (1989), *Tridev* (1989), *Ghayal* (1990),
26 *Agneepath* (1990), and *Satya* (1998) towards
27 the end of the century, almost all of which
28 emphasised urban anger. In this context of film
29 production, as well as in the socio-economic
30 context made imminent by globalisation, *Disha*
31 can be seen as being representative of a
32 feminised perspective on national modernity.

33
34 *Balkuli* is a symbol for the progress possible
35 across village-India as imagined by the film-
36 maker. The title shots of the film show a barren
37 land breeding thorny bushes of the Bakuli plant;
38 the yellow flowers of the Bakuli are beautiful but
39 non-productive. The lack of markets for
40 agricultural products and the diminishing
41 sustainability of farming in Bakuli results in forced
42 migration of the unemployed village youth to
43 Bombay. Although Bakuli is a barren village,
44 Parshu's well brings new hope and promise
45 for sustaining a healthy agricultural economy.
46 The symbol of the well, at first barren, and then
47 filled with water, conveys the thought that real
48 development lies in the revival of the agricultural
49 sector in villages. Yet, the progress is not
50 instantaneous; it needs to be toiled for. The film
51
52
53



• Fig. 2: 'Shoma and Vasant in Bombay Chawl'.

presents Parshu's obsessive interest in the well with an element of humour; he is generally accepted as a madman by other villagers as well as by his family. *Disha* suggests that villages can achieve sustainable development only through such obsessive passion.

Paranjpye's film belongs to the genre of realist sociological cinema which had rid itself of the 'excesses' of commercial Hindi films. The film demonstrates influence by Soviet realism, and especially by the concept of montage. The director attempts to represent the workers' lives by depicting mundane tasks such as bathing, getting ready for work, taking lunch breaks, working in the mills and such like (Figure 2). In a Kafkaesque reminder of the disease and degeneration in the city, Paranjpye shows us shots of cob-web covered machinery, symbolising the destruction and death to come through industrialization and migration. The influence of Soviet realism can be further glimpsed in scenes of drably-dressed workers doing mundane jobs in the textile mills of Dadar. One sequence in the film shows a non-functional mill through a montage of images, a result of the impasse in negotiations between mill-workers and the government, which crippled the textile industry in Bombay in the 1980s. There is no background sound to this montage and Soma comments on the morgue-like appearance of the mills; in the last frame of this sequence he exits the factory after exclaiming 'Ram Naam Satya Ho', a chant that is uttered during Hindu death rites.



• Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

1 The only joy in the lives of the workers is shown
 2 to be the time that they share their lunch-boxes.
 3 Their nameless, faceless, existence in Bombay is
 4 depicted through a single shelf in the workers'
 5 house that has one peg for each man, where they
 6 can hang possessions – clothes, bags, calendars –
 7 suggesting that the only recognition of an
 8 individual in Bombay is through his material
 9 belongings. In another scene, as Vasant is being
 10 introduced to the men in the house – where each
 11 man has limited space and must sleep in shifts –
 12 the voiceover of the men's names is overlapped
 13 with images of cattle in a village shed through
 14 unsynchronized sound-image editing. By
 15 juxtaposing unrelated images and sounds, and
 16 using fades and wipes for editing, Paranjpye
 17 overlays the images with symbolism.

18 The village and the city of *Disha* are not fixed
 19 entities frozen in time. The film highlights
 20 the changes taking place in each location
 21 and the complexities of social and economic
 22 relationships. The act of migration involves
 23 the generation of memories of that which is
 24 left behind. Such memories are imaginary and
 25 subjective. In Vasant's case, the gulf between
 26 the Bakuli of his memory and the Bakuli he
 27 encounters on his return is vast. Vasant
 28 remembers Bakuli as a warm, nurturing place,
 29 evoking deep connections to the soil and its
 30 nostalgic connotations. On his return he finds
 31 that the maternal solace of the village is
 32 threatened by the discovery of his wife's
 33 (Phulvantibai/Rajshree Sawant) affair with the
 34 manager of the 'bidi' factory where she works.
 35 His difficulty results in a narrative turn; he
 36 reluctantly returns to the other life in Bombay.

37 Phulvantibai's new-found economic
 38 independence and her entry into the public
 39 sphere symbolize the changing face of the village
 40 that exists in simultaneity with the change
 41 brought about through Parshu's well. Paranjpye's
 42 depiction of Phulvantibai's affair stresses guilt
 43 rather than expressing women's economic and
 44 sexual freedom. Phulvantibai's embarrassment at
 45 the discovery of the affair by Vasant, her father-
 46 in-law's worried letter to Vasant, and the
 47 manager's licentious behaviour suggest that the
 48 affair is a result of economic compulsion more
 49
 50
 51
 52
 53

than anything else. In the scheme of the film's
 plot, Phulvantibai's affair serves as a narrative
 device to enable Vasant's return to Bombay.
 In an article on the realist turn in Hindi cinema,
 Madhava Prasad suggests, citing the example of
 Shyam Benegal's film *Nishant* (1975), that certain
 impasses in narrative are encountered because of
 the inability of cinematic realism to cope with the
 'demand' for an explanation of the characters'
 conduct²². In Prasad's opinion, certain kinds of
 realist narrative cannot spin themselves out
 without a speechless core, and this inability is
 responsible for the narrative element of the silent
 subaltern. He suggests that the 'aesthetic of
 realism splits the melodramatic unit into its
 component parts: image and meaning, and
 assumes the burden of meaning, leaving the
 image in a raw state'.²³ Phulvantibai's affair
 represents one such impasse, allowing the realist
 narrative in *Disha* to develop to completion.

Paranjpye seems to suggest an alternative
 model of development which foregrounds rural
 development through the agricultural sector and
 small-scale industries. Even as Bombay retains its
 status as an 'expansionary force, devouring the
 other and reconstituting its own image'²⁴, the
 village undergoes a simultaneous change,
 bringing it closer to Paranjpye's ideal of
 development. Although the dominant
 perspective is clearly grounded in the village in
Disha, the film also addresses the complexities
 generated by an economic situation that compels
 migration. It can be argued in the context of this
 film that the idiom of representation of the
 city-village trope is affected not only by changes
 in film technology (enabling more realistic
 images), or by socio-political discourse about
 the nation-state, but also by a gender-specific
 perspective. The urgency with which the image
 and memory of the village haunts the narrative
 is indicative firstly of the 'minor' tradition that
 women's films constitute, and secondly, of the
 place of memory and migration in a feminised
 world view.

The image of the nation in this film can be read
 as utopian or dystopian fiction; such a reading
 being enabled by the emphasis on spatial
 characteristics and geographies. The utopian

1 or dystopian view presented takes critical
 2 cognizance of the social context where the
 3 contradiction between social reality and the
 4 imaginary nation in *Disha* works to foreground
 5 social crisis; the film acquires a political view-
 6 point through its social critique. Alison Butler's
 7 idea of a 'minor cinema' is useful in elaborating
 8 this point²⁵. The idea of minor cinema originally
 9 comes from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's
 10 concept of minor literature²⁶. As Butler explains,
 11 a minor literature is not a literary genre or period,
 12 nor is classification as minor an artistic
 13 evaluation, adding that Kafka, Joyce, Beckett,
 14 and Godard, who Deleuze and Guattari place in
 15 this category, are all canonical writers. The three
 16 defining features of a minor literature as listed
 17 by Deleuze and Guattari are displacement,
 18 dispossession, or deterritorialisation; a politicised
 19 experience; and a bias towards collective values.²⁷
 20 They define a minor tradition in political terms,
 21 where the viewpoint of the deterritorialised
 22 group is foregrounded in its social context to
 23 generate a sense of collectivity, and this notion
 24 of collectivity is used in Aruna Raje's *Rihaae* to
 25 present an alternative view of development
 26 where the nation is in sympathy with women.

31 *Rihaae* ('Liberation')

32 In Indian society, national development has
 33 sidelined and distanced women's issues; the
 34 progress of women has frequently been seen as
 35 antithetical to national identity and development.
 36 This relationship is particularly foregrounded
 37 when nationalism becomes a significant concern
 38 and women are seen as symbols of national
 39 identity.²⁸ Film enables this distance to be
 40 addressed; it allows the imagining of a non-
 41 patriarchal nation, or of fictional national histories
 42 of equal opportunities. Jyotika Virdi states:

43 The nation is constructed in Hindi cinema through
 44 a complex apparatus of metaphors, discourses, and
 45 modes of address. It is imagined through a stock set of
 46 tropes, symbols, characters, and narratives that are
 47 meant to first air, and then resolve, contemporary
 48 anxieties and difficulties. The films iron out tensions
 49 among various constituencies in the nation and play

out utopian ideals – ideals embraced by audiences from
 diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.²⁹

What distinguishes the way the nation is
 imagined in *Rihaae* is the idiom of representation
 and the narrative strategies through which the
 two conflicting entities of 'woman' and 'nation'
 are either brought together as Virdi suggests, in
 a utopian ideal, or differentiated using political
 idioms from popular film culture. The act of
 migration and the depiction of village, city, and
 nation, operate as a means to create this fictional
 space where mutual interests and conflicts can
 be addressed. That is, issues of national
 development addressed in *Rihaae* include a vision
 of women's participation in this development.
 The conflict between nation and woman is
 negotiated in the film by re-interpreting the
 forces that place woman and nation as
 oppositional constructs, in particular the gender
 associations of the urban and the rural. Indeed,
 women become synonymous with the imagined
 nation in this fiction.

Many of Raje's films have dealt with the issue
 of women's bodies and sexuality. In *Rihaae*, she
 reveals the moral hypocrisy towards sexuality in
 a feudal set-up and uses the city-village binary
 to represent this conflict. Like *Disha*, *Rihaae*
 is a story about migrant labourers who work
 as carpenters in Bombay. The most significant
 aspect of the lives of the migrant men is the
 'left behind' village and their women. Raje moves
 the narrative between the city and the village,
 showing parallel depictions of life. Life in both
 locations is made distinct by the moral,
 hierarchical, social, and cultural impositions
 forced upon men and women, as well as those
 that divide urban and rural people.

Raje presents an imaginary village and
 city through the use of codified settings.
 Geographical location in the film is symbolic and
 lacks localization. The city is named as 'Bombay'
 at one point in the film, but Raje chooses not to
 use any of the images commonly associated with
 Bombay in cinema. Bombay is introduced verbally
 to the viewer by the village postman, who
 comments that the migrant men have left behind
 a village full of women, children, the disabled



• Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53



• Fig. 3: 'The Prostitutes and the Migrant Men'.

and the elderly. The introductory shot of the city captures men working as carpenters in an apartment. The customary images of the Gateway of India, the trains, the skyscrapers, or Marine drive are all absent in this introduction. The lives of these men are pictured without reference to any external indicator of life in Bombay. The depiction is restricted to the narrow lanes and alleyways that the men live and wander in. For the migrant men the city is constituted out of their immediate surroundings – their sense of adventure and discovery only extends as far as the prostitute's chambers (Figure 3).

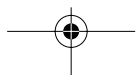
Prasad points out that fictional stories can be located in real cities, but not in real villages. Prasad suggests that this is because unlike in the city, which is 'experienced as a space inhabited by a *population* . . . whose mutual relationships cannot be easily specified', a village with its clearly defined social networks has no 'dummy places, no empty seats, where fictional characters can be placed'; the fictional village has to be invented.³⁰ Vadner is a village that is marked by a large banyan tree ('Vad' means banyan). The banyan is the symbol of the village. But since the tree is a part of nature, Vadner's identity is shared by numerous other villages in India, most of which have large banyan trees as the centre-point of the village plan. The dress and language of the villagers suggests that it is situated in the state of Rajasthan. However, Vadner recreates fictional representations of the village from film and literature; stereotypical features become symbolic of 'Indian village'.



• Fig. 4: 'The Cinematic Village: Taku, Mansukh and Astrologer'.

The portrayal of village life incorporates women's tasks such as washing clothes, filling water from the well, or tilling farm land. The women's attire is traditional, yet colourfully ethnic. The allegorical village, recreated through the film sets, is iconic in its appeal (Figure 4).

To the binary of the village and city, Rajee introduces a third symbolic entity – the foreign or 'abroad'. The presence of the foreign element draws the politics of the village-city into a larger framework, endowing the contours of the nation with more clarity in the process, and also subverting the power hierarchy of village and city. Mansukh/Naseeruddin Shah, who returns to Vadner after spending several years in Dubai, is the protagonist of this narrative ploy. Mansukh is the symbol of the foreign land, an imaginary place par modernity. His physical get-up and appearance reflect his modern positioning; he wears western-style clothes, smokes imported cigarettes, wears sunglasses, and possesses a cassette player. In other words, Mansukh imports the modern into Vadner; the conventional journey from village to city undertaken by Hindi cinema's protagonists is here reversed by Mansukh whose difference from the villagers, material belongings, and perception as a desirable young groom by the village women endows upon him a position of power. Ultimately, however, this power is exposed as



1 being superficial and greed-driven, when
 2 Mansukh chooses to marry the daughter of a rich
 3 landlord, a narrative act that reinstates the
 4 supreme position of the nation as defined by
 5 geographical boundaries. Raje establishes the
 6 hierarchy of the foreign-city-village triad within
 7 a structure that generates unconventional
 8 combinations of location-gender-modernity. This
 9 difference is visualized using theatrical modes
 10 through exaggerated and artificial symbols of
 11 representation. While the village remains the
 12 centre of narrative logic and action, the journeys
 13 between the village, city and the foreign land
 14 raise questions of relative values.
 15

16 At the core of Raje's film is the focus on
 17 sexuality (and its moral associations) and
 18 women's rights to their own bodies. She uses the
 19 power-structure of the topographical triad to
 20 enact this drama. Mansukh's arrival in Vadner
 21 results in a series of intimate encounters between
 22 him and some of the village women. Popular
 23 discourse structures village-women-chastity in
 24 a paradigmatic relationship, each being
 25 substitutable among themselves, and operating
 26 as a binary with the paradigm of city-men-sexual
 27 liberty. The film attempts to break this structure
 28 by playing around with the linear equation (or
 29 syntagm) of the position of the subject in the
 30 transition towards modernity, the associated
 31 sexual freedom, and gender. A central part of
 32 the attempt to deconstruct this linear relationship
 33 is organized around the allegorical imagining
 34 of the village-city. In representing the village
 35 women as sexual individuals, and not as chaste
 36 wives-in-waiting, the so-called modernity of
 37 the city is transferred onto the village and hence
 38 its women.
 39

40 The film breaches typical boundaries between
 41 private and public, and between the inner and
 42 outer worlds³¹. The female body, ordinarily a
 43 subject of secrecy and shame in middle-class
 44 India, is liberated by the village women in *Rihaee*.
 45 Raje uses the female body as the material object
 46 through which revolt is staged (Figure 5).
 47 Mansukh's sexual adventures result in two
 48 pregnancies in Vadner. One of these women,
 49 Taku/Hema Malini, insists on keeping her child
 50 based on the claim that destroying the foetus
 51
 52
 53



• Fig. 5: 'At Work'.

would be a perversion of her own body and self. The film links moral hypocrisy and sexual oppression to the demands of a capital economy and the resulting migration and breaking up of community. Two of the oldest feminist organizations in India, the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) and the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD) have emphasized the connection between biology-based and labour-based oppression of women. These activists claim that while the root of women's oppression lies in the biological differences between men and women, it is only as the mode of production and reproduction changes historically that these biological differences became important enough to subjugate women.³² An unpublished manifesto of the 'Stree Sangarsh' cited by Radha Kumar encapsulates this opinion: 'One of the first dualisms in human history was the sexual division of labour, which developed due to women's reproductive ability; the appropriation of control over women's bodies has been one of the most significant forms of oppression under



- Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

1 capitalism³³. The manifesto describes how this
 2 control is exercised by confining women to
 3 domesticated units which emphasize child-birth
 4 and rearing, and as societies industrialise, by
 5 privatising women's work around the duties of
 6 maternity and childcare.

7 The control of women's bodies by feudal
 8 agents whose powers are strengthened by a
 9 capitalist economy is visualized as a problem that
 10 is a combination of sexual hypocrisy and
 11 economic circumstances in the film. *Rihaee*
 12 depicts the confusion of a nation that is
 13 grappling with migration resulting from a capital-
 14 based developmental vision and the demands
 15 made by a social support system that is often of
 16 a feudal nature; a condition that results in the
 17 classic conflict between traditional and modern
 18 value systems. The village women's fight for
 19 sexual equality and a right to their own bodies is
 20 represented in the film through a mass protest
 21 against the village 'panchayat'³⁴. Taku's refusal to
 22 abort her child draws the attention of the
 23 'panchayat', which rules that she must leave the
 24 village if she desires to continue the pregnancy.
 25 Her protest is taken up by the other village
 26 women, particularly by the older village women.
 27 The scene of revolt stages the solidarity of the
 28 village women; to this extent the film makes its
 29 expectations and demands explicit.

30 Raje visualises a 'modernised' village, one
 31 where the conventions of oppression are resisted
 32 and countered. In order to represent this village,
 33 she creates an iconic village setting, constituting
 34 an allegorical component of the nation-state.
 35 Further, a literal injection of modernity is
 36 introduced through Mansukh's arrival in the
 37 village. Having thus transformed the village, a
 38 consciousness of women's bodies can be played
 39 out in the new setting. Bombay functions at
 40 a similar allegorical level as a constituent
 41 component of the national whole. Rather than
 42 situating the discourse of modernity in and
 43 through urban images, Bombay provides a
 44 narrative anchor to the modernising village. The
 45 dialogue between the urban and rural takes place
 46 through letters and physical journeys; these
 47 journeys bring about and highlight the process
 48 by which the new nation is evolved.

Towards an Understanding of Women's Cinema

The two films discussed here are marked by the visual, referential, and imaginary mobility they enable between the city and the village. In *Disha* and *Rihaee*, this movement takes the form of actual journeys. Paranjpye uses a classical approach bridging the journey between the village and city with a song in the folk style of the 'tamasha',³⁵ that pre-empt the adventures of the city before the visual transition of cinematic frames takes place. Subsequent journeys to and fro enable different viewpoints to be represented; a woman's perspective of Bombay through Phulvantibai's eyes, the changes in the village through both Vasant's and Soma's eyes. In *Rihaee*, Raje highlights the rupture between the migrant men and their wives through the exchange of letters, which are repetitive and predictable. These letters enable an imaginary link to be retained between the city and village. The most significant journey in *Rihaee* is the one undertaken by Mansukh, whereby the village becomes transformed through this bearer of a foreign-bred sophistication. The subsequent arrival of the migrant men in Vadner creates the ground for confrontation between a stagnant feudal patriarchy and a changed village. While the imagination of national progress in both *Disha* and *Rihaee* is based on other dominant discursive traditions in Indian political history, these films make a significant contribution to the understanding of nation and development from women's perspectives.

This essay has tried to emphasise that these two films challenged the dominant ideas of progress and modernity in the 1980s and 90s, and the linearity commonly associated with these, by reorganising the syntagm between nation-gender-modernity through narrative and form. The locus of modernity is shifted from its conventional place in the city to the Indian village, which assumes the location where 'progress' is performed. Even as these films generate a utopian vision of the nation which is in sympathy with women, they can be read as texts in the 'minor' tradition by virtue of the

1 combination of utopianism and social critique
 2 that they present. The blurring of boundaries
 3 of location as distinct encoders of modernity
 4 or tradition, and by extension, the blurring of
 5 the distinction between the modern and the
 6 traditional itself, represents the 'feminised'
 7 aesthetic in these films – an aesthetic which can
 8 be read as being 'feminised' in the context of
 9 Indian philosophies of perception.³⁶ These films
 10 express an alternative vision and language in the
 11 socio-political context of their thematic content
 12 and period of release, but the feminisation of this
 13 language through the subtle reorganisation of
 14 power-structures is seen to be a characteristic
 15 feature of women's filmmaking in India right
 16 across the thirty odd years of active film
 17 production in the Hindi and English languages.
 18 The observations about the aesthetics of *Disha*
 19 and *Rihaae* outlined in this essay, therefore,
 20 generate a more pressing need to explore Indian
 21 women filmmakers' treatment of binaries beyond
 22 those of city/village, to include perceptions of
 23 self/other, as well as masculine/feminine, which in
 24 turn, may generate new possibilities within
 25 Anglo-American film theory to conceptualise the
 26 association between gender and cinema outside
 27 the Western tradition.

Notes

- 34 1 M. Biswas, 'The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and
 35 the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s',
 36 in P. Kaarsholm (ed.), *City Flicks: Indian Cinema
 37 and the Urban Experience* (Calcutta, Seagull Books,
 38 2004) pp. 40–59.
- 39 2 R. Vasudevan, 'The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre,
 40 Narrative Form and Film Style in Contemporary
 41 Urban Action Films' in *City Flicks*, pp. 223–36.
- 42 3 It can be argued that India became attracted to the
 43 idea of liberalisation much before the 1990s, but for
 44 the purpose of this paper, the 1990s marked the
 45 moment when this idea began to occupy much
 46 prominence in public discourse and policy and
 47 became a visible influence on cultural production.
- 48 4 'Women's cinema' is a term that Indian filmmakers
 49 have persistently avoided and film theorists and
 50 critics have seen as being of marginal interest within
 51 the larger context of the study of Indian cinemas.
 52 However, since the 1980s, women have contributed
 53 in large measure to all aspects of film-making, and
 in spite of denial by women directors, it is possible
 to look at this body of work as a collective

demonstrating specific aesthetic and thematic
 features. Both, film studies and postcolonial feminist
 studies, would potentially benefit from such an
 exercise.

- 5 Andrew Higson states that some of the factors
 which identify a national cinema include the
 inheritance and circulation of notions of national
 identity, negotiation of conflicts experienced by the
 imagined community, production of new
 representations of the nation, and the construction
 of a collective consciousness of nationhood through
 specialised cultural referents. See Andrew Higson,
 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30:4
 (1989), 36–46. For various historical, political and
 aesthetic reasons this definition becomes
 problematic in the Indian context, not least because
 of the multiple regional film industries that compete
 with Bollywood, some such as those in the South,
 generating a larger quantity of films than produced
 annually in Bombay. While Hollywood films have
 posed a lesser threat to Indian films, there has been
 a concerted effort on behalf of the Indian state and
 some filmmakers and critics to produce a 'subdued'
 and realist cinema, different from the excessive and
 fantastical films associated with Bollywood,
 generating a question as to the nature of what
 constitutes a national cinema.
- 6 The nation is being considered here more as an
 'imagined' community in Benedict Anderson's
 words, rather than a socio-political formation.
 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections
 on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London,
 Verso, 1983).
- 7 Jameson defines ideologeme as the 'minimal unit' of
 organisation of class discourse – 'an amphibious
 formation, whose essential structural characteristic
 may be described as its possibility to manifest itself
 either as a pseudo-idea – a conceptual or belief
 system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice –
 or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class
 fantasy about the "collective characters" which are
 the classes in opposition'. Cited in M. Prasad,
Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction
 (Delhi, OUP, 1998), p. 6. Prasad suggests that the
 binary tradition/modernity indicates one such
 'conceptual belief system which regulates thinking
 about the modern Indian social formation', in
 addition to being a central theme and organising
 device in popular film narratives. *Ideology*, p. 7.
- 8 See theories of modernisation as outlined by Gyan
 Prakash, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Partha Chatterjee in
 this context, for example in, G. Prakash *Another
 Reason: Science and the Imagination of a Modern
 India* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999);
 S. Kaviraj *Politics in India* (Oxford, OUP, 1997) and
 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus*, 129:1
 (2000) 137–62; P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its
 Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*
 (Delhi, OUP, 1994).

• Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

- 1 9 A. Nandy 'Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye
2 View of Politics', in A. Nandy (ed.), *The Secret
3 Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability
4 and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi, OUP, 1998),
5 pp. 1–19.
6 10 S. Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian
7 Sexuality* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990).
8 11 A large number of scholars in different parts of
9 the world have contributed to recent developments
10 in the theorising of Indian cinema, but it would
11 be worthwhile to indicate that *Deep Focus*
12 (1988–2005) and the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*
13 (1983–99) seemed to provide a launch-pad for
14 these enquiries in the early years.
15 12 S. Chakravorty, *National Identity in Indian Popular
16 Cinema, 1947–1987*, (Austin, University of Texas
17 Press, 1993).
18 13 Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, pp. 6–14.
19 14 Ashis Nandy, for example, suggests that 'certain core
20 anxieties of the Indian civilisation have come to be
21 reflected in the journey from the village to the city
22 and the city to the village. Travel through space and
23 time, the known and the unknown, and ultimately,
24 the self and the not-self get subsumed through
25 these two humble forms of journey'. A. Nandy,
26 *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: the Village
27 and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian
28 Imagination* (Delhi, OUP, 2001), pp. 7–8.
29 15 The term Bambaia is affectionately used to describe
30 the slang-ridden Hindi spoken in Bombay, and which
31 has become a major feature of the Hindi language
32 as used in cinema. The word Bom Bahia ('the good
33 boy') was originally the name given to the islands by
34 the Portuguese who sailed here in 1508. Later, in
35 1661, these islands were gifted to Charles II of
36 England as part of Catherine of Braganza's
37 wedding dowry.
38 16 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London,
39 Routledge, 1994), p. 2.
40 17 In the Marathi language, Bakuli is the name
41 of a weed that has small yellow flowers and
42 grows on arid land.
43 18 For a range of views on this subject see
44 C. Das Gupta's, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's
45 Popular Cinema* (Delhi, Roli Books, 1991); E. Barnow
46 and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York, OUP,
47 1980); A. Sircar, 'Framing the Nation: Languages of
48 Modernity in India' (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation,
49 University of East Anglia, 1997).
50 19 Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar who worked as a team
51 in writing many scripts for Hindi films in the 1970s
52 and 1980s have often put to use the energies of
53 unrest in Indian society during this time, and were
54 instrumental in the creation of Amitabh Bachchan's
55 star persona as the 'angry young man'.
56 20 Rajiv Gandhi, 'Foreword', *Seventh Five Year Plan
57 Report*, Vol. I (Planning Commission, Government of
58 India, 1985). Available online at [http://](http://planningcommission.nic.in)
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
- 21 F. Rangoonwalla, 'The Age of Violence', *Illustrated
Weekly of India*, 4–10 September 1996, pp. 27–29.
22 M. Prasad, 'From Speech to Voice: a Note on a
Realist Turn', *Deep Focus*, 7:3–4 (1997–98),
pp. 51–54.
23 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
24 Kaarsholm, *City Flicks*, p. 6.
25 A. Butler, *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen*
(London, Wallflower, 2000), pp. 19–23.
26 Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20. Originally from G. Deleuze and
F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*
(Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
27 Deleuze and Guattari elaborate that 'in a minor
literature, every individual issue matters: its cramped
space forces each individual intrigue to connect
immediately to politics. The individual concern thus
becomes all the more necessary, indispensable,
magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating
within it. Because a minor literature emerges from a
deterritorialised group, its function is to conjure up
collectivity, even in the absence of an active
community'. Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20.
28 See P. Chatterjee 'The Nationalist Resolution of the
Women's Question', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds),
Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History
(Delhi, Kali for Women, 1987) pp. 233–53;
U. Chakravorty, 'Whatever Happened to
the Vedic Dasi?' in *Recasting Women*, pp. 27–86;
K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the
Third World* (London, Zed, 1986).
29 J. Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular
Films as Social History* (New Jersey, Rutgers University
Press, 2003), p. 9.
30 M. Prasad, 'Realism and Fantasy in Representations
of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema', in *City Flicks*,
p. 83.
31 The politics of the inner and outer worlds as used by
Indian nationalists has been described by Partha
Chatterjee in *Recasting Women*, pp. 233–53. The
segregation into tradition bound inner domain, of
which women became symbols in history, and the
changing/Westernising outer domain inhabited by
men may have been a useful defence mechanism
during colonial times, however, its limitations from
the perspective of gender have been extensively
documented. See also U. Chakravorty in *Recasting
Women*, pp. 27–86.
32 R. Kumar, *The History of Doing: an Illustrated
Account of Movements for Women's Rights and
Feminism in India 1800–1990* (London, Verso,
1993).
33 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
34 In villages in India the panchayat has been
established as a medium of local governance and is
comprised of village elders and influential persons
who resolve local and domestic disputes through the
method of negotiation and consensus.
35 A musical folk drama tradition developed in the early
eighteenth-century in Maharashtra.



1 36 In *Women's I/Eye*, I have argued that one of the
 2 defining characteristics of Indian women's cinema is
 3 the aesthetic of non-dualism. In this tradition, the
 4 'other' is experienced as a projection of the self, and
 5 this outlook influences the manner in which points
 6 of identification are set up through the narrative and
 7 through filming and editing, which in turn
 8 influences spectatorship. The viewing relations set
 9 up by women's films in India are influenced by larger
 10 perceptions of bisexuality and gender transgression,
 11
 12
 13
 14
 15
 16
 17
 18
 19
 20
 21
 22
 23
 24
 25
 26
 27
 28
 29
 30
 31
 32
 33
 34
 35
 36
 37
 38
 39
 40
 41
 42
 43
 44
 45
 46
 47
 48
 49
 50
 51
 52
 53

as well as by the sub-culture of gender transgression
 evident in mainstream Indian society. Therefore,
 frequently, one finds that in women's films,
 conventional binaries are subverted or applied
 to a different grammar of cinema, inviting
 interpretations that are unconventionally feminist
 within the Anglo-American theoretical context.
 R. Sawhney, *Women's I/Eye: A Critical Study of
 Women's Cinema in India* (Unpublished Ph.D.
 dissertation, University of Limerick, 2006).

UNCORRECTED PROOF

