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Introduction. From Highbrow to Lowbrow: Studies of Indian B-grade cinema and beyond

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Cardboard skulls decorating the book of the dead's pink cover—the *Necronomicon*; intoxicated young ladies having a ‘kitty party’ then gang raping their male servant; secret agents 077 and 707 serving the nation; a shape-shifting monster’s head rotates 180 degrees while tracing a doomed bride in red and the list of similar images is far from exhaustive. The above mentioned aesthetical and narrative cinematic devises just happen to come from a variety of Indian films—usually ascribed to the ‘lower’ cinematic cultures and labeled as exploitative, B-grade or even ‘trash’ cinema. Often despised and ridiculed by academicians, critics, and the big budget film industries while at the same time enjoying vast popularity in smaller urban centers and towns, these Indian low budget films co-exist with Bollywood and other major industries—yet work by their own sets of rules and agendas. These films remain a part of the national as well as global film consumption, even if slightly overshadowed by the blockbuster or Arthouse cinemas. Despite the changing trends in India’s film productions and aesthetics, the low budget cinema retains its cult status throughout the country—and this is most evident while taking a stroll down the Grant Road in Mumbai, lined up with numerous video stalls and offering enormous amounts of cheaply produced ‘3 films in 1’ type of DVDs: the genre selection ranging from action (fight) to horror; from mythological to soft-core sex films.

The existence and popularity of these films raise several questions: What is the place of low budget and B-grade films in the broader discussions on Indian cinema? What do these films tell us about the industry and spectatorship? What is their message?

It is the primary task for this collection of articles to tackle these issues and to investigate the complex relationship between low budget cinema and the very idea of ‘convention’. For if we consider all these films to be a certain kind of a *paracinema*, then, according to Jeffrey Sconce, this cinema has a unique aspiration to rise to the status of ‘counter-cinema’ (Sconce 1995, 374). Furthermore, as Sconce observes,
'paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic “art” aggressively attacking the established canon of “quality” cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art’ (ibid.). Although the quotation by Sconce was first used to define American low budget and *eurotrash* cinemas (which by no means are far more ‘aggressive’ than the Indian paracinematic forms) it is still important to investigate how the usage of imitation, parody, pastiche and other postmodern strategies—so popular in the Indian low budget cinema—work within the context of Indian cinematic art cultures in transgressing and subverting the existing official normativities as well as what other functions these strategies perform.

The majority of articles in this *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* issue were collected after the conference ‘The Body in the Cinemas of South Asia’, held at the Vilnius University Centre of Oriental Studies and co-organized by Dr. Valentina Vitali (University of East London) and Dr. Deimantas Valančiūnas (Vilnius University). The conference, which gathered Indian film scholars and film enthusiasts from 11 countries, was a significant event for two main reasons. Firstly, it was the first academic event of this kind both in Lithuania and in the region. It created a platform for scholars from Eastern Europe as well as other countries to bridge their academic interest and research in the field of South Asian film studies. Secondly, this conference was an attempt to encapsulate the different approaches in the studies of South Asian film, including not just the research in the mainstream cinema but also in some of the most diverse and often neglected film genres and productions, such as horror, exploitation and B-grade.

The success of bridging two sometimes completely separated industries was perhaps the result of the chosen thematic focus—the signifier of the ‘body’ and its many uses (and misuses) in films. The construction, function and performance of the body on the screen have always been the object of film studies. Rarely, however, has the subject been given full and direct consideration as a central dimension of South Asian cinemas. Therefore, the conference proposed a variety of ways to investigate the cultural, ideological and representational construction of the body in South Asian cinemas, paying close attention to the discourses of gender, sexuality and identity. The body on the screen becomes a platform to negotiate, transgress and subvert a number of tensions, fears and/or desires—transforming the private into public and the personal into national.

In a similar way, this collection of articles puts a strong emphasis on the signifier of the body in Indian cinema, but also looks at its broader functionality, beyond the established canon of the commercial Indian cinema industries and venturing into the ‘lowest’ layers of the cinema—its B-grade circles.

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1 More on the conference and the detailed programme: http://bodyinsouthasiancinema.wordpress.com
The majority of papers presented at the conference deal with the Hindi cinema. This is not surprising—the spread and consumption of Hindi films is undeniably global. Hindi films were also a major cinema production that had been imported and circulated in the former Soviet Union countries—Lithuania (or, for that matter, Poland) being of no exception. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a growing amount of academic research and monographs concerning mainstream Hindi cinema. Yet, while there remains a lack of substantive research on regional cinemas and, for that matter, on the smaller sections of Hindi cinema (in the low budget or B-grade circles), there has been more and more attempts by established Indian film scholars to look beyond the umbrella term of ‘Bollywood’ and to search for alternative approaches to the study of the variety of forms in the Hindi cinema—one of which is the recent collection of articles Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood. The Many Forms of Hindi Cinema (Dwyer, Pinto 2011).

This Acta Orientalia Vilnensia issue is yet another modest attempt to contribute to the field.

The present Acta Orientalia Vilnensia volume also concentrates on the Hindi cinema—with the exception of the article ‘The Politics around “B grade” Cinema in Bengal: Re-viewing Popular Bengali Film Culture in the 1980s–1990s’ by Anugyan Naag and Spandan Bhattacharya, which is an excursion into the Bengali cinema industry and it is here where this volume begins.

Naag and Bhattacharya take a fresh and challenging look at the Bengali cinema production of the 1980s and the early 1990s, which, undeservedly, is often presented in the various media as being of ‘low quality’ and ‘bad taste’. The authors investigate the social and economic conditions of the Bengali cinema in the abovementioned period, taking into consideration both the declining spectatorship of the upper class bhadraloks and the formations of new popular discourses in cinema. Their discussion on the concept of the B-grade cinema and new aesthetic and language-related discourses in the context of Bengali cinematic culture is a fruitful attempt to establish certain links between styles, genres, audience, reception and the notions of the popular and mainstream.

Action (or fight) films constitute an ample part of many B-grade film productions. Surprisingly, other than the abundant research concerning the Amitabh Bacchan persona and the Angry young man type of films of the 1970s, there has been little research done on the variety of action, fight and stunt films of Hindi cinema. The pioneering work in this field is undoubtedly credited to Valentina Vitali (2008) and the next article in this collection is Krzystof Lipka-Chudzik’s contribution to the topic—‘Bodies, Bollywood and Bond. The evolving image of secret agents in Hindi spy thrillers inspired by the 007 franchise’. This article is an impressive historiographic account of the development...
of the specific James Bond influenced movie genre in India. From the action film *Farz* (1967) to *Agent Vinod* (2012) the author traces the significant thematic and aesthetic changes in the formation and development of the Hindi Bond films. Drawing parallels with the original James Bond franchise films, the author investigates the uniqueness of Indian Bond films, its pastiche forms and historical evolution in terms of the subject-matter and the construction of the male body.

The exploitation and B-grade cinema is inseparable from the horror film genre, which is still largely neglected in the academic Indian film studies, with only occasional and somewhat fragmented attention. Therefore, three articles in this volume by the authors Deimantas Valančiūnas, Mithuraaj Dhusiya and Aditi Sen explore this terrain in Indian cinema.

Deimantas Valančiūnas’ article ‘Indian Horror: the Western monstrosity and the fears of the nation in the Ramsay Brothers’ Bandh Darwaza’ researches the film *Bandh Darwaza* (1990) by the pioneers and the best known film-making family in Indian horror—the Ramsay brothers. By employing a post-colonial reading of the film, the author draws attention to the Western gothic imagery used in the film. In the article Valančiūnas proposes the idea that *Bandh Darwaza*, which was created just before the economic liberalization in 1991, appears as an embodiment of the anxiety and fears related to the forthcoming changes this liberalization supposedly could bring about. Connecting the economic liberalization and the inevitable Western intervention into the sacred domain of ‘Indianness’, protected by the Indian nationalism, the film transforms the phobia of the unknown into a Dracula, the deformed monster of the Western classical horror tradition.

Horror cinema as a certain site to explore socio-political tensions is also the core idea of the article ‘Shape Shifting Masculinities: Accounts of maleness in Indian man-to-animal transformation horror films’ by Mithuraaj Dhusiya. The author researches the topic of shape-shifting and man-to-animal transformations in two films, belonging to different Indian film industries—a well known Hindi film *Jaani Dushman* (1979) and *Punnami Naagu* (1980) made in Telugu language. While female to animal transformations was a commonly deployed motif in the fantasy films of the 1980s (usually employing the topic of female transformation into snakes, e.g. *Nagina* (1986)), there is still little scholarship on male-to-animal transformations. Dhusiya investigates how the theme of bodily transformation correlates with the discourses of gender and masculine subjectivities, related to the broader socio-historical transformations in India—namely, how the films function as a site of critique on the politics of the National Emergency or the caste-based politics.

Aditi Sen in her article “I Wasn’t Born With Enough Middle Fingers”: How low-budget horror films defy sexual morality and heteronormativity in Bollywood’
ventures even further beyond the established B-grade horror traditions of the Ramsay brothers to the bottom of India’s horror production, investigating the uncategorized low (or, perhaps, ‘no’) budget films by such directors as Kanti Shah, Harinam Singh etc. In her witty and pioneering research Aditi Sen explains, how certain narrative and visual strategies employed by these low budget horror films subvert conventional Bollywood norms and aesthetics as well as interrogates the very idea of normativity. These films, according to the author, open up the space for dialogue that the mainstream cinema has totally neglected—particularly, in the areas of incest, female lust, the othering of male sexuality, and transgendered identities.

The last two articles in this collection deal with mainstream Bollywood, but choose to focus on various strategies deployed in the films, which subvert and transgress the conventional approach to the female body and sexuality.

Sabrina Ciolfi in her article ‘Demure Heroines Expressing Sexual Desire: Hints of traditional motifs in popular Hindi cinema’, researches a number of popular Hindi films of the 2000s, belonging to a certain subgenre of Hindi cinema—the family drama, usually concerned with the concept of a joint-family as an embodiment of Hindu values and traditions. The author investigates how films construct the leading female characters as chaste and virtuous women while at the same time looking for the ways to perform their eroticism and sexual desires, usually by deploying certain tactics and strategies of erotic depictions, hints and motifs found in the classical Sanskrit literature and aesthetics.

Ravneet Kaur, on the other hand, in her article ‘Framing the Body and the Body of Frame: Item songs in popular Hindi cinema’ investigates those famous item songs—a specific film structural component of the song/ dance sequences in Hindi films. In the past few years there has been much scholarship produced for the analysis of the songs and dances in Hindi films (e.g. Gopal, Moorti 2008; Morcom 2013); however, research dealing exclusively with item songs is quite rare. Therefore, Ravneet Kaur in her article proceeds with a thorough cinematic investigation of the structural composition of the item song. The author analyses item songs using the concept of the ‘frame’ and paying great attention to the various cinematographic aspects of the item songs (camera positions, editing), relating them to problematic debates on gender, culture and consumption.

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References


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The Politics Around ‘B-Grade’ Cinema in Bengal: Re-viewing popular Bengali film culture in the 1980s–1990s

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Abstract. The 1980–90s was a turbulent period for the Bengali cinema, the events being triggered by a series of industrial problems, the anxiety of a new film public and the pressing necessity for newer forms of articulation. During this time, Bengali popular cinema responded with newer genres of narratives (elaborated later) that emerged from dissimilar aesthetic positions and different social perspectives. But it is unfortunate that instead of engaging with this diverse range of film making practices, the journalistic and academic discourses on the 1980–90s Bengali cinema present only the ‘crisis-ridden’ scenarios of the Bengali film industry—suffering from multiple problems. Interestingly, this marginalized and unacknowledged cinema of the 1980–90s almost became synonymous to the concept of the ‘B-grade’ cinema, although it is not similar in formation, circulation and reception like the other established B-circuit or B-grade cinemas across the world. This paper aims to criticize this simpler ‘crisis narrative’ scenario by looking at the categories of class and audience and questioning the relevance of issues related to the popularity of these films. In brief, our article aims to problematize the notion of what is ‘B-grade’ cinema in the context of the Bengali cinema of the 1980–90s and by referring to this film culture, it tries to open up some other possibilities to which this notion can refer.

Contextualizing 1980s:
Politics around distribution and exhibition of Bengali films

In the 1980s Bengali cinema was at a crossroads—ridden with the anxiety of industrial uncertainty, the possibility of a new filmic culture, and the pressing necessity for newer forms of articulation. The 1980s is a juncture in Bengali film history when a large section of the audience welcomed the new melodramas of Sukhen Das, Anjan Chowdhury or Bireshwar Chatterjee while a section of the urban intelligentsia maintained its distance from this emerging mainstream model; the
new Leftist Government\(^1\) showed its interest to develop a ‘healthy’ film culture with autonomous bodies like the West Bengal Film Development Corporation, and the government sponsored Nandan Film and Cultural Centre also came up with a law for the resurgence of Bengali cinema and the industry. On 25 June 1981, The Calcutta Information Centre organized a meeting for the first time with the re-established Film Development Board that was attended by twenty-seven of the forty registered members. Vice-chairman Buddhadev Bhattacharya mentioned in his speech that,

[T]he State Government has been trying to obtain prior consent of the President of India to a bill providing for compulsory screening of West Bengal films in the cinema houses of this state for a period of 12 weeks a year. The Law Ministry of the Government of India has raised certain constitutional and legal points and the State Government is working on these points for obtaining necessary clearance. (Bureau 1981, 41)

In response, Subrata Sensharma pointed out that the State Government could easily impose this law and call for a renewal of License, without any further delay. The Board had not known this before, and the final draft of the proposal in that meeting was:

The Board approved the State Government’s stand regarding compulsory screening of West Bengal Films in cinema houses within West Bengal for a period of 12 weeks in a year. The Board has further requested the state Government to explore if such compulsory screening can be made a condition of license granted to the show houses. (Bureau 1981, 41)

The law had to be drafted in such a way that none of the cinema halls could deviate from the terms and conditions. Hence a section from page 588 of the Cinematograph Code was incorporated into the draft, which mentioned,

The State Government may from time to time, issue directions to licensees generally or, if in the opinion of the State Government circumstances so justify, to any licensee in particular, for the purpose of regulating the exhibition of any film or class of films and in particular the exhibition of scientific films, films intended for educational purposes, films dealing with news and current events, documentary films or films produced in India and where any such directions have been issued, these directions shall be deemed to be additional conditions and restriction subject to which the license has been granted. (Bureau 1981, 41, 42)

Following this, on 10 July the same year, the Leftest government issued a letter with the above-mentioned clauses and a mandate of 12 weeks of compulsory Bengali film screening to the Home Department Secretary, all district offices, the Calcutta Police Commissioner, and cinema hall owners.

And this came as a shock to most hall owners. The news created a tremor in the Tollygunge studios, the Dharmtala area of distributors’ offices and especially among cinema house owners who ran Hindi or English films 365 days in a year. Simultaneously, several cinema halls were short-listed by the Calcutta Municipal

\(^1\) In West Bengal the Left front came to the power in 1977 state election.
Corporation and a notice was issued (to them) to immediately amend the hall in order to keep their licenses intact, as the maintenance standards of these halls were below quality. Cinema theatre owners had earlier avoided the compulsory conversion to air-conditioning on the grounds of frequent power cuts, and frequent increases in rent, hiring or booking charges (Bureau 1981, 43).

On average in a year, these five chains would run new Hindi films for nine months and show old Bengali films for the remaining time. Though thirty new films were released in a year, there would always be more than ten films at a time that had also been certified, but not eligible for theatrical release due to the lack of cinema halls. The main problem for Bengali films was the large number of Hindi films that were released and those distributors (who exclusively distributed Hindi films) booked cinema houses and chains and paid hefty advance amounts to hall owners, who were then contract-bound to show only Hindi films. For instance, halls like Basushree-Bina-Darpana and Priya, which earlier showed Bengali films, now chose only Hindi films for the years 1981 to 1983 and several others followed this trend. This was a matter of concern because the regulation the government wanted to impose demanded at least seventy five feature films to be produced in a year in Tollygunge (Bureau 1981, 44). In 1981, West Bengal had 350 permanent cinema halls and roughly another 210 exhibition sites that were temporary. In order to meet the demands of the cinema halls, more films needed to be released. However, Tollygunge’s condition at the time did not permit the production of so many films. The lack of actors, technicians, efficient producers and committed directors was a major drawback, alongside the poor and deteriorating condition of the studios. Though the prices of tickets had been reduced to one rupee, only hall owners who had a hit Bengali film running would make a profit (Bureau 1981, 44).

The reduced ticket price policy also affected new releases, because even old films were being run simultaneously for a one rupee ticket; this was another source of competition for the newly released Bengali films. These films, which had already earned huge profits, were again giving extra returns to the hall owners—but in this extra profit, producers or distributors received no share. Therefore, distributors made up for this loss by gaining greater control over the rural sector. On the one hand, they took a major portion of the profit from small hall owners in rural areas, and in return they gave them new releases (Bureau 1981, 43).

On the other hand, distributors and hall owners were stuck on the issue of how they would run Bengali films in areas where the audience was mostly non-Bengali. They would incur huge losses if they had to run Bengali films for twelve weeks in these areas. In such a situation, the government’s intervention with the compulsory rule of screening Bengali films for twelve weeks further complicated the situation.
Moreover since the government had incurred huge losses by dropping the ticket price to one rupee as well as financing several feature films that both the audience and exhibitors had refused to acknowledge, the scenario for Bengali filmmakers, distributors, producers and hall owners became acutely tricky and challenging (Bureau 1981, 43, 44).

1980 was also a turbulent year for the Tollygunge industry, which was triggered by a prolonged strike during September and October by the Bengal Motion Pictures’ Employees Union, who demanded an increase in the payment structure and bonus benefits as well as the subsequent lock-out by the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association. 98% of the approximately 400 cinema halls in West Bengal were shut down. Hall owners could not meet the demand for a hike in the bonus and salaries of employees. They argued that they had to pay 125% of the ticket price as Entertainment Tax to the Government so they barely earned enough to pay their employees. The strike and lock-out caused an estimated loss of Rs. 10 to 12 lakhs per day to the industry and Rs. 15 lakhs to the Government. This deeply affected the regular cinema-goers, especially the audiences for Bengali cinema. The death of super-star Uttam Kumar in 1980 and the gradual weakening of the Bengali cinema industry created a detachment in the minds of the audiences, making the film cultural scenario very dismal.

**Bhadralok discourses around film culture in Bengal in the 1980–90s**

Calcutta as a metropolitan city was also changing—culturally, socially and politically—in the mid-1980s when the *bhadralok* Bengali middle class was familiarizing itself with television sets at home—which gave people the privilege of watching films in the comfort of their households. The VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) was also making its entry into the urban dwellings/ city dwellers’ rooms that enabled people to watch films of their choice at their discretion, conveniently avoiding the drawbacks of the overall experience of going to the cinema theatres.

like a Gharana—a school unto himself. Pal adds that the kind of films that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s by directors like Anjan Chowdhury was actually initiated by Sukhen Das. His films also dealt with social and contemporary issues. Most of his films had very successful musical tracks and songs. He was a pioneer in bringing talent in from Bombay—whenever the film needed some. Sukhen Das had a unique style of storytelling. He gave priority to the story, dialogue and drama as the most important aspects of his films. Moreover he made way for the voice of the suppressed to be heard and articulated through his films. But he was not free from criticism—some of his films were considered regressive, lacking in cinematic sense and high in melodrama similar to the jatra (Pal 2004, 16, 17).

The 1980s Bengali cinema in general responded with newer, multiple genres of narratives and their popularity offered a gamut of trial and error methods across the film industry when a diverse range of Bengali films emerged in numerous genres and stylizations, as their makers and producers came from dissimilar backgrounds, diverse social and political positions and different perspectives. But it is unfortunate that instead of engaging in this diverse range of film making practice, the journalistic and academic discourses on the 1980s Bengali cinema present a bleak scenario of a film industry suffering from multiple crises. Beyond cinema and cinematic practice this is also a period when the elite class of Bengal was facing a crisis of their literary self and the specific term ‘aposanskriti’ (bad-culture) came into parlance (largely to indicate the emerging culture of the newly privileged urban class and also the westernization of the younger generation who were allegedly distanced from their literary roots of Bengali culture). In the midst of this crisis and the anxiety of the Bengali literary

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2 Jatra (origin: Yatra meaning procession or journey in Sanskrit) is a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, which spread throughout most of Bengali speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Tripura. The typical characteristics of Jatra were to present high and excessive melodrama, loud acting, and stereotypical characters—especially that of villains—as well as tacky dialogues, hackneyed plots, trite dialogues and songs often with lewd or vulgar lyrics, etc. It is interesting to note that newspaper columns, public sphere discussions and part of the film industry called the new popular Bengali films not only ‘bad’ or ‘derogatory’ but also described them as an ‘art form’ that was more close to one wall theater (Jatra) or folk performance than film. Precisely that’s why this lack of ‘film sense’ was talked about when these films were described.

3 These two terms ‘sanskriti’ (‘culture’) and ‘apo-sanskriti’ (bad culture) that appeared in the press and public sphere in the mid to late 1980s and in the early 1990s spread almost like wildfire and created fear and anxiety regarding a certain kind of ‘crisis’, ‘decay’ and the degradation of (Bengali) film culture, and was also instrumental in constructing a nostalgia for an ‘ideal’ culture. The division of what used to be ‘sustha’ (healthy) Bengali culture in earlier days and what it had become became a point of great concern in different sectors of public sphere discussions. Narayan Chowdhury for instance edited a book called Sanskriti O Apasanskriti (Culture and Bad Culture, 1985) and wrote a book called Sanskriti, Shilpa O Sahitya (Culture, Arts and Literature, 1985). And newspapers like Anandabazar Patrika or Dainik Basumati largely engaged with this topic and mobilized the discourse of ‘Aposanskriti’ in features, articles, and reader’s letters and editorials.
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self of the bhadralok class, film makers like Anjan Choudhury, Swapan Saha, and others continued with their newer forms of melodrama. While being popular, these films earned widespread criticism from a part of the urban intelligentsia for the ‘vulgarity’ and ‘crudity’ of their narrative model. Popular newspapers and magazines published letters of dissatisfied Bengali film audiences and saw them as markers of the ‘crisis narrative’ of the Bengali Cinema. These critical perspectives of the Bengali intelligentsia (but not necessarily the industrial formulation, production or distribution circuit) relegated this other form of popular cinema to the ‘B-grade’ cinema status of the Bengali film history. The term ‘B-grade’ here is not applicable in terms of its production logic (or for that matter of legal discourse) but as a result of a section of urban intelligentsia’s discourse of culture, where they considered this cinema as a complete misfit.

To recognize this criteria of the ‘misfit’ in Bengali film history we have to briefly mention the cultural dominance of a particular (bhadralok) class in Bengal and its relation to Bengali cinema.4 The question of bhadralok taste and bhadralok film culture is central to the narrative of crisis in the 1980s. ‘Bhadralok’ literally meaning ‘gentle folk’ in the Bengali language is a term widely used in Bengal to refer to the educated, though not necessarily affluent middle and upper sections of society, and is often used not only as a socio-economic category but also as a cultural entity.5 In the Bengali film industry, however, this bhadralok presence gained significance in the 1930s with the remarkable success of the New Theatres that continued in the later decades of the Uttam-Suchitra6 era. Sharmistha Gooptu has tried to explain

4 For this brief narrative of bhadralok history in the following lines we drew from Tithi Bhattacharya, Sumit Sarkar, and Aseema Sinha.
5 As scholars have explored, during British colonization in India (1757‒1947) an upwardly mobile section emerged in Bengal that was physically removed from the productive activities of both agriculture and industrialization, but gained a significant position as the ruling class. Western education, a certain kind of learnedness, a world of culture and the rhetoric about culture gave a unified identity to this heterogeneous category called bhadralok formed of principally Hindu ‘upper’ caste groups. And in the late nineteenth century they came to exercise social power and cultural dominance over both urban centers like Calcutta as well as the rural areas. The bhadralok class of pre-independence India that had received rents from the zamindari system, and later survived on Government service and other learned professions. It is interesting to note that this dominant class in Bengal did not represent the commercial interests either of the agrarian sector or of the industrial sector. And scholars have argued that one of the main aspects of Bengali culture is the ‘non Bengali nature of Bengal’s economic classes and also the non productive character of its ruling elites, the Bhadralok’ (Bhattacharya 2005). See also Sarkar 1997, Sinha 2005.
6 ‘The era of ‘Uttam-Suchitra’, the mid 1950s through the 1960s, is commonly designated as the ‘golden period’ of Bengali cinema, and has been written and reminisced about pervasively. During these years Bengali directors were able to produce a genre of film melodrama that became integral to a Bengali sense of self. Identification was rooted in the figures of an idealized female and an idealistic and ethical male, embodied respectively by Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, and their romantic love became the stuff of intense emotional identification among Bengalis of the post-independence generation. The same prototypes were common in films of that era which did not actually feature
the narrative of bhadralok cultural dominance in the 1930s Bengali cinema in an article where she argued that the (economic) marginalization of the bhadralok class within the Bengali province and in the country ‘led the bhadralok to better appreciate opportunities thrown up by newer, relatively unexplored avenues like the Cinema’ (Gooptu 2003, 2413).

In Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation, Gooptu sees how the New Theatres’ success led to a Bengali bhadralok cinema supported by its close connections with Bengali literature, the literati and the discourse of Bengali culture (Gooptu 2010). What she calls the ‘perfect marriage of economics and respectability’ (Gooptu 2003, 2413). And the discourse of Bengali-ness is, according to her, continued in different generic practices, cinematic figures and directions in the later period of Bengali cinema. And in the 1980s the popular cinema model knowingly/ unknowingly causes a ‘discontinuity’ from that discourse. Therefore these popular films of the 1980s are seen as emerging from an oppositional plane of the ‘realistic’ mode of Bengali cinema of the earlier decades and its mode of address—and were criticized for remaking popular Bombay cinema. And along with this a discourse was formed that described ‘it (Bengali cinema) has never been as bad as this’. This is strange since Anjan Choudhury and Swapan Saha responded to the social crisis that was evident in many other contemporary cultural events of that time and in other mediums of artistic expressions. Their films speak through symptoms, which demand a proper interpretation and not a direct literal meaning of what is expressed on the screen. The Manichaean schema of opposition and ‘the logic of the excluded middle’ that Peter Brook theorized (Brook 1983) are translated into the problems of contemporary Bengali society through a series of metaphors. This aspect is largely ignored in the critical discourse; especially, the resurgence of the family melodrama in a body of films of this period, which to a great extent has its roots in the contemporary social and cultural crisis of West Bengal and borrowed its form and narrative content from Bengali folklore to the teleserial7 and its drama of middle-class domesticity. So interpretation of these film texts and the film culture, only in terms of copy-paste jobs from the Bombay cinema, would be a mistake. What Brook and Elsaesser said about melodrama and its formal characteristics with a crisis of expression holds true for this new Bengali film melodrama in which very often, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen together, and it has been suggested that ‘Uttam-Suchitra … be used as a sign’. See Biswas 2000, 122 for the broader genre of the 1950s and 1960s popular melodrama. Also see Gooptu 2010, 157.

7 Teleserial became an important influence bringing in domestic space and social conflict in the narrative logic of these films. For instance teleserials like Humlog and Buniyaad followed by Rajni, Basanti and Nukkad on national television established a pattern of familial dramas of domesticity that might be seen as a possible template for these films. Regional Bengali television as well responded with popular teleserials like Janani and Janmabhumi in the early 1990s which engaged with the narrative of crisis of filial bond and disrespect to the mother.
language became inadequate to express the subject matter (Elsaesser 1987, 70–2). It is interesting here to study the plot of a popular film *Baba Kano Chakor* (dir. Swapan Saha, 1998), which told the story of the ups and downs in the life of a Bengali middle class extended family and the central theme was the disrespect shown to the parents by the elder son and his wife. In this film the elder son borrowed money from his father that he had saved for his daughter’s marriage and when the father needed it the son did not pay him back. The elder son eventually succeeds in his business while the educated younger son cannot get any job and is compelled to work as a driver. The rest of the narrative engaged with the humiliation of the parents by the elder son and his wife and how the father literally became a servant in his elder son’s family. At the climax when the family needed the money to pay the medical bill of the mother, the elder son, instead of helping his father, invested in luxury for their nuclear family dream. But after his mother’s death the son realized his selfishness and the father forgave him. The family reunited again.

The contradictions between the ‘old’ familial value system and values of the emerging life-style became one of the primary concerns of this narrative model. Along with it these films present a strong rejection of the possibility of nuclear family space and the life-style associated with it. New modern spaces like birthday parties, bars, pubs, etc, were seen as evil spaces, which destroyed traditional womanhood, familial ties and moral values. Issues concerned with generational drama, sibling rivalry and disrespect towards the elder members became repetitive in these melodramas—where the family also emerged as a space that would finally resolve the crisis and erase the source of evil.

Words and language played a central role in these films since they reflected the fascination and fear, trouble and trauma of an imagined crowd and developed a mode of language of ‘unarticulated emotions and incommunicable ideas’ (McLean 1965). Noted film journalists in Bengali and English newspapers did not hide their feelings of discomfort while listening to this unidentifiable, ‘rowdy’ Bengali in their review columns. This is possibly the reason why many film journalists of this period did not consider these films as Bengali films at all and described the Bengali film star Prasenjeet (who has acted in many of these films) as a Hindi film star. If on the one hand, filmmaker Haranath Chakrabarty saw it as a part of their project to speak in a simple, colloquial Bangla dialogue addressing the common Bengali mass and that there was nothing ‘unconventional’ or ‘unusual’ in using that language; on the other hand, journalists in their columns felt that this language was a conscious ‘rejection’ of the *bhadra* cultural code. For instance, in a personal interview with veteran film journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta who discussed naming strategies of these films and cites this particular film, *Baba Keno Chakor*, as an interesting example. According to
her, instead of a direct and crude approach, the film could go for some title like ‘pitar asamman’ (Disrespect to the father) that would not hamper the sense of the theme that the film wanted to convey and the film would also have a ‘presentable’ name that was suitable for the bhadra tongue. But the makers did not use that name deliberately because they wanted to express that rejection of the bhadra cultural code and any kind of bhadrata in their populist strategy. However, close observation reveals that it is not about ‘rejecting’ an established (bhadra) culture or challenging the hegemony of a (bhadralok) class but of a certain claim over a culture that was being denied. Here we must remember that in being and becoming the bhadralok class, the changing idea of the self, socio-political transformations, the emergence of newer belief systems and other major and minor social phenomena have always acted on this category as in the case of any other social and cultural type. Therefore, a problem arises if we completely ignore the slipperiness of this term while using it in historical writing. The 1980–90s is a period that offers heterogeneous tendencies of the term and also the possibilities of the plurality to which this term can refer in the context Bengali society and its cinema.

The historian Sumit Sarkar sees this self-defining term ‘bhadralok’ serving as sociological shorthand and also as a broad charismatic authority for itself in the class’ self-perception (Sarkar 1997, 169). This idea of bhadralok self-perception is useful for not only understanding the ‘break’ in the cinematic practice of the 1980s but also the dominant history writing mode of Bengali cinema. The discourse of bhadralok culture and the notion of a certain kind of Bengali-ness that was a dominant feature of Bengali cinema experienced a break in the bhadralok perception in the 1980s. Here it would be valid to ask whether this was essentially a real ‘break’ in the history of Bengali cinema, or if and how much of this was based on a certain perception and more importantly, whose perception and perspective should we take as the standard perception and perspective. It seems to us that this is a question that can be debated over endlessly without finding a final answer. Hence, here we would like to consider the question of a belief system and its dominance in structuring a cultural history that perhaps led to a ‘break’ in the bhadralok film history through the emergence and popularity of a certain kind of Bengali film of the 1980s, which further subsequently caused a rupture in Bengali cinema—in this period and the decades that followed.

The recurrent genre of popular Bengali films in 1980–90s

Within the diverse range of films in the 1980–90s there were four major tropes of film narratives that can be found repetitively: first, the narrative centring around the figure of the honest police hero fighting against the corrupt social and political system, which reflected the contemporary times of the 1980s’ Bengal; second, the adaptation
of popular Bengali folklore, primarily revolving around the mythical tales of the snake goddess; third, domestic melodrama concentrating on the issues of daughter-in-laws and mother-in-laws; and fourth, action narratives centring on issues of illegitimacy and class. It is also important to note that there were instances where these tropes had overlapping tendencies in the narratives of a few films. In 1984 a young script writer Anjan Chowdhury made a significant entry into the industry quite drastically shifting from the earlier tradition of Bengali cinema with his directorial debut, *Shatru*, where he introduces the policeman as the hero or protagonist of the film, repeatedly played by Ranjit Mullick. In *Shatru*, Mullick's character was that of a noble, honest and dutiful police officer of a suburban village Haridevpur, who fights corrupt politicians and business goons to bring peace and social justice. Here it is perhaps important to note that the protagonist's figure can be identified with the angry-young-man image of Amitabh Bachchan in Hindi cinema, popular throughout the 1970s. *Shatru* had a mixed ensemble cast with a corrupt MLA played by Manoj Mitra, whose son is a rogue, troubling and ever-teasing the village school master's college-going daughter. There were other characters—a comic and corrupt police sub-inspector played by Anup Kumar and the figure of a local businessman dealing in illegal country liquor. The film had fight sequences, theatrical comedy and heavy melodramatic dialogues. *Shatru* ran successfully in city halls like Radha-Purabi-Ujjwala-Sri for seven weeks consecutively, mostly with ‘house-full’ boards. This situation of an overwhelming audience response was till then, associated with the so-called *bhadralok* cinemas of the 1950s, 1960s and to an extent the 1970s.

It is relevant here to discuss the film *Pratik* by Prabhat Roy (1988) based on a lumpen hero and his quest for a ‘legitimate’ identity in the *bhadra* circle of society. Pratik, the male protagonist of this film, grows up in a city slum and fights against the discrimination he and his mother experience in their lives. His mother works as a domestic helper and tolerates disrespect, embarrassment and the cruelty of society for giving birth to an ‘illegitimate’ son. The first part of the story engages with the crisis and humiliation the son and his mother face in their day-to-day lives. The word *Pratik-bejanma* (in Bengali Pratik, the bastard) is purposefully used in the film narrative to highlight the prejudiced Bengali society and its notion of legitimacy. Then the story moves in flashback to narrate the affair between Pratik's mother and a wealthy man. When she was young, a man came into her life and they fell in love with each other. When she became pregnant the man excused himself in the name of some urgent work, promised to come back but he never returned. The second half of the story tells of Pratik’s search for his father and the final resolution. Apart from *Pratik* (1988), films like *Pratidaan* (1987) or *Ekanta Apan* (1987) narrated the struggle of *Rano-gunda* or *Pratik-bejanma* of Bosebagan or Panchanantala slums;
they also focused on these marginalized urban figures’ desire to belong to a more legitimate *bhadra* circle of the society. Here lies the question of gaining/ not gaining acceptability and question of the legitimacy of belonging to an upward or respectable class.

Also, these new film narratives constantly try to portray this threatened existence of a class on the margins of society; their loss of hope and the everyday humiliation they had to face because they were not wealthy or could not afford ‘the good life’ in a society full of class inequality and injustice. In a film like *Chhhoto Bou* (1988), Anjan Chaudhury narrated the crisis of domesticity of a middle class Bengali family where the mother badly treated her elder son and his wife and the blind father witnessed this helplessly. The opportunist middle son and his ambitious and westernized wife were also a party to the mother’s ill-treatment. The middle son and his wife were criticized and punished in this film since they posed a possible threat to the joint family structure with their plans to buy a flat and leave home. They also have a married sister who often visited her home and insulted the elder daughter-in-law. This situation changed drastically when the younger son married an orphan girl and he left town for work. The younger daughter-in-law resumed control of the family and restored its order by punishing the wrong-doers and giving respect to those who deserved it. Then the angry mother-in-law wrote to her younger son about her younger daughter-in-law, to which the son returned and after an exchange of several heightened melodramatic dialogues, the mother realized her fault and recognized those who really cared for her and the family. The film ends with the joint family reuniting. Anjan Chaudhury almost became an expert of the daughter-in-law series with films like *Mejo Bou, Baro Bou*, *Bourani* etc., which focused on the drama of domesticity between the elder, middle or younger daughters-in-laws of these films. Hence, with film after film we see this narrative plot of a joint family where its two sons get unequal treatment because they belong to two different income classes of the same society. The film texts formed their melodramatic trope—remembering these class equations in Bengal and the moral anger of a certain class.

Deviating from the dominant mode of the literary narrative, the fourth major trope borrowed its structure from the myth and folklore that are popular in the peripheries of the state of Bengal. *Beder Meye Josna* inspired by a popular ‘jatra pala’ narrative initiated this trend that almost acquired a cult status. This 1991 Bengali film directed by Motiur Rahman Panu was a remake of a popular Bangladeshi film. In Bengali language ‘bede’ denotes a gypsy community of snake charmers who make their living by entertaining people, selling medicinal herbs and jugglery. This film narrated a love story between a girl from a ‘bede’ community and a local prince. One day when the local prince was bitten by a snake, Josna, a girl from the ‘bede’ community was called
to cure him. The king requested Josna to cure his son and in exchange, promised Josna to give her anything she wants. Josna risked her life to cure the prince and when the prince recovered she fell in love with him. When the prince came to know about Josna he also fell in love with her. But the king objected to this since she belonged to the ‘bede’ community. However in the climax of the film it was revealed that Josna actually belonged to an upper caste family. The king finally agrees to get them married. Following Beder Meye Josna, Bengali cinema experienced a body of films that dealt with snake charmers, snake goddess, female figures that possessed special powers from the cult worshipping of snake etc. (in films like Nagini Kanya, Nach Nagini Nach Re, Behula Lokhindor and others). Also, there were films like Pratirodh, which narrated the love story of an honest police officer who fell for a girl, Lakhsmi, who survived a snake bite and possessed special powers.

The period from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s was marked by new economic policies, new job sectors and the growth of the consumer culture—all of which merged and resulted in the idea of a ‘new’ middle class in India (Fernandes 2007, 29–35). If measured in terms of access to consumer goods, incomes and infrastructure, the Indian middle class grew by large numbers in the period and the definition of the new middle class was based on the ideal of middle class professionals as ‘white collar workers’ in private companies, possessing education, skills, and expertise (Donner 2008, 54). But along with the upwardly mobile segment of this new class there was a section of the population that did not benefit from the new employment opportunities of the private sector or from government initiatives. With factories closing down in Bengal and a relatively less developed private sector job market, this class increasingly felt betrayed and disillusioned in the Bengali society. The rise of this ‘cosmopolitanism of the “English medium”’ that was required for the ‘economic laws of the job market’ came as an attack on a segment of the population and its belief systems on a large scale. Hence the cinema we are concerned with reflected this anxiety and threat to the new consumer culture and it is criticized for affecting the social and familial harmony. Thus, it is important to note that while television advertisements and the overall media scenario engaged this portrayal of an aspiring middle-class (nuclear) family and its consumer dream, the popular cinema in West Bengal criticized even the possibility of this aspiration.

The above mentioned films mostly used ‘masala’ elements quite strategically in this period, since on the one hand they followed the literariness of the pre-existing film culture in terms of dialogue delivery while on the other hand, they used occasional action sequences, devotional songs, and even dance numbers in the plot. The general assumption that the 1980s Bengali cinema mostly remade popular Bombay films and catered exclusively to the rural and sub-urban audience can be challenged because it
fears to address the complexity of the popular film forms of this decade. It is interesting to note that these film texts respond and comment on a contemporary moment of Bengal’s social history but the critical paradigm only looks for their ‘masala’ elements and escapist climax. In a number of films during this period the crisis of the old patriarch, unemployment, and price hikes are mentioned but the film texts are only seen as ‘crude’ copies of other regional hits. It is evident from these film texts that they tried to comment on the new social order, the new class politics and tried to form a perspective of the disillusioned and betrayed section of the society. But the dominant modes of criticism ignored them simply as the ‘unreal’ picture of the contemporary.

Here we need to understand why the dominant discourses of the state, the media and a section of the public sphere considered this segment of film makers and the film making practice as ‘low quality’ and of ‘bad taste’. It is unfortunate that instead of acknowledging this new variety of film makers and the film making practices, the dominant critical paradigm neglected this new cinema culture and foregrounded the politics of a critical discourse that established the logic of opposition and not of differentiation or diversification. One personal interview with Swapan Saha, one of the most prominent mainstream filmmakers of the 1990s, revealed his assistant film making career in the Bangladesh film industry, then his business experience in Falakata suburb in north Bengal, and finally his joining the Bengali film industry as a film maker with Ghorer Bou in 1989 after he came to Calcutta in the late 1980s. It is important to mention Saha here—his rural origin, his familial background of small-scale business for a few generations—since it is related to the way he imagines film spectatorship during this period of Bengali cinema. It is not only his personal past as a small scale businessman or his rural background, but also that with his figure as a film maker, Swapan Saha continued to make films that strongly deviated from the dominant tradition of Bengali cinema. In addition, most of the producers of Swapan Saha films came from a different background of contracting and promoting business. This whole new chain of film makers-producers, coming from a ‘class’ not considered as ‘educated’ or urban enough in the bhadra sense, was felt to be a serious threat by a part of the industry, the press and the bhadralok public sphere.

Conclusion

The problem with the dominant critical discourses is that they ignore the newer formations within the industry and fail to analyze this new phase of Bengali cinema from broader perspectives. This has been reiterated by several writers; for instance, Somen Ghosh in his book Bangla Cinemar Palabadal (The Changing Phase of

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8 Authors’ interview with Swapan Saha, 15 December 2010 and 15 October 2011, Kolkata.
Bengali Cinema) has tried to analyze this ‘crisis’ ridden period of the 1980s Bengali cinema when he observes that ‘when a totally unrealistic, lower standard film made its silver jubilee at the box office, it expressed our shameless nature in our cultural characterless-ness’ (Ghosh 1990, 135). It is interesting to note that like Ghosh, the opinions expressed in many other books and articles saw the popularity of certain kinds of films as a marker for the Bengali film industry’s ‘crisis’. Ghosh later even laments the popularity of a filmmaker like Anjan Chowdhury. He writes about Chowdhury,

[I have heard that] he [Anjan Chowdhury] has broken the records of many of the earlier filmmakers. He has become so famous that even other directors are keen on having their film scripts written by him. But it is difficult to digest his films for any educated Bengali with proper taste. His films are not only unreal and bizarre, but full of a kind of tasteless vulgarity. It is really a matter of research, which class of audience makes these films hits. (Ghosh 1990, 162)

Ghosh laments the loss of the ‘characteristic purity’ that Bengali films once had and their efficient expression of ‘clean reality’ that was rare in other regional films (ibid.). It is not only Ghosh but also in the writings of others like Partha Raha or Rajat Roy that the ‘cultural superiority’ of earlier Bengali films compared to both other regional films of that period and contemporary Bengali films is discussed. Raha for instance develops his comparison of Bengali cinema’s ‘now’ and ‘then’ narrative not only in terms of the deterioration of film quality, but also with reference to the emergence of the control of Tollywood by the Bombay mafia or the underworld dons of the coal industry and that of the non-Bengali film producers chain (with surnames like Kejriwal, Agarwal or Khaitan) (Raha 2004, 80–1). Rajat Roy in his book similarly recognizes the ‘declining’ quality of Bengali films and studies the fragmentation of the Bengali audience (Roy 2001). Most of these writings present a crisis story of the Bengali cinema from the perspective of a section of educated Bengali bhadralok class, which feels distanced from the ‘crudity’ and ‘vulgarity’ of the contemporary mainstream model and the target audience of this model. Whereas Sharmistha Gooptu argues that the appropriation of Bombay cinema’s ‘clichéd plot’ and action genre ‘overturned the pre-existing middle-class orientation and pandered to more sub-altern groups’ (Gooptu 2008, 155) veteran journalist Ratnottoma Sengupta sees it more as a ‘denial of bhadrata and bhadralok culture’ in the new generation of film makers.\(^9\) In this article we suggest that it is problematic to read these filmic texts’ narrative logic and aesthetics simply as ‘targeting sub-altern groups’ or the ‘denial of pre-existing bhadralok film-culture’

Going beyond the narrative of lamentation, how Sharmistha Gooptu identifies the 1980s Bengali popular cinema as a departure from the order of ‘bhadralok

\(^9\) Interview with Ratnottoma Sengupta, December, 2010.
Bengaliness’ is useful for our studies (Gooptu 2010, 254). She identifies the reasons for the emergence of this cinema as the financial crisis of the industry, the emergence of TV culture as an alternative to the cinema going habit of the middle class audience (especially of middle class women whom she sees as until then, ‘the industry’s most stable audience segment’) and the death of Bengali cinema’s top star Uttam Kumar that resulted in ‘a profound transition’ (ibid., 263). She maps her argument in terms of firstly, the changing scenario of West Bengal's socio-political situation when the Leftest government came to power in 1977 and how they transformed ‘public imagery’ from the better sections of society to the ‘subaltern classes’, and secondly the changed strategy of the marketing of Bengali popular cinema that could provide ‘a unique local brand’ to the people who ‘had never been so directly addressed’ (ibid., 266–7). It is true that the Left secured its electoral base in Bengal for more than three decades by using the strong support of the rural population and the ‘uneducated’ urban labour classes. But scholars have also shown how the Leftist regime was based on the bhadralok leadership of Bengal and party leaders and ministers mostly ‘represented’ the bhadra, educated, urban class. So the transformed imagination of the ‘subaltern classes’ as the cinema going public might not follow the simplistic logic of the overpowering presence of the ‘subaltern class’ in the Leftist regime. Parallel to the popularity of a certain kind of Bengali cinema amongst a certain audience base, dissatisfaction and disapproval about them also emerged in the public sphere quite significantly, and a strong sense of Leftist rhetoric can be felt in these critiques. And it would be problematic to place the categories like bhadralok or sub-altern on opposing planes and to consider them a mutually exclusive class in Bengali society. Thus, this claim of a cinema ‘exclusively’ made for a class not having television sets in their homes and directly addressing them is problematic.

If it is taken for granted that in the 1980s and the 1990s television provided bhadralok entertainment that caused the decline of bhadralok spectatorship of Bengali cinema resulting in a certain kind of Bengali film exclusively made for a certain kind of film audience who lacked television sets, then how do we deal with the question of the increasing visibility of the new kind of mass cinema on television as well? Is it the same bhadralok public, which is fine with this kind of film practice on TV, but is reluctant to visit the film theatres to watch these films? Or are there other factors beyond the textual and narrative logic that caused this middle class’ reluctance? Moreover, here TV became an important site since in many of these popular film melodramas the influence of television is not only evident in terms of narrative structure but in its aesthetic and ideological imagination. Therefore, what appears as the marginalized and unacknowledged cinema of the 1980–90s almost became

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10 For details see Kohli 1987; also see Kohli 1990 and Sinha 2005.
synonymous to the concept of B-grade cinema, although not similar in formation, circulation and reception of the other established B-circuit or B-grade cinemas from Hollywood or even the Bombay cinema. It is interesting to see the complexity and the class politics behind a dominant cinematic history that remained unexplored and critically evaluated. This paper perhaps opens up possibilities to re-think Bengali cinema, and particularly the categories of mainstream and popular cinema, its tradition, styles, genres, audience, reception and discourse from a newer perspective and problematize the simpler argument that ‘a more localized form of content that could be most closely identified (with) by an audience segment, which had never been directly catered to’. Thus, audience and class have both been very vital for our project. But within the limited scope of this paper, we have not been able to work on a proper study of audience reception or do a ‘cultural reading’ of the films that fall within these periods. Rather, we have problematically looked at the categories of class and audience, questioning the relevance of issues related to the popularity or success of films that could form subjects of further research and analysis.

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Bodies, Bollywood and Bond.  
The evolving image of secret agents in Hindi spy thrillers inspired by the 007 franchise  

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Abstract. In the 1960s, after the international commercial success of the James Bond films, many imitations and parodies of the original were made in different parts of the world. In India popular Hindi films were also inspired by the 007 franchise, beginning with the action thriller Farz in 1967. From then on a new genre was formed in the Bombay cinema: Hindi Bond films. These derivative productions were deliberately created to replicate the plot formula and narrative structure of the original Bond series. They underwent considerable development from cheap, amateurish B-movies to big budget commercial hits such as Ek Tha Tiger in 2012. Also the leading characters in Hindi Bond films, the secret agents of the Indian police and intelligence, evolved from the innocent, happy-go-lucky youngsters in the 1960s into the tough, world-weary men of action in the 2010s. One of the most important factors of this gradual change is the way the heroes’ bodies were shown on screen. The focus on the esthetics, the musculature, the physical abilities and sex appeal of the Bombay Bonds was different in every decade. This article concentrates on the evolution of Hindi Bond films: the genre as well as the leading characters.

In 2002, Shah Rukh Khan, the Bollywood superstar, said: ‘James Bond always does well in India—that’s a Hindi film. Man, I want to be James Bond. Please make me the first Indian James Bond’ (Govil 2008, 201). Apparently, the famous actor was not aware that he was regretfully late with this declaration, because the first Indian James Bond appeared on screen 35 years earlier, in 1967. And his successors continue to entertain the audience even today. This article intends to introduce the reader to the leading characters of these exotic, obscure and fascinating productions known as Hindi Bond films.

In many aspects the first three films about Bond, Dr. No (1962, dir. Terence Young), From Russia With Love (1963, dir. Terence Young) and Goldfinger (1964, dir. Guy Hamilton), are the most important for the whole series. They introduced the leading character, a British spy James Bond alias 007—ruthless assassin, irresistible womanizer and globetrotting snob created by British writer Ian Fleming.¹

¹ Technically, before Dr. No there was Casino Royale (1954, dir. William H. Brown, Jr.), American TV adaptation of Ian Fleming’s novel. But the leading character, a U.S. intelligence agent named Jimmy (!) Bond, does not resemble Fleming’s 007 in the least.
They established a successful formula for the series: the secret agent equipped with futuristic gadgets undertaking dangerous missions in exotic and lavish places all over the world, spending his time in luxury and enjoying the company of beautiful women. These three films also marked the beginning of ‘Bondmania’, the international popularity of 007—the hero as well as the series.

The commercial success of entertaining spy thrillers full of action, adventure, elegance, eroticism and humour, encouraged the producers from other countries to make their own imitations of Bond films. These low-budget, derivative productions, made mostly in France and Italy in the 1960s, were mockingly called ‘Eurospy’ films. One of the prominent ‘Eurospy’ action thrillers is the French/Italian film Banco a Bangkok (1964, dir. Andre Hunebelle)—also known as Panic in Bangkok or Shadow of Evil—based on the novel Lila de Calcutta (1960) by the French author Jean Bruce. The leading character, agent OSS 117 (Kerwin Mathews) is a dashing, debonair James Bond-type superspy.\(^2\) He investigates the mysterious death of another OSS operative and discovers that the agent was killed by the henchmen of an evil Indian scientist, Dr. Sinn (Robert Hossein), who wants to destroy the world with a deadly virus.

Three years later Banco a Bangkok was remade in Andhra Pradesh as a Telugu production, Goodachari 116 (1967, dir. Mallikharjuna Rao M.). The star of this film, Krishna Ghattamaneni, later would earn the nickname ‘Andhra James Bond’, because in subsequent years he quite frequently played secret agents, for example in the production James Bond 777 (1971, dir. K.S.R. Doss).

In the year of its release Goodachari 116 was remade as a Hindi action thriller Farz (1967, dir. Ravikant Nagaich). The hero, agent 116 alias Gopi (Jeetendra), just like OSS 117, has to investigate the death of another operative worker, 303. He discovers that his colleague was killed by the gang of terrorists who try to destroy India’s crops with toxic fertilizer. The mastermind of this operation is a mysterious man in a Mao jacket called Supremo (Rajanala): a yellow-skinned, slant-eyed, racist caricature of a Red Chinaman. Agent 116 single-handedly brings the gang down, saving his country and winning the heart of the innocent daughter of one of the terrorists’ accomplices.

The film was a commercial success and today is considered the first Hindi equivalent of a James Bond film—or, for short, a Hindi Bond film (though, as a matter of fact, Farz is not directly inspired by any of the original Bond productions; it is only the remake of the remake of the adaptation trying to cash in on the success

\(^2\) It is important to stress that Jean Bruce created OSS 117 in 1949—four years before publication of Ian Fleming’s Casino Royale (first novel introducing James Bond). Also, the first film adaptation with OSS 117, OSS 117 n’est pas mort (1957, dir. Jean Sacha) was made five years before Dr. No! However, Jean Bruce’s creation has never become such a worldwide phenomenon as Bond. Moreover, the film series with OSS 117 gained popularity only after Dr. No and From Russia With Love were released and ‘Bondmania’ started.
of the 007 franchise). After *Farz* there were many other productions (obviously inspired by the adventures of Bond) that eventually formed a sort of separate genre in the Bombay cinema.

**On Mother India’s secret service:**

**What is a Hindi Bond film?**

One might argue that the term ‘Hindi Bond films’ is somewhat arbitrary, because—as in the case of *Farz*—the references to James Bond are so vague that there may be some reasonable doubt whether they even exist. But the term ‘Hindi spy films’ would be irrelevant because: a) there are many Hindi spy films that are not related to 007 in any way—such as *Samadhi* (1950, dir. Ramesh Saigal), *Night in London* (1967, dir. Brij) or *Saazish* (1975, dir. Kalidas); b) there actually exists a cluster of Hindi films deliberately created to resemble the Bond productions as much as possible.

An additional problem is that many ‘masala movies’—popular entertaining films made in Bombay—include blatant, sometimes bordering on plagiarism, references to the Bond series, even if their plot has absolutely nothing to do with espionage and secret agents. For example, the opening credits of action thriller *Warrant* (1975, dir. Pramod Chakravorty) are illustrated by Monty Norman’s *The Bond Theme*, mixed with Lalo Schifrin’s tune from *Enter the Dragon* (1973, dir. Robert Clouse); both used without permission by the film’s music director, R.D. Burman. The climax includes scenes either plagiarized (such as the villain’s lair hidden under the mountain lake), or literally edited (the helicopter fight) from *You Only Live Twice* (1967, dir. Lewis Gilbert). Another action film, *Shaan* (1980, dir. Ramesh Sippy) begins with a musical sequence obviously mimicking the so-called Bond credits (opening titles juxtaposed with the silhouette of a dancing woman) and the film’s villain, Shakaal (Khulbhushan Kharbanda), seems taken straight from Bond’s world with his larger-than-life demeanor, the ever-ready army of henchmen and a secret tropical island headquarters (and the fact that Shakaal is clearly modeled after an old Bond adversary, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, also plays some part). The same with another arch-nemesis: the infamous Mogambo (Amrish Puri) from *Mr. India* (1987, dir. Shekhar Kapur).

But could these productions be called Hindi Bond films? Definitely not, because they lack the most important, defining element of the formula—that is Bond himself, or rather his Indian counterpart. If we would be so generous as to call them Hindi Bond films, we would be obliged to do the same with most of the ‘masala movies’, because it is hard to imagine a decent masala without such necessary ingredients as over-the-top villains, gadgets unknown to modern science, elaborate death traps and a spectacular climax in the villain’s secret headquarters. These integral elements of the Bond formula became the elements of the masala recipe.
To avoid potential problems, this article focuses only on the productions that most faithfully recreate the plot formula and narrative structure of the 007 series—‘a secret agent is assigned on a mission to fight a terrorist organization while enjoying the luxurious life of a playboy’—even if they do it in such an indirect and roundabout way like *Farz*.

**From Bombay with love:**
**The differences between 007 and Bombay Bonds**

The best way to start the analysis of Hindi Bond films is to show the most important differences between the original Bond series and its Hindi derivatives.

First of all, there is no such thing as ‘a Bond series’—a long running adventure serial with one leading character—in Hindi cinema. The film producers in Bombay assumed that the audience despises sequels; they felt obliged to show a new leading character in every film. Even in 2006, Derek Bose claimed: ‘Hindi film-makers are scared stiff of producing sequels and would rather turn out remakes and copies of proven hits from the past’ (Bose 2006, 59)—how ridiculous these words sound now, when sequels are the norm of practice in Bollywood! In the case of James Bond, making a film series would present an additional problem for Bombay producers—007 romances a different girl in every movie—if an Indian hero were shown being this promiscuous, it would not have been accepted by the Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC) nor the conservative audience. Nevertheless, there actually were a few feeble efforts at creating an Indian equivalent of the Bond series. After *Farz*, agent 116 was the hero of *Keemat* (1973; this time he was played by Dharmendra!) and *Raksha* (1981, played by Jeetendra again) while another agent, Gun Master G-9 (Mithun Chakraborty), appeared in *Surakksha* (1979) and *Wardat* (1981)—all five films were made by the same director, Ravikant Nagaich. Also, in the end credits of *Spy in Rome* (1968, dir. B.K. Adarsh) a sequel was announced (*Our next: Operation America*), but the film’s fate remains unknown.

Secondly, spy films—especially in the 1960s—seldom reached the mainstream Hindi cinema. Most of the spy thrillers from Bombay were half-amateurish B-class films with schematic, often ridiculous plots, repetitive songs, crude humor, choppy editing, deficient set design and an almost non-existent budget—making Bombay Bonds stand incomparably lower than the British original, on both the technical as well as the artistic level. An additional problem was the cast. In the 1960s and 1970s the Bombay Bonds were played by relatively unknown actors such as Dev Kumar, Sailesh Kumar or Mahendra Sandhu. Even the actors who are revered as movie stars today—e.g. Jeetendra or Feroz Khan—had not yet reached stardom and popularity when they were cast as secret agents. There are also some notable exceptions such
as Dharmendra or Amitabh Bachchan, but spy thrillers are a rather small and insignificant part of their filmography.

Finally, the rules of Bombay film entertainment (especially in the 1960s) demanded that the leading character should be supported by a comedian—a clumsy, motor-mouthed, feather-brained sidekick contrasting in every way with the perfect, noble and valiant hero. Such hapless assistants were played by experienced comedy actors like Mehmood, Dhumal, Jagdeep, I.S. Johar or Rajendra Nath. They marked their presence even in Hindi Bond films, usually playing lower ranking secret agents, helping the heroes accomplish their missions. Unfortunately, their comedy antics usually had the effect of breaking the mood of the spy adventure (in Farz one of the dramatic fight sequences turns into a slapstick comedy full of throwing pies and silly sound effects) and removed even the last remains of credibility from the films. In the world of James Bond such ‘assistance’ would be unthinkable, though in Never Say Never Again (1983, dir. Irvin Kershner) 007 was helped by extremely incompetent clerk played by Rowan Atkinson (then again, this film does not belong to the Bond canon, so the argument might be invalid).

The cop who loved me:
Why did the secret agents work for the police?

In the case of Farz and other Hindi Bond films it might be debatable whether to call them spy movies is justified at all because the leading characters did not work in intelligence. They were secret policemen working for the CID (Crime Investigation Department) or the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). In other words, the Hindi Bond films are spy movies without spies! There are several reasons for this phenomenon.

The early Bond films were a deliberately de-politicized escapist fantasy. If 007 fought with Soviet spies, they usually did not work for KGB, but for the fictitious organization SPECTRE, detached from the political spectrum of the Cold War (Chapman 2009, 60). In Dr. No it was even said explicitly that James Bond did not work for MI5 or MI6, but for some nonexistent government agenda called MI7. The filmmakers from Bombay went even a step further. Because of India’s non-alignment policy they were forbidden from making any references to the Cold War or the foreign affairs of their country. The villains were usually defined simply as ‘dushman’ (enemy) with no specific information as to their politics or nationality. Even if they were deliberate caricatures of Chinese communists, like Supremo from Farz, they were never identified as Chinese citizens. They just came from some unidentified country north of India where people simply happened to have yellow skin, slanted eyes and names like Chang, Wong or Ming.
Some work Bhowmik describes the 1960s as the time of the ‘CBFC’s ever-growing intolerance towards cinematic images or messages, which were overtly political or even implicitly critical of central government policies’ (Bhowmik 2009). For the Bombay filmmakers, the mere subject of espionage was a dangerous area to steer away from. Especially, because the 1960s was a very turbulent decade, marked by two wars: with China and Pakistan. In both cases, Indian intelligence—The Intelligence Bureau—failed miserably at gathering military information abroad. In 1968, the government of India established a new organization named Research and Analysis Wing, usually abbreviated as RAW.

Some distant echoes of the Intelligence Bureau’s disgrace can be heard in the Hindi Bond film Ankhen (1968, dir. Ramanand Sagar), released coincidentally in the same year when RAW was established. Despite its obvious escapism, this production did vaguely refer to the actual situation. In the film India is threatened by mysterious enemies and the government cannot rely on its official intelligence, so a group of concerned citizens, mostly veterans from World War II, decide to help their motherland. The patriots form their own spy network, both in India and abroad. But despite their self-proclaimed status they are not actually professional agents, only talented amateurs, not connected with the Intelligence Bureau or RAW. One of them, Sunil (Dharmendra), is the leading character of Ankhen; it’s one of the very few exceptions when the hero is a spy and not a policeman.

But even Sunil has many ethical doubts about his profession of choice—another reason why secret agents in Hindi films usually work for the police. The film hero, especially in the 1960s, should be the epitomy of all possible virtues and moral integrity; that is why it’s so easy to make him a policeman, who in Hindi cinema is always shown as the protector of common people and preserver of law and order. On the other hand, a spy lies, cheats and exploits other people’s weaknesses. He does not play fair, and although one might argue that some of the Hindu gods and mythological heroes, e.g. Krishna, also tended to break the rules in order to achieve the goal, it is obvious that the Bombay filmmakers preferred to avoid any moral doubts and uncertainties, portraying the heroes as unambiguously honest and trustworthy. Sunil from Ankhen remains on the good side only because all the dirty tricks he performs serve a noble cause—the protection and safety of his country (and the fact that Sunil is played by matinee idol Dharmendra helps his case tremendously).

Parties are forever:
Secret agents as the overgrown teenagers

The filmmakers from Bombay put much effort into making the heroes look as similar to James Bond as possible. Secret agents in Hindi films are young, handsome, elegant
men wearing tuxedos and bow ties or, optionally, a tie and jacket (and occasionally a hat). They have a full arsenal of spy gadgets concealed as the objects of everyday use. They even ride in sports cars equipped with machine guns and rocket launchers. The obvious reference is the codename: agent 077 in *Golden Eyes: Secret Agent 077* (1968, dir. Kamal Sharma), 707 in *Inspector* (1970, dir. Chand), XX7 and 005 in *Spy in Rome* (1968, dir. B.K. Adarsh) or 770021 in *The Great Gambler* (1979, dir. Shakti Samanta). Sometimes even the film's title leaves very little doubt about the hero's provenience, e.g. *Bond 303* (1985, dir. Ravi Tandon) or *Mr. Bond* (1992, dir. Raj N. Sippy). On the other hand, the title *Lady James Bond* (2003, dir. Raju Chauhan) might be misleading, because this production is in fact a B-class melodrama with absolutely no relation to the narrative structure of the 007 film series.

The differences are also very easy to spot. James Bond is a man of the world—a stylishly-suited snob used to luxury and expensive brands. Alas, secret agents from Bombay cannot afford such extravagance. Though they frequently attend lavish parties, they are in fact simple, common people without any particular taste—working class heroes instead of born and bred gentlemen. The Bombay Bond does not ponder existential dilemmas—whether his Martini should be shaken or stirred—because he cannot drink alcohol. The CBFC was rather strict in this matter.

Another important aspect of James Bond's life unavailable to the Bombay agents is sex. In the 1960s the hero of Hindi film had, of course, the right to romance, but only with an innocent, chaste virgin—never with a scantily clad vamp! There could absolutely be no doubt that the lovers were going to be married and their relationship would be consummated no sooner than after the wedding.

Nevertheless, the filmmakers did everything to assure the audience that the Bombay Bonds were irresistible to the opposite sex. The usual method was to show the agents surrounded by beautiful girls during the introductory musical sequence (the CBFC must have thought that the heroes were too busy singing and dancing to even think about any ulterior motives). Another popular trick was a sequence at the swimming pool—the perfect excuse to show some half-naked male and female bodies on the screen without being accused of immoral behavior.

But it would be a serious oversimplification to associate the swimming pool sequences only with some gratuitous nudity. In Hindi films from the 1960s the pools—just like picnics or dancing clubs—served as gathering places for young, attractive people who enjoyed sports and physical activities. The film heroes belonged to this new, modern generation of urban youth who did not remember (or did not want to) the perils of British rule, the atrocities of the Partition and the hardships of building a new, independent country. They were born and raised in a free India and simply wanted to enjoy life. That's why when seen today, the film heroes from the 1960s seem
to be rather boyish with their juvenile charm and arrested adolescence. In today's terms we could describe them colloquially as 'trendy' or 'cool'.

The Bombay Bonds indeed tended to be cool. They even went as far as to perform rock and roll, twist or big beat songs and dances. At first sight this seems to be a nod to the musical hits from Bond franchise; but in fact, the secret agents showing off on the dancefloor disagreed with the image of 007 completely: first, because James Bond does not fit into the song-and-dance routine. Second, despite the rule that every Bond film must include a pop song during the opening credits, agent 007 is a staunch conservatist who hates rock and roll. Let's quote his famous line from *Goldfinger*: 'My dear girl, there are some things that just aren’t done, such as drinking Dom Pérignon ’53 above a temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit. That's as bad as listening to the Beatles without earmuffs!'!

The secret agents from Hindi Bond films of 1960s, played by Jeetendra, Sailesh Kumar or Joy Mukherjee, were the antithesis of the aggressive, seductive alpha male that is 007. Biologically, they were grown up men, but mentally, they remained carefree teenagers, innocently unaware of their own sexuality. In case of agent 116 from *Farz*, sex existed only as a subject of juvenile jokes, when one of the female characters spelled his codename as *One. One. Sex*. Even if the hero was wearing only swimming trunks, and around him scantily clad ladies frolicked all over the pool (which is picturized in the song ‘Husn Ki Zulfe Kali Pad Gayi Aaho Se’ from *Golden Eyes. Secret Agent 077*), this image was not intended to show their sex appeal on screen, but rather focused on their fitness, vitality and youthfulness.

From today's point of view the word *fitness* may sound like an overstatement, because the leading characters from the 1960s did not have such obsessively perfected musculature as Bollywood stars of the 21st century. On the contrary: their bodies looked average, natural, with most of the imperfections and defects—saggy arms and pot-bellies were clearly visible. As Sudhanva Deshpande claims, 'Actors like Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor, or Rajesh Khanna never displayed their biceps. Even the angry young man persona of Amitabh Bachchan was not premised on muscular physique. Only real washouts like the wrestler-turned-actor Dara Singh survived by showing off his muscles' (Deshpande 2005, 196). The Bombay Bonds definitely were not athletic, but this did not stop them from exposing their bare chests on screen—like Sailesh Kumar in *Golden Eyes. Secret Agent 077* or Dev Kumar in *Spy in Rome*. In the 1960s, this was still a novelty; in subsequent decades it would become the unbreakable rule.

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3 For the record: the only known case of 007 singing is Sean Connery in *Dr. No*; Connery also performs an elaborate dance sequence with Kim Basinger in non-canonical *Never Say Never Again*. 
For your Ankhen only: Secret agents as tough professionals

It would be too simplistic to say that every Bombay Bond in the 1960s was a trendy teenager at heart. There are some interesting exceptions that are worth a closer look.

First of all, there is Sunil, the character played by Dharmendra in Ankhen. At first glance he is just another boyish type because he seems to be genuinely frightened by the idea of love and romance. It is his girlfriend Meenakshi (Mala Sinha) who shows courage and initiative. She literally throws herself at Sunil at every available opportunity, but he is constantly rejecting her charms. In reality, the hero is a mature, level-headed professional, in total control of his emotions and desires. Sunil is a spy and he is aware of the consequences. He claims that there is no place for romance in this line of work and not only because a spy can die at any moment. The problem is that the secret agent by definition forfeits his right to any true feelings based on love, trust and understanding. Sunil's job alienates him from society; that is why he renounces romance completely—which seems ironic because in the 1960s Dharmendra was considered as one of the first male sex symbols in Hindi cinema! In Ankhen his seductive power, which should be amplified by the mere fact that he plays India's James Bond, is sadly diminished to absolute zero.

Secondly, Raju, as alias agent 909 (Feroz Khan) in C.I.D. 909 (1967, dir. Mohammed Hussain). The eponymous hero is assigned to protect the beautiful Reshma (Mumtaz), the daughter of a scientist who invented a mysterious weapon called ‘the bomb for peace’. A devilish Chinese named Wong (Rajan Haksar) threatens to kill Reshma if the professor will not give him the formula. Agent 909 eliminates the enemy and retrieves the document. It is obvious that Raju is modeled after Sean Connery's Bond: he is cynical, a little arrogant, and aware of the simple fact that's he's irresistable to all women. Raju sees himself as a ladykiller, a conqueror, a lovable rogue full of testosterone. Just like 007 he flirts with his boss's secretary and throws his hat on a coatrack while entering the office. Agent 909 is also aggressive and ruthless towards his adversaries. The introductory scene in C.I.D. 909 shows the basic difference between Raju and the hero of Farz. Agent 116 enters the screen singing a love song and cavorting with Aruna Irani; 909 starts with a desperate fight with an enemy assassin. Of course even this macho man must fall in love eventually, but he treats Reshma rather nonchalantly, just like Bond would do. And though Raju restrains himself only to a song-and-dance routine, it is obvious that he represents intimidating, triumphant masculinity.

Thirdly, Rajesh, as agent XX7 (Dev Kumar) from Spy in Rome. His mission is to save Professor Sharma (Brahm Bhardwaj) and his daughter Kamini (Jaymala). They were both kidnapped by the evil Dr. Chang (K.N. Singh). Agent XX7, accompanied by the bumbling agent 005 (Rajendra Nath) and a plastic bag full of gadgets, finds
them in Rome. The mission ends well: the professor is saved, Kamini falls in love with Rajesh and XX7 kills Dr. Chang. This secret agent is, by the way, the most aggressive and brutal of all three Bombay Bonds mentioned here. He resorts to violence at every opportunity and has no remorse for inflicting pain on women. Dev Kumar as XX7 is fairly convincing in the fighting sequences, but fails miserably when it comes to flirting with Kamini (it is significant that in subsequent years the actor made a career switch and played mostly villains). The film implies that their relationship was not just a platonic one—but the details are left to the audience’s imagination.

Sunil, Raju and Rajesh were ahead of their time in the 1960s. In the next decade they would have fit perfectly into the new, explosive formula of the entertaining ‘masala movie’.

The spy with the golden gun:
Secret agents as men of action

In the 1970s violence and unrestrained eroticism literally exploded onto Hindi cinema, as the CBFC became more permissive and liberal. This abrupt change gave way to aggressive alpha males totally aware of their sexual magnetism. One such example is inspector Vijay played by Amitabh Bachchan in *The Great Gambler*, a curious case of a Hindi Bond film that expands the narrative formula of the original series by adding another hero to the plot.

Vijay, as a secret police agent, infiltrates an international gang of terrorists. They have obtained a precious government file called ‘K-2’ and want to sell it to the highest bidder. Unbeknownst to Vijay, his twin brother Jai (also played by Bachchan) is working for the gang (although Jai is unaware of his employers’ nefarious activities). After many chases, shootouts, fistfights and cases of mistaken identity both brothers join forces in the climax, bringing down the gang and saving the country.

As opposed to the meek heroes from the previous decade, Vijay is a real man of action, more focused on fighting terrorists than seducing beautiful women. His romance with Mala (Neetu Singh), the-girl-next-door type, seems to be completely devoid of passion. On the other hand, Jai flirts with the gangsters’ moll Shabnam (Zeenat Aman). Still, despite the actress’s undeniable sex appeal, it is Bachchan—tall, dark, handsome, fit and manly—who is portrayed as the object of desire. When Vijay shows up on screen for the first time, the audience sees him naked from the waist up taking a shower (*The Great Gambler* is one of the rare productions when Bachchan bares his torso; the actor always expressed his dislike of undressing before camera). The director makes every effort to demonstrate the physical abilities of the star. Amitabh as Jai and Vijay is in constant movement: he runs, shoots, fights and sneaks without a moment’s rest. And, what’s most important, being 190 cm tall, he literally
towers over the rest of the cast, impressing women and intimidating men—his own body became an important part of his screen persona.

Another notable ‘man of mystery’ in Hindi cinema of the 1970s was the eponymous hero of Agent Vinod (1977, dir. Deepak Basry), played by Mahendra Sandhu. His mission is to protect Anju (Asha Sachdev), the daughter of a great Indian scientist (Nazir Hussein) who has developed a formula for a superweapon even more dangerous than the atomic bomb. The professor gets kidnapped by the mysterious Scorpion Gang. When he refuses to give his captors the priceless formula, they threaten to murder Anju. Thankfully, Vinod saves the professor and eliminates the terrorists just in time.

Agent Vinod meticulously tries to repeat the key motifs from the original Bond plot formula: briefing with M, obtaining gadgets from Q, wearing a tuxedo at lavish parties… The hero even has his own golden gun as a possible homage to The Man with the Golden Gun (1974, dir. Guy Hamilton). And his assistant Chandu (Jagdeep) introduces himself to everyone as James Bond, so the reference would not go unnoticed.

And yet it is difficult to call Vinod an Indian 007 with a straight face. Mainly because even with a maximum dose of good will Mahendra Sandhu could hardly be described as a sex symbol: he is short (and wears padded shoes), overweight, has an out-of-date haircut and his clothes would give nightmares to any fashion designer. If only Agent Vinod was an intentional parody of James Bond like Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery (1997, dir. Jay Roach), all this would be justified. But the film in all seriousness shows the unattractive, hapless hero as the invincible secret agent and irresistible womanizer.

And this last aspect deserves more attention. The makers of Agent Vinod tried to refer to the fact that in every film Bond romances with a different girl. During the course of the action Vinod and Anju fall in love, but just before the closing credits, when the audience is led to expect a happy ending; however, the hero suggests that he might not be faithful to Anju, because he is only able to love his country. This is a surprising resolution in a Hindi film—and also a harbinger of further changes of morality and ethics in the Bombay cinema.

You only love twice:
Secret agent as a sex symbol

A secret agent of the CBI, Gun Master G-9 (Mithun Chakraborty)—Gopi for friends—became the Bollywood Bond of the next generation. He is the hero of two films: in Surakksha G-9’s mission is to save the country from the evil Shiv Shakti Organisation that intends to spread terror in India, and in Warlat he must thwart the plans of the
villainous Shakti Kapoor (Shakti Kapoor) who wants to destroy India with deadly locusts, genetically modified crops and an acid, which turns humans into hypnotized zombies. Of course, in every film there is a helpful, beautiful girl by G-9’s side (they are played by Ranjeeta and Kaajal Kiran, respectively).

Calling Gopi a ‘secret agent’ might seem debatable because he is in fact quite flamboyant with his profession and codename: in Wardat he even rides a car with big bold letters ‘GUN MASTER G-9’ written all over the vehicle. Besides, G-9 is a sort of local celebrity in Bombay (especially coveted in trendy bars and dance clubs), with an established reputation as a dedicated womanizer. He is not above casual sex with a lady he has just met. And in the morning after he asks her: ‘Oh, by the way, what’s your name?’.

Mithun Chakraborty as G-9 is portrayed not just as an object of romantic desire, but as a symbol of unrestrained sex. He is young, handsome, uninhibited and (which was new in Hindi film at the time) well-built and athletic. He often wears tight T-shirts that underline his musculature. Even Gopi’s fight scenes are erotic as the camera focuses on his bare chest, biceps and abdominal muscles, shining from sweat. Gun Master is an icon of threatening masculinity: both to his opponents and to women whom he tames with his brutal, raw physical power—literally, because if a woman slaps him, he does not hesitate to slap her back.

G-9 resembles, in terms of the dominating aggressive male sexuality, the original Bond played by Sean Connery, though visually he resembles him the least. In the late 1970s and 1980s Bombay filmmakers had already found other sources of inspiration, i.e. action thrillers from Hong Kong and Japan or Hollywood blockbusters with Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. So instead of a tuxedo and bow tie Gopi prefers casual dress: T-shirts and jeans or sports jackets and colourful ties. A visible sign of the changing times is also Mithun Chakraborty’s mullet. As opposed to Bond’s mature, conservative attire, Gun Master creates an image of the boy-next-door on a disco dancefloor, attractive mostly to the younger part of a female audience.

**License to chill:**

**The Secret agent as an ideal of man**

In the early 1990s the honorary title of the James Bond of Hindi cinema was bestowed upon none other than … Mr. Bond! The eponymous hero of *Mr. Bond*, played by Akshay Kumar, is an amalgam of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, John Travolta and Sean Connery as 007 (this last reference seems rather obvious, because the opening scene of the film is taken almost frame-by-frame from the first five minutes of *Never Say Never Again*).

Mr. Bond (we never learn his first name) is assigned to a mission: to locate and destroy the gang of the ferocious Dragon (Pankaj Dheer)—an evil Mandarin-like
villain—who kidnaps innocent children and turns them into slaves. Following a few unsuccessful attempts Bond finally infiltrates Dragon’s base and after a spectacular fight he destroys the enemy.

The hero’s name is a not-so-subtle nod to James Bond, but apart from that, Mr. Bond has very little in common with 007. In fact, this secret agent is more like a rather newer, better version of Gun Master. He is young, handsome, fit, muscular and also equipped with a mullet—the only difference is Mr. Bond’s hairy chest, as opposed to G-9’s depilated torso. It is worth adding that the hero is also impervious to pain. In one sequence Bond willingly takes a beating from Dragon’s henchmen; he does not fight back because he believes that any resistance from his side could endanger the kidnapped children. Still, apart from a few superficial cuts and bruises Mr. Bond comes away from this predicament unharmed.

Akshay Kumar, just like Mithun Chakraborty, is in top physical form: he performs fight and chase sequences without the help of a stunt double. And he is deliberately portrayed as a sex symbol. Mr. Bond, being a remorseless womanizer, romances three beautiful girls simultaneously (and, as the film suggests, not in a Platonic way!). The ladies know about each other yet show no signs of jealousy. On the contrary, they support one another like fans trying to please their idol. This part of the plot is illustrated by the song ‘Handsome Man Jab Se Dekha Tujhko’, in which Mr. Bond displays his muscular body at the pool while his little harem admires the physical beauty and the sex appeal of their alpha male.

‘Handsome Man…’ also shows how radically Hindi films—not only in the Bond genre—had changed during the course of three decades. In the 1960s, women were the objects of the camera’s (and audience’s) gaze. They were obliged to look absolutely perfect with flawless make-up, hairstyle and clothing style, whereas men could be imperfect with their lack of musculature, saggy arms, pot-bellies and double chins. In the 1990s—the age of New India and booming capitalism—men became the objects. The new esthetics of the consumption culture encouraged them to look estheticised, stylized, modeled with professionally-toned musculature. Their bodies were perfected almost to the point of artificiality. And they started to parade half-naked on screen more often than women. Especially in the swimming pools, that, by the way, became the gathering places for a different sort of clientele: the young, rich, pampered people who wanted to demonstrate that even without their designer clothes and sports cars they still looked good and attractive, and most of all, sexy.
Quantum of curry: Hindi Bond films in the 21st century

After the proliferation of Hindi Bond films in 1960s the genre went into decline in the subsequent decades, and in the early 1990s it literally vanished without a trace. The producers from Bombay were no longer interested in remaking the adventures of 007. The Bond series with Pierce Brosnan in the lead turned into an unintended self-parody with such ridiculous ideas as the invisible car in Die Another Day (2002, dir. Lee Tamahori), the film that is considered by fans as ‘a leading contender for the worst Bond movie’ (Chapman 2009, 240). Of course the references to the famous British spy were still present in these Bollywood films, e.g. in Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani (2000, dir. Aziz Mirza) where the gangsters’ hideout is deliberately designed like a Bond villain’s secret lair, because the gang’s boss played by Johnny Lever is an ardent fan of 007.

Then, at the turn of the 21st century a new kind of spy thriller started to gain popularity in Hindi cinema. This time they were ‘proper’ spy thrillers, with the leading characters working no longer for the police, but for the Indian intelligence. (Spying for RAW had stopped being a taboo in Bollywood.) The reason is very simple: in late 1990s and early 2000s the Hindu right-wing government supported a wave of jingoist propaganda films such as Sarfarosh (1999, dir. John Matthew Matthan), Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001, dir. Anil Sharma) or LOC Kargil (2003, dir. J.P. Dutta), which depicted Pakistan as the sworn enemy of India. As Someswar Bhowmik noticed, ‘the country was told many times, and in no uncertain terms, that it faced a clear and present danger from Pakistan. The message was clear and simple: while “we” are victorious, “they” are vile; so the glorification of “our” virtue has to be complemented by a denouncement of, and hatred for, “their” vice’ (Bhowmik 2009, 304–5). That is how the RAW agents were finally graced on the screen. Their job, once ungrateful and dirty, was now shown as a noble, patriotic duty—the end justified the means. It is no coincidence that the most prominent ‘proper’ spy thrillers The Hero: Love Story of a Spy (2003, dir. Anil Sharma), Asambhav (2004, dir. Rajiv Rai), Mukhbir (2008, dir. Mani Shankar) and Lamhaa (2010, dir. Rahul Dholakia) are all about brave Indian agents defeating Kashmiri separatists usually backed by the nefarious ISI (Pakistani intelligence). These films, however, are neither related to nor inspired by the Bond series.

The surprising commercial success of Casino Royale (2006, dir. Martin Campbell) and Quantum of Solace (2008, dir. Marc Forster) reinvigorated the 007 franchise and encouraged Indian film producers to rely on the British spy once more. In 2012, two Hindi Bond films were made: Agent Vinod (dir. Sriram Raghavan; not to be confused with the 1977 film) and Ek Tha Tiger (dir. Kabir Khan). Both films are big budget
blockbusters with star casts and high production values. And both eponymous heroes are RAW agents.

Vinod (Saif Ali Khan) is given an order to find a stolen Russian nuclear device before it falls into the wrong hands; failing that, he discovers that the terrorists intend to detonate the bomb in Delhi. With significant help from the mysterious Ruby (Kareena Kapoor), who cooperates with MI6 and ISI simultaneously, he manages to disarm the device at the last moment. The film is undoubtedly a serious effort to make a 21st century Hindi Bond film—modern, fast-paced, action-packed and fun. Vinod, just like Bond, is a globetrotter; during the course of one mission he visits Russia, Morocco, Latvia, Pakistan and Great Britain. He is also a man of action, shooting his way out of trouble every five minutes. But surprisingly, he is not a womanizer; despite some tenderness there is no romance between him and Ruby.

Tiger (Salman Khan), on the other hand, almost immediately falls in love with the beautiful Zoya (Katrina Kaif) during a routine operation in Dublin, but the girl turns out to be an ISI agent. They both decide to sacrifice everything for love and flee together, being pursued by their former colleagues from the ISI and RAW. After a violent shoot-out in Havana, Tiger and Zoya run away free, never to be caught again. In this aspect Ek Tha Tiger deviates from the original series’ narrative structure. The film begins just like an ordinary Hindi Bond production, and then right in the middle of action it changes into a Bollywood version of Mr. & Mrs. Smith (2005, dir. Doug Liman). But it does not stop the hero from showing his prowess at fighting and protecting the heroine in the best style of 007.

Tiger and Vinod are muscular, fit and perfectly trained in close quarters combat. They are also impervious to pain and torture—especially Vinod, who gets captured by the enemy all too often and is interrogated without mercy (he is even resistant to the psychotropes)! Tiger, on the other hand, despite getting shot in the back, still manages to ride a bicycle and jumps into a plane during take-off. His abilities, shown in the film, are of course beyond any rational measure. Tiger’s completely unrealistic fight sequences (enhanced by CGI special effects) with his devastating punches that send opponents skyward, dodging bullets in slow motion or long jumps that utterly disregard gravity, belong rather to the comic book superhero fantasy than to a 007 spy thriller.

Speaking of which, Vinod and Tiger both make deliberate references to Bond. Vinod restrains himself to only wearing a tuxedo in one sequence (also in a promotional poster). Tiger is much more conspicuous; apart from the tuxedo he wears a blouse with a glittering 007 logo. And in the conversation with his boss (Girish Karnad) he confesses that he’s tired of all this secrecy in his life; sometimes he wants to shout as loud as he can: ‘I’m a secret agent! I’m a spy! I’m James Bond, damn you!’.
Surprisingly, Saif Ali Khan and Salman Khan, playing RAW agents, resigned from exposing their musculature on screen. Saif as Vinod appears only once in a boxer shirt displaying his biceps—and despite the actor’s undeniable attractiveness and sex appeal, the hero remains cold and asexual in contact with women. Only once does Vinod become nice, charming and seductive—it is when he pretends to be gay in order to make contact with the terrorists’ messenger who is obviously homosexual. Maybe this way, the director tries to tell the audience something important about the character.

In Salman’s case the restraint from appearing half-naked is highly unexpected, because the star is famous for exposing his naked torso, especially in fight sequences. As Sudhanva Deshpande claims, ‘The joke about actor Salman Khan is that he is the only Gandhian star in India: he has vowed not to wear a shirt so long as the hungry millions in India go shirtless’ (Deshpande 2005, 196). *Ek Tha Tiger* breaks this rule (but not entirely: in one short sequence Tiger flashes his bare chest for about two seconds). Salman tries to fit into a character who is too experienced, too mature, too tired (and maybe a bit too old—the actor is almost 50) for showing off his physique. In other words, Tiger is James Bond who no longer wants to be Bond.

*Agent Vinod* was a box office flop, but *Ek Tha Tiger* was the biggest commercial hit of 2012. So it would be reasonable to expect more Hindi Bond films in the near future (two sequels to *Tiger* are already anticipated). It is, of course, too early to predict the outcome, but one thing is certain: James Bond remains one of the finest sources of inspiration for filmmakers in Bollywood.

References


Indian Horror: The Western monstrosity and the fears of the nation in the Ramsay Brothers’ Bandh Darwaza

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Abstract. This paper investigates Indian horror films as a site of socio-economical tensions in India at the end of the 1980s through the employment of the postcolonial reading of the 1990 Ramsay brothers’ horror film Bandh Darwaza. This paper argues that specific references to the European gothic tradition and employment of imagery and interpretation of a western monstrosity (Dracula) in the film are not merely the exploitation of the exotic discourse, but an unconscious articulation of fears and anxieties summoned by the specific socio-economic conditions of India. The political turmoil and the economic changes at the end of the 1980s created a specific platform for fears and anxieties that were articulated through the deformed monsters of the western gothic tradition.

Introduction

Anthony Henriques, a reader of the Indian cinema magazine Filmfare complained in the ‘Readers’ letters’ section of the 1988 edition about the ‘laughable’ attempts of the Indian film industry to produce horror movies, concluding that ‘the Ramsay Brothers and the others who produce horror movies would be better advised to tap the rich vein of Indian ghost stories instead of relying on second-hand imitations of third grade foreign horror movies’ (Henriques 1988). I take this remark as a starting point of departure to analyze a horror film by the Ramsay brothers—Bandh Darwaza (The Closed Door), made in 1990. The clear references in the film to western horror elements, the Dracula character and pronounced hybrid aesthetics raise the question as to why this particular monstrosity was chosen to be reinvented in the Indian cultural context.

Horror as a genre in India was born with the Ramsay family production in the late 1970s and retained a stable position throughout the 1980s. Cheaply-made Ramsay horror films circulated at the margins of mainstream Bollywood; however, the films drew large audiences to the cinema halls in smaller urban centres and towns. The 1980s (when horror films by the Ramsay brothers were the most popular) was a certain liminal phase in Indian cinema—a transit period between the 1970s ‘angry young man’ type of films, which exploited social fractures, inequality and the
tensions of the criminal and political underworlds, and the family dramas of the 1990s, which shifted their attention from urban violence to the reformation (or rather re-establishment) of the family institution (Uberoi 2006). The 1980s was a period where India’s political, social, economical and cultural landscapes were marked with uncertainty and disruptions.

Many film scholars confirm that in many cases horror films not only explore fears and tensions of a person(s), but usually expand these feelings further into the terrains of collective fears and the anxieties of a nation. As summarized by Valerie Wee, ‘horror films articulate the specific fears of a nation/community and reveal the socio-cultural, political, and ideological failures and instabilities that shape a nation/culture’s historical zeitgeist’ (Wee 2014, 8). Similarly, Indian horror films of the 1980s functioned in the terrains of political turbulences and instability, marked by the Indian army’s attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the subsequent communal violence and the growth of extreme Hindu nationalism (Vitali 2011, 80–1).

In this interpretative context, this article proposes to treat Bandh Darwaza as a filmic site of reflection on the political and socio-cultural transformations at the start of the 1990s. This analysis also proposes a further crucial interpretative dimension—the liberalization of India’s economy. Major economic changes came to India in 1991, when India shifted its economic organization to the capitalist patterns, thus opening itself to the investments of foreign capital and multinational corporations—and export and import. In this context Bandh Darwaza, which was created just one year before the economic liberalization, will be treated as a mediator of certain anxieties and fears attached to the forthcoming changes that this liberalization could supposedly bring about. Connecting economic liberalization and the inevitable western intervention into the sacred domain of ‘Indianness’, protected by the Indian nationalism, Bandh Darwaza transforms the phobia of this new form of neo-colonialism into the deformed monsters of the western classical horror tradition, and Dracula in particular.

Even though the Ramsay brothers are marginalized in the intellectual and academic debates on Indian cinema with their films being treated as kitsch and cheap cinema production, reading these films critically and relating them to the broader context of socio-cultural and political displacements can ‘open the doors’ (referring to the title of the film in question) to deeper layers of the country’s national identity and psyche. Therefore, this article explores one of the possible interpretations of the film Bandh Darwaza in establishing a relation between the cultural connotations of vampire mythology, conventional gothic fiction and films, and the socio-cultural climate of India.
The foreign monstrosity in *Bandh Darwaza*

The film *Bandh Darwaza* narrates a story of a childless thakur and his wife. The thakur's sister is a follower of a dark cult and a servant of a terrible creature Newla. She lures the thakur's wife to a mysterious place called Kali Pahadi, where she meets Newla. The monster promises that the thakur's wife will have a child. However Newla warns that if the child is born a girl, she will become the property of Kali Pahadi and will have to be brought here. When the daughter Kaumiya is born, the thakur's wife dies at the hands of her evil sister-in-law, who tries to kidnap the child and bring it to Newla. The thakur interferes and supposedly kills the monster. But Newla is not destroyed—instead he dissolves into a bodiless lethargic sleep. The thakur's daughter grows up and upon the hypnotic influence of her real father Newla comes to Kali Pahadi to restore the monster once again to its former form.

The narrative composition of *Bandh Darwaza* is somewhat similar to many of the films by the Ramsay brothers with a monstrosity threatening some particular figure of feudal authority and his family. The spatial and aesthetical configurations of the film are also quite conventional to the craft of the Ramsay brothers: secluded, abandoned caves where the dark cult thrives, a fierce *pujari* and a gang of skull-garlands wearing martial servants. However, what makes the film *Bandh Dawaza* a particularly interesting case for study is the clear references in the film to the *Dracula* story and the ideological tropes associated with popular vampire mythology. While aesthetically all films by the Ramsay brothers are an eclectic mix of various Western horror narratives and motifs, carefully blended with the interpretation of the vernacular mythological narratives, the distinct feature of *Bandh Darwaza* is its relation to a particular monstrosity—Dracula.

Here we cannot deny the possibility of the exotic discourse of the ‘Other’, as an important market strategy, employed by the Ramsay brothers in order to accumulate the spectators' interest. It is known that the British ‘Hammer Horror’ production, (which is best known for its *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and the *Mummy* film franchises), was widely circulated on the outskirts of Indian popular cinema and was watched by the Ramsay brothers and apparently had an influence on some of their narrative and aesthetical decisions (Majumdar 2012).

Various remakes of the *Dracula* narrative can be found not only in Western cinematic cultures, but also in Asian horror circles as well. However, as it is very clear from a study of the Japanese *Dracula Trilogy* (released by the ‘Toho Studio’ in the 1970s) by Schlegel, the reception of these films in the West is usually dotted with a particular irony and sometimes disappointment (Schlegel 2009). The negative reception is usually based on the treatment of these films as a parody of the original *Dracula*, mainly because the films had little ‘authentically Eastern moments’, related
to any particular Oriental expectations by Western audiences. The problem with the
reception of this type of film is that in most cases they are evaluated only by the
observing of what is being shown while not trying to analyze why precisely these sets
of images are chosen and what is their connection to the social and cultural aspects
of the culture(s) from which they are derived—as in many cases they can provide
us with clues about how to interpret the reinvention of western narratives in Asian
horror films (Schlegel 2009, 272–3).

This similar disapproving approach is quite often applied to the films by the
Ramsay brothers, as was clearly indicated in the introduction of this article with the
citation from the Filmfare reader. In this respect, the visible elements of western
gothic and horror fiction and the pronounced allusions to vampire themes in Bandh
Darwaza require us to critically read the film from both the perspective of conventional
Gothic and the Dracula mythology as well as to pay attention to the unique cultural
landscape of India.

Dracula is one of the most popular characters of gothic fiction, which in the course
of more than a hundred years has become integrated into the popular imagination
and appears in many film adaptations, cartoons and commercials (Bolton 2010, 55).
The character of Dracula is embedded with deep cultural codes and if appropriately
read from a certain historical perspective, becomes a ‘modern myth still relevant to
our lives’ (Hutchings 2003, 9). It also has to be noted that Dracula is always related
to different ideological dispositions, as noted by Cavallaro: ‘Literary and filmic
images of the vampire summoned by the Gothic vision indicate that this monster
is a context-bound fantasy, which alters through time as the creature is required to
incarnate different ideological messages’ (Cavallaro 2002, 181). In this way Dracula’s
imagery in the Ramsay brothers’ film Bandh Darwaza has to be analyzed not only in
relation to the socio-political context of India, but also to the inner concepts of the
British gothic and vampire themes.

Proceeding now to the analysis of the film, first we should take a closer look at the
Newla character in Bandh Darwaza. The first and foremost important feature of Newla
is that it is being constructed as an alien monstrosity, not related to the mythological
or folk sphere of India. Contrary to the other monstrous characters created by the
Ramsay brothers (who, despite the obvious influence from western horror, are quite
abstract and not entirely tied to the recognizable western monstrosities), Newla in
Bandh Darwaza is created and modelled according to the ‘Hammer Horror’ tradition
of Dracula. Visually, the Ramsay brothers borrowed clearly recognizable sets of
images of the British Count: a long black suit with a cloak, fangs, the lethargic sleep
at daytime in a coffin and activity at night, the ability to transform into a bat, the
supernatural strength, just to name but a few.
India's rich mythology and folk beliefs have a number of supernatural creatures, which do not, however, fall exactly into the concept of a western vampire. Even though some of the vampire-related elements are to be traced in Indian demonology (e.g. creatures like pishachas and rakhsas, or wetala), most of them are more related to the cannibalistic rather than purely blood drinking practices (Bhattacharyya 2000, 120). In this respect, the idea of reanimated corpse is quite problematic in the Indian cultural context, where the Hindu ritualistic practices define specific funerary rites—cremation (Tombs 2003, 248–9). Therefore, the similarities between Newla, Dracula and Christian traditions are evident—the sleeping place of Newla is a coffin: an object, which for many Indian spectators is adequately associated with the non-Hindu funerary practices, and first of all, Christian.

So we can consider Newla belonging to an alien culture but residing on Indian soil. It is also clear that the Ramsay brothers were not seeking to make an adaptation neither of Stoker's novel, nor a remake of any of the Dracula films (as there are very few if any references to the original story in the film), and just borrowed some of the representational elements from Dracula-related stories and films, which signify that the character of Dracula was chosen not because of the uniqueness of the literary story, but because of some aspects related to vampire topic that conventional Indian mythology could not offer. As emphasized by Carroll, contrary to the mythical stories, where you can also encounter a monstrosity and where it is considered to be an inseparable part of the world's fabric, in the horror stories ‘the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order' (Carroll 1990, 16).

In Indian culture, all sorts of monstrosities are acquainted from the early childhood through TV programs, comic books, adapted stories and calendar art (the best example could be demon Rawan, one of the central characters of Ramayana). In this respect Bandh Darwaza is different from the conventional Indian mythology and Hindu cosmogony precisely because of the otherness of Newla's monstrosity, which would be treated by Indian spectators as an anomaly. The strategy of the employment of a western monstrosity in the Indian horror films could be related to the fact that westernized characters in films like Bandh Darwaza could offer Indian spectators a particular scopophilic intervention into the private sphere, which in Indian cinema

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1 Even one of the stylistically and aesthetically closest to conventional gothic genre Indian films—Mahal (The Palace, 1949) converts traditional gothic elements of ghosts and spirits through reincarnation—the concept acceptable and understandable for the Indian spectators (Mishra 2002; Dwyer 2011).

2 Christian references to demonology in the film Bandh Darwaza can be found not only in the vampire imagery of Newla: additionally there is a grimoire book of Black magic (the pink Necronomicon!), which is used by Kaumiya to lure Kumar to the cemetery in order to have sex with him. The ritual is performed using candles and the photograph—articles employed in many popular usages of western magic.
was closely monitored by censorship. Asha Kasbekar (2002) has convincingly explored the double function of Indian popular cinema: the affirmation of morality through immoral scenes—this way Indian popular cinema would employ erotic or sexually provoking female characters to create certain voyeuristic pleasures (most often this would be done through explicitly sexual cabaret dances etc.). However, at the end of film, punishing these characters for their supposedly immoral behaviour and thus affirming the moral values of the spectators. This formula is obviously used in the films by the Ramsay brothers as well. The Ramsays, however, crossed the firm boundaries of Bollywood aesthetics and narratives in a way even more daring; quite often accumulating a large amount of sexuality and fantasy, their films were able to offer eager Indian spectators particular pleasure forms rare in Bollywood films. The brothers have masterfully combined conventional Indian cinema strategies (romantic love, stories, fight and stunt scenes, comical interludes) with the new concepts: the transformed and eclectic gothic and horror aesthetics with the addition of stylized sex scenes, famous bathroom episodes and explicit dialogues.

All these means of unauthorized pleasure would become a special way to transgress the private sphere, which earlier would not have been that easily accessed by the Indian spectator. This transgression is effectively achieved through the monster, which in many cases would initiate, manipulate or even take part in these actions. Taking note that the monstrosity is always eliminated and destroyed at the end of the Ramsay brothers’ films, the aforementioned double ideological connection between the camera, as a voyeuristic intervention as well as the establishment of moral notions, is more than obvious.

The transgression of the private sphere, however, can be expanded into a broader analysis. As explained by Madhava Prasad, the transgression of the private poses a threat not only to the family or the institution of marriage, but to the nation itself, because ‘expansion of the sphere of sexuality threatened to break open the national borders and destroy its identity’ (Prasad 1998, 91). Therefore, if we consider the mission of the horror film not only to exploit the individual fears and anxieties and their connection with the broader fears of the nation, the western monstrosity in Ramsay’s *Bandh Darwaza* can be treated as a reflection of a broader national anxiety, and, to be more precise, the postcolonial fear to re-live the colonial experience again. To support this mode of analysis, I will turn now to a certain postcolonial interpretation of the Stoker’s *Dracula* in the western critical tradition.

*Bandh Darwaza* and the fears of the nation

One of the interpretations found in the critical readings of the novel *Dracula* is that the novel serves to reveal a certain anxiety of 19th century Britain to experience
reverse colonialism. This interpretation was developed by Stephen D. Arata in his article *The Occidental Tourist*, where he interprets Stoker’s *Dracula* in the context of declining British imperial power. In this interpretation, Dracula is seen as a reflection of imperialist ideology as he uses some of the imperial strategies such as the systemic accumulation and classification of knowledge about the country, which he plans to invade and transform into his vampire empire. Britain, having vast experience in colonial practices, instinctively reflects its own fear of becoming a victim of the same strategy; therefore, this imaginary intervener is positioned in Eastern Europe—another pole of the exotic discourse other than the already explored ‘East’. Arata notes that in reading the novel from this perspective, ‘Stoker thus transforms the materials of the vampire myth, making them bear the weight of the culture’s fears over its declining status. The appearance of vampires becomes the sign of profound trouble’ (Arata 2000, 166).

The model proposed by Arata could be implemented in the interpretation of the film *Bandh Darwaza* as well. The film clearly establishes relations between the discourse of a foreign monstrosity, blood drinking practices and sexuality—that which lets us bind the parallels between Arata’s interpretation and the postcolonial reading of the film. Moreover, that the connotations between imperialism, vampire and the image of Dracula are also to be found in the later Indian horror films.\(^3\) Taking into account the sensitive socio-political and economical situation of India at the end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, when the film *Bandh Darwaza* was released, the aesthetical and narrative complex of the film could be interpreted as the postcolonial fear of a new colonial expansion, in the postcolonial studies defined by the term neo-colonialism and related to the economical exploitation of the Third World Countries. Economical liberalization in India opened the flow of transnational capital and encouraged international companies to establish their offices, encouraging the vast export of goods. However, the liberalization has also triggered imports, as a result bringing to India not only foreign goods, but cable TV as well—this way increasing not only the circulation of the ‘western values’, but also erotic films and programs. Therefore, this national anxiety about the increased impact of westernization may be figuratively seen in a hybrid and foreign nature of Newla in *Bandh Darwaza*. The film *Bandh Darwaza* constructs a foreign monstrosity, which is only supposedly destroyed at the start of the film. The lethargic sleep of the monster (that is, a belief that something

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\(^3\) For example, in a low budget film by Harinam Singh *Shaitaani Dracula*, Dracula commands his followers to drink blood, proclaiming ‘create hundreds and thousands of draculas for our empire. For in the whole world there will be only draculas’ (*hamaare saamraajya ke liye laakhon, hazaaron aur karororn dracula banao. Puri duniya mei dracula hi dracula ho*). In this context the used word empire (*saamraajya*) positions ‘Dracula’ not as individual, but rather as a specific condition of colonisation.
is destroyed but actually is not and still waiting for its hour to rise again), in this interpretational framework could be treated as a fear of neocolonialism—the fear that colonial past is not destroyed completely, but can rise again.

This interpretation can also be supported employing Freud's concept of the uncanny. At the very beginning of his essay, Freud emphasizes that the uncanny ‘belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror’ (Freud 1919, 1). Freud emphasized the certain ambivalent duality of the German terms heimlich (homely, hidden, closed) and unheimlich (released to the outside), where both of them are related to negative or uneasy experiences. Therefore, it may be possible to use Freud's references to the double logic of the uncanny in trying to explain the duality used in the film Bandh Darwaza: if the gigantic statue (where Newla's vital energy is conceived), hidden in the dark dungeons under ‘the closed door’, could be considered as belonging to the heimlich, then Newla could be interpreted as the twin reflection, the unheimlich, or the repressed fear. Freud has connected the ambivalent categories of heimlich and unheimlich meanings thus concluding that the uncanny is ‘in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression’ (Freud 1919, 13). Freud also emphasizes the importance of anxiety about something that is repressed and its ability to come back again (ibid.).

Therefore reading the film Bandh Darwaza from the perspective of the postcolonial discourse, it is evident that Newla is a very ambiguous creature. First of all, as we have noted earlier, it is constructed as an alien monstrosity. At the same time Newla is also a fixed and established monstrosity—there is no mentioning of a transit moment (as, for example, in original Stoker's novel and film adaptations Dracula is always migrating) and from the very first shots in the film Newla is referred to as a creature residing in Kali Pahadi. As Freud has noted, repression is always an incomplete process and the past has an ability to slip back into the present, so it is not surprising then that following this concept of the uncanny, the lethargic sleep of Newla may refer to the anxiety of the nation about the possible return of the monster—what precisely happens in the film. So if we substitute the figure of Newla with the figure of western colonialism, in the psychoanalytical sense it could be considered to be known and destroyed, but still retaining the dreadful ability of returning—even if in another form. In this way Bandh Darwaza reflects on the idea of colonial horror coming back and being repeated.

The interpretation of a neo-colonial monstrosity is also possible if we take a closer look at the polarization between a monstrosity (shaitan) and humanity (insaan) in the film and the relation between the monstrous and the religious objects. In popular culture and traditional lore related to the vampires there is a firmly established
antagonistic relation between the undead and the cross. The Ramsay brothers, however, extended this religious discourse much further. One of the final scenes in Bandh Darwaza is when Newla tries to hide in his coffin, but he fails to do so because there are certain religious objects hidden in his abode: the Om sign, the cross and verbalized suras of the Quran (Hindu, Christian and Islamic attributes respectively). Valentina Vitali treats religious iconography in the Ramsay films as not so much related to the narrative importance, as more to the commercial need to exploit the exotic taste of the spectators and the creation of a dramatic effect (Vitali 2011, 79); however, this aforementioned scene in Bandh Darwaza could also be read as relating to a particular nationalist rhetoric. Partha Chatterjee has effectively argued about the ideological division between the material and the spiritual in many of the nationalistic narratives, emphasizing the hierarchical superiority of spirituality (East) over the materiality (West) (Chatterjee 1993, 6). From the film we can derive an idea that Newla is disturbed not by a certain religion, but by spirituality as such, as was emphasized in the film by selecting a combination and unity of the religious (or spiritual) elements.

If the gothic genre tried to question the rational ideas of the Enlightenment and the polarization between ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’, this ‘otherness’ would quite often comply with the Saidian Oriental ‘otherness’. Therefore, according to Procter and Smith, ‘postcolonial Gothic might be said to cite and write back to familiar Gothic texts (including imperial ones) in order to unsettle or in some way disturb their grand narratives of colonial mastery/ degeneration, relocating the horror from the locus of the colonised to the violence and abuses perpetrated by empire’ (Procter, Smith 2007, 96). In this way, the film Bandh Darwaza, as an example of postcolonial gothic, works as a contra-strategy to imperial narratives, reforming and applying otherness and monstrosity to the imperial identity. In this way the idea of reverse colonialism (where Dracula is the dark side of Britain, its eastern ‘Other’), in the postcolonial horror narrative is reversed yet again—the western monstrosity becomes the ‘Other’ for India, or, rather, the embodied fear that this ‘Other’ may return once again.

This fear of neo-colonial exploitation and threat to identity is emphasized through one more thematic aspect—sexuality, which is reinterpreted yet again in the film Bandh Darwaza relating it to the sensitive context of the nation.

**Bandh Darwaza and the sexual nature of a woman**

In his interpretation of reverse colonialism, Stephen Arata refers to the conceptual links between sexuality and the blood drinking practices, where a bite of the vampire is equal to sexual intercourse. The expansionist strategy of a vampire is dreaded precisely because through the bite there is a possibility of reproduction, related to
certain aspects of race and hybridity. Being bitten by Dracula, Victorian women become a distinct ‘race’, belonging neither to the world of the dead, nor of the living—transformed into aggressive sexual predators.

The link between blood, sexual intercourse and reduplication of the species is known to many cultures. India is not the exception: here blood in some mythological narratives is tied to reproduction. However Bandh Darwaza develops this idea further and more explicitly, including a scene of actual sexual intercourse between the monster and a woman. The strong sexual instinct of Newla is especially pronounced in the film and his sexual nature is presented from the very first scenes, where Newla is introduced as an ‘impure entity’ (ek napaak jism), and having sexual encounters with the village women (jo gaav ki ladkiyon ki izzat se khel raha hai). The references to impurity are used both directly and figuratively: it may refer to the illegitimate sexual intercourse generally as well as to the supposed incestuous relations between Newla and his daughter Kaumiya. If we follow the interpretation of the vampire’s bite (that is sexual intercourse) as the contamination of the race, this paradigm could be also found in the film Bandh Darwaza.

The major effect of an encounter with the vampire is the inner transformation of the woman, transforming her into a sexually aggressive predator. This way the importance of sexuality is closely related to the major fear of losing one’s own identity and becoming someone else—an alien—a threat posed both to the personal as well as the national identity. Woman’s sexuality in Indian cinema was always closely monitored and controlled by a strict means of censorship, so actual sexual intercourse or explicit shots of the naked body were mostly eliminated or carefully masked. However there were many practices in Indian cinema, which allowed filmmakers to include sexual references and not to have them removed by the censorship. Other than a well-documented and analyzed technique of the ‘wet sari’ (Dwyer, Patel 2002, 91), the most often used strategy in Indian cinema was the polarization of female characters into two characteristic categories in cinematographic terminology: the Madonna and the Vamp. The Vamp was often constructed as being alien to the Indian cultural landscape, a stranger—often an Anglo-Indian or of uncertain descent. She was always portrayed as vulgar, persistent, sexually aggressive etc. As a contrast, the idealized woman, or the Madonna, was always portrayed as traditional, spiritual and sacrificial (Gokulsing, Dissanayake 2004, 79).

For example in Devimahatmya there is the famous myth of the goddess Kali and her struggle against the demon Raktabija. According to the myth, every drop of blood spilled from the wounded Raktabija would reproduce another demon, so Kali was able to defeat the demon only by drinking every drop of his spilled blood. This relation between blood and reproduction is encoded in the demon’s name as well, where in Sanskrit rakra menas blood, and bija—seed (a word which encapsulates sexual connotation as ‘semen’ too).
And even though the image of the Vamp character has suffered some changes in the course of time, the devaluation of her negative image is apparent only from the end of the 1990s, when, inevitably, Indian cinema was looking for strategies of constructing a modern, yet traditional image of a woman (Gangoli 2005, 157), many of the films prior this period retained this character division. The ideological separation in women characters is still visibly articulated in the film Bandh Darwaza through the main female characters—Sapna and Kaumiya (Newla's daughter). Kaumiya is presented as sexually active, a ‘hunting’ woman who starts demonstrating her active sexuality even before the actual contact with Newla (perhaps as an indicator of her monstrous blood), while Sapna shows almost no hints of sexuality (except for one song/dance scene in the rain, but it should be treated as a romantic dream sequence) and is rather associated with bravery, heroism and romance. So if we treat Newla as a foreign monstrosity, related to him (or spread through him) aggressive sexuality is also considered as being alien to traditional Indian culture—it is imported and infiltrated but not indigenous.

Other unconventional sexual practices (such as masochism) are articulated through another female character in the film—Newla's mysterious female servant. It is obvious that this character has no visible narrative impact for the film and functions only as a voyeuristic cinematic insert and as ideological confirmation of the idea that pronounced sexuality is of a foreign nature. The identity of Newla's servant is never revealed; however, she obviously transmits the Western exotics through extravagant clothes, a connection with black magic and forbidden sexual practices. Comparing these two to Newla-related female characters (Kaumiya and the female servant), it becomes evident that explicit sexuality is either foreign (in the case of Newla's servant) or infiltrated and artificially contaminated, indoctrinated through hypnosis or other unconscious practices (in the case of Kaumiya).

In this context it is important to investigate the case of Manu, Sapna's sister-in-law. When Newla corners Manu in a closed barn, they have a struggle, which ends with eye-contact. The close up of Manu face indicates a shift from terror to the unexpected and uncontrolled desire for the monster. Contaminated by Newla's bite, Manu desperately wishes to unite with the monster, constantly repeating to her friends and relatives that she needs to go to Kali Pahadi. As the spectators are constantly reminded throughout the film, Newla is not a human being, but a demon. This hypnotic desire for the alien, a nonhuman and fearful creature could be interpreted as a fantasy of sexual experimentation with otherness. But as the overall ideological discourse of the film confirms, this sexual attraction for otherness is treated not as an active and individual desire, but rather as a result of contamination.

It is important to note that Kaumiya, too, reflects her inevitable submission for the monster. The song in the film I was a sparkle (Main ek chingaari thi) shows
Kaumiya imprisoned in the dark catacombs and labyrinthine passages of Kali Pahadi (a reference to the conventional gothic setting). She is lamenting that once she was a sparkle, but now everything is veiled with darkness—beyond the closed door. In the course of the song Kaumiya is constantly being exploited and humiliated by episodic appearances of Newla; however, she cannot escape his hypnotic powers and at the end of the song she is portrayed as a bride, laying affectively to Newla through the cover of a glass coffin. So the film condemns neither Kaumiya, nor Manu, and rather presents their condition as an inevitable outcome of contamination.

It is therefore important to emphasize that both Kaumiya and Manu die at the end of the film: this is a reference that contaminated blood neither cannot stay for long (in the case of Manu) nor has an antidote (in the case of Kaumiya). The only woman in the film acting on her own free will is the mysterious stranger—Newla's female servant. But this representation does not collide with the overall ideological position of the film—being a foreigner; she is an alien to the cultural environment of India and therefore is able to demonstrate her sexuality and choice freely.

**Conclusion**

In the analysis of the film *Bandh Darwaza* I argued that the film, which was created just before the economic liberalization in 1991, appears as the embodiment of anxiety and fears related to the forthcoming changes this liberalization supposedly could bring about. Choosing the vampire theme, the film re-writes the conventional western gothic narrative and uses it as a means to reflect the anxieties of the nation. *Bandh Darwaza* reflexively posits the dangers of westernization, which might be created by the socio-economic changes in India, and intuitively prescribes them the form of a western monster.

The film also elaborates on the dangerous position of the woman. As a bearer of cultural and traditional values, she is more vulnerable to submissively succumb to the destructive and degrading influence of the West. The film articulates the unconscious sexual desire for the ‘Other’, while at the same time indicates the dangers of it, emphasizing the threat of racial mixing and suggesting better protection of women,

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5 This episode may be related to the traditional Hindu epic mythology. One of the main episodes in *Ramayana* is Sita's abduction by the demon Ravana and the imprisonment in his island kingdom Lanka—a place where there is no possible way of escaping. Even though Ravana attempts to seduce Sita, she remains virgin and pure—the rakshas does not succeed in using her sexually (this is later confirmed by agnipareeksha—the fire trial). In *Bandh Darwaza*, the sexual contact is dramatized to the maximum. Even if there is no direct depiction of the sexual act between Newla and Kaumiya, there are, however, indirect references to it (it is evident in few scenes where Newla is shown fondling Kaumiya's body). The narrative of purity here is transformed into desire (even if forcible) for the exotic ‘Other’.
as they are presented in the films as more vulnerable in terms of their sexuality. Contaminated by the foreign forces, a woman can become an aggressive sexual predator and bringer of the dangerous and contaminated reduplication, thus posing a threat to the exquisite Indian identity.

The dominant aspect of Bandh Darwaza still remains the exclusive focus on the idea of a unified community. The film implements the motif of a battle against the western and strange monstrosity, which, however, is not an individual battle but the combined force of the community. In the last minutes of the film Bandh Darwaza we can see the whole village united in the triumphant victory over the ‘Other’. The community is shown gathered near the body of the defeated monster, strategically positioning the low-angle camera shots; this way directing the viewer’s gaze from below and creating the impression of the superiority of mankind over the deformed monstrosity. The common denominator of the religious discourse shown in the film is the synthesis of religious practices. In Bandh Darwaza the Ramsay brothers, for the first time, combined the three main religious practices (Hindu, Muslim and Christian) in the communal fight against a monstrosity as a signifier of unified India, overcoming the threat posed for the nation.

References

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Shape Shifting Masculinities: Accounts of maleness in Indian man-to-animal transformation horror films

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Abstract. Unlike the werewolf myth, on which there is a significant corpus of takes in Hollywood cinema, Indian horror films abound in snake-, tiger- and gorilla-transformations. Most of these shape-shifting monsters represent aberrant subjectivities that set in motion a cycle of destruction and redemption within these narratives. This article will explore how the male body in Indian horror films acts as a site of different bodily discourses that permits a reading of socio-cultural crises within the societal framework. Although there are almost a dozen Indian horror films to date that deal with such shape-shifting monsters, this article will limit itself to studying one Hindi film Jaani Dushman (1979, dir. Raj Kumar Kohli) and one Telugu film Punnami Naagu (1980, dir. A. Rajasekhar). The following core questions will be explored: do these narratives challenge the constructions of hegemonic masculinity? What departures from normative masculinity, if such a thing exists at all, take place? How do these narratives use horror codes and conventions to map the emergence of different types of masculinities? How can these bodily discourses be correlated with various contemporary socio-political issues of India?

Animals in Indian cinema outside of the genre of horror films have largely been portrayed sympathetically: for example, the domesticated animal is lauded for its ability to perform human-like actions as well as serve as a loyal companion to its human counterparts. In fact, the animal world has been constantly telescoped through human emotions, i.e., the closer such an animal appears to exhibit idealised ‘humane’ virtues, the more it is lauded or valorised. In contrast, horror films differ substantially in the representation of such animal-human relationships. The subject of such films is usually a wild and/or exotic animal that threatens the very existence of man. This bestial nature is used as a narrative technique to gesture to the transformation of the human being into something fearful and incomprehensible. Fear of animals lie in the human inability to understand their behavioural patterns, especially their aggression. This is harnessed for a particular effect in the horror genre. This article focusses on those human-to-animal horror films where the body of the male protagonist becomes the site of transformation into animality. Through an interpretive reading of select man-to-animal transformation horror films, this article proposes that the spectacle of horror produced through monstrous male bodies narrativises crises of masculinities. These
crises of masculinities in turn can be read as products of the socio-political climate of their times. There are almost a dozen Indian horror films to date starting from the Bangla Hanabari (Haunted House, 1952) to the Hindi Hiss (Nagin: The Snake Woman, 2010) that deal with the theme of human-to-animal transformations. This study will focus on two man-to-animal films: Jaani Dushman (Beloved Enemy, 1979) and Punnami Naagu (Full Moon Snake, 1980). This article seeks to establish that while the monstrous body in Jaani Dushman can be read as a disguised critique of National Emergency in India (1975–7), the shape-shifting male body in Punnami Naagu can be read as a metaphor for the caste politics of the 1970s and 1980s Andhra Pradesh.

**Man-to-animal transformation films**

Unlike woman-to-animal transformation films, man-to-animal transformation films, quite predictably, focuses primarily on the predicament of the male protagonist who undergoes the metamorphosis. Such films narrativise the trials and tribulations that these male characters undergo to come to terms with changes in their bodies. Typically, the male body is culturally constructed as stable and not in constant flux, unlike the female body, which is subject to consistent change in the form of menstrual cycles, menopause, pregnancy, lactation and so on. The horror film in focusing on the male body in flux may be read as thus revealing the male body’s culturally-prescribed narrative of stability to be of mythical, not objective status. This is not to say that such struggle fructifies into anything meaningful in the horror film as all the male protagonists eventually die. (And one must add, die dissatisfied). This is very different from how female protagonists of the snake-women films react to such metamorphoses. Right from the beginning of those films, they are shown to be entities who have already adapted themselves to their dual selves—that of the supernatural and human. As a result, whenever they transform into snakes, the process seems to be less painful and less self-conflicting than what their male counterparts undergo in man-to-animal transformation films. Also, the ending of films with snake-women is less tragic as everything either culminates in the fulfilment of the snake-woman’s desires (usually the destruction of evil) as in Nagina (Snake Jewel, 1986) or Hiss. Or, in instances like that of Nagin (Female Snake, 1976) where the snake-woman dies partially unsuccessful in her revenge, she is repentant for her actions and reconciled to her fate (Dhusiya 2012, 112). But nowhere does one see them troubled about the uncontrollable changes in their bodies, whilst male characters always find themselves unable to reconcile the inevitable transformations their bodies must undergo in man-

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1 Though the film does not depict actual shape-shifting, the plot revolves around the villain wearing a gorilla bodysuit. In this sense, the film can be considered as a precursor to man-to-animal transformation films.
SHAPE SHIFTING MASCULINITIES

The male protagonist's inability to comprehend and assimilate these bodily changes can be read as its incapability to understand and thus withstand crises within masculinity. These horror films generate valuable insights about the pre-occupation of the male subject with his body, his masculinity, about choices between diverse formulations of masculinity around him, and his uneasiness at his repeated failures in achieving his desired notion of masculinity.

Studies on masculinities have gained rapid traction since the 1990s, particularly in the West, and it cannot be denied that sometimes models of masculinity developed in the West have become benchmarks for the rest of the world (Kimmel 2001, 22). The label 'masculinity' does not suggest any static framework of ideas and beliefs. Rather it is an evolutionary process where the 'masculine' subject constantly negotiates its own understanding of masculinities in relation to the world outside it (Kahn 2009, 190). In any given historical moment, this negotiation usually involves a reaction to or against the normative cultural exaltation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 81). This 'hegemonic' masculinity is not a stable, singular structure but a 'hybrid bloc' of diverse constituting processes that legitimise and reproduce patriarchy (Demetriou 2001, 337). While there is no ignoring the fact that global patterns of masculinity have played a vital role in influencing masculinities through the processes of colonialism, imperialism, post-colonialism and geopolitical struggles (Ouzgane, Morrell 2003), it is equally important to explore local indigenous patterns of masculinities (Ruspini et al. 2011, 5). In the Indian context, it has been argued that the two dominant forms of masculinities thrive on two exactly-opposite principles: one is based on the Brahmanical ideas of control and detachment, and the other works on the principles of non-vegetarianism, sociability and providing for the family (Osella, Osella 2006, 50). Then, in certain special circumstances, like that of a prison where there is a forfeiture of human independence in a gendered set-up, a new set of competing and alternate masculinities other than the popularly-conceived ones develops (Bandyopadhyay 2006, 187). The purpose of this study is not to search for some elusive indigenous exclusivity of Indian masculinities as 'it is no longer possible to conceive of a pristine theoretical and cultural world of “non-Westernness”, unmarked by a history of asymmetrical interactions' (Srivastava 2004, 27–8). Instead the focus is on the various socio-historical and economic processes that map the growth of the male protagonists in man-to-animal transformation horror films.

Jaani Dushman

The National Emergency imposed by the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 was a watershed moment in the postcolonial history of India. The country witnessed the blatant violations of civil and political rights as the central government proceeded
with arbitrary arrests, censorship of the press, forced sterilisations and a witch-hunt launched against several judicial and police officials who were unwilling to participate in its mercenary tactics (Gupta 2012). The ruling establishment defended the drastic step citing external threats to national security and internal political instability created by the opposition parties (Palmer 1976, 100). The government utilised various audio-visual modes to propagate and legitimise the need for such an authoritarian regime (Rajagopal 2011, 1015). As a result, voices of dissent, apart from the opposition using the obvious political platform, remained scattered and unorganised only to appear later in the form of personal experiences, underground literature, prison memoirs etc. (Tarlo 2003, 32). Hindi films made during this period that critiqued the imposition of Emergency or fictionalised Indira Gandhi were either destroyed as in the case of Kissa Kursi Ka (Ahmed, 2009) or banned as was Aandhi (Storm, 1975) initially in 1975. However when closely studied, certain Hindi films made during that period with no direct reference to the Emergency, do enable a reading of the socio-political anxieties of the time. Jaani Dushman is one such film.

Jaani Dushman is set in a fictionalised north Indian village of the 1970s and is a multi-starred film featuring well-known and high-paid stars of the 1970s, like Sunil Dutt, Jeetendra, Sanjeev Kumar, Neetu Singh and Rekha. It tells the story of a feudal world where an old thakur\(^2\) (Sanjeev Kumar) commands enormous respect from his fellow villagers. The film throws up an interesting mix of different themes such as romance, unrequited love, chivalry, class-warfare, feudal masculine anxieties and the creation of a fictional landscape. It narrates the story of one Lakhan (Sunil Dutt), a hard-working and morally upright farmer who labours industriously to put together enough money to marry off his only sister Gauri (Neetu Singh). Shanti (Bindiya Goswami), the daughter of the thakur is secretly in love with Lakhan, even though he loves Reshma (Reena Roy). Then there is Amar (Jeetendra) who is in love with Gauri. Shera (Shatrughan Sinha), the son of the thakur, an arrogant and known philanderer, typifies the spoiled brat of a rich father and is shown unwilling to reciprocate the love of Champa (Rekha) as she belongs to a poor section of society. The film meanders towards horror once the narrative reveals that the village was afflicted with a curse: newly-wed brides disappear on their way to their in-laws’ houses. The film, then in flashback mode, traces the origin of the curse to a wealthy landlord Jwala Prasad (Raza Murad) who was poisoned by his newly-wed bride. Ever since, his spirit has haunted the village and killed all the newly-married brides. The revengeful spirit possesses the body of the Thakur and whenever he sees a bride in her traditional red wedding attire, he is transformed into a gorilla-like monster and kills her.

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\(^2\) Thakur was generally used to refer to the feudal landlord in villages of northern India.
At the level of the narrative, the film establishes a number of strategic modes of communication with the audience. One of the key manifestos of the Emergency was the arbitrary censure of civil liberty. This is metaphorically expressed through the many possession episodes in the film. The film makes extensive use of popular horror film codes and conventions to establish such draconian restrictions on human liberty. An unnamed character in the initial part of the film creates a discourse about ghostly possession: the possessed man shows certain symptoms, such as constant sweat, pursed up lips whilst talking, his body always trembling and his eyes unblinking, unable to stop staring. These traits are constantly visible on the thakur each time the ghost possesses him. Though these are very common film strategies to show how people behave when possessed by evil spirits, they have been hardly spelt out in the cinematic history of Indian horror this far. The deliberate articulation of such traits in the film in the form of a discourse almost insists that the spectator not miss the point the film is trying to make. All these symptoms are related to the control of the body through censure of speech and expression. This can be related to the controlling of public speech and expression so prevalent when the Emergency was enforced in the country. The National Emergency saw the suspension of Article 19 of the Indian constitution. This article ensured the right to freedom of speech and expression, and it is this very freedom of speech and expression that is violated within the filmic narrative. Article 19 also has the provision for ensuring the freedom for an Indian citizen to move freely throughout the territory of India. The suspension of Article 19 also resulted in the restriction on mobility, which comes across on numerous occasions in the film when the newly-wed brides are abducted and killed on their way to their husbands' homes. This particular pattern of brides being picked up on their way to their husband's home can be read as an infringement of the freedom of movement. Further, the mise-en-scène at the level of the scenic construction also enables a more direct communication with the audience. The film uses horror to destabilise the normative screen–audience relationship. It subverts the aesthetics of frontality by re-working the frontal mode of address. Frontality is the placing of the camera at a 90-degree angle to the action so that the audience gets to have a 180-degree view, as if seeing the action through a transparent fourth wall, instead of a 360-degree view. This placement of the viewing angle has its own politics of representation in Hindi cinema. It has been argued that most Hindi films largely prefer the frontal mode of address that disrupts the perspectival narration (Vasudevan 1993, 51–79). This creates spatial hierarchies within the film frame between characters in a pre-established manner that seriously impairs the dialogue between the film and the audience (Vitali 2011, 99). However, this film dismantles this frontal mode of address in those moments when the monster attacks its victims. In one such scene, one sees the head of the monster rotating at 360
degrees while the camera vigorously pans left and right. This facilitates the destruction of the unitary frontal mode of address and also symbolically reflects the social crises in the national imaginary during the Emergency period when human rights were curtailed. The monster after all can be imagined as the state going berserk as was the case at the time of the National Emergency. The monstrous figure of the ghost-possessed thakur can be read as metaphorically mirroring the draconian face of the state during the Emergency. The turmoil that his facial expressions reveal during the possessions can very well mirror the fragile condition of the country during an equally ghostly possession of the National Emergency.

Within the filmic narrative, the ghostly possession of the thakur can also be read as his own anxiety at his gradual loss of feudal power amidst the changing fabric of the socio-political order and the rise of other forms of competing masculinities. The source of his masculine anxieties can also be read as stemming from his own gradual loss of power in a society that is moving beyond the feudal world of his youth. Lakhan symbolizes the upright, working-class man with the potential to mobilise public opinion against the class-system and thus upset the carefully orchestrated and well-preserved feudal structure of the thakur. Lakhan for the thakur thus represents an alternative masculinity that threatens to diminish the power of his own. This threat becomes obvious at several moments in the film. Lakhan on one occasion openly accuses him of being the real bride-murderer when the thakur’s daughter was not attacked the way other newly-wed girls were. Though Lakhan did not know then about the thakur’s ghost-possession, he instinctively feels that only the women of the thakur’s subjects were getting killed and the thakur’s own daughter did not meet the same fate. This was the first open challenge to the thakur’s fiefdom. Then, on several occasions, the thakur had to stop fights between his son Shera and Lakhan. These fights can be read as instances of class antagonism: Lakhan as a self-made man had more acceptability among villagers than the thakur’s own son, who threw tantrums at every given opportunity. Lakhan was also the reason behind the severing of ties between the thakur and his son. Unable to rationalise his accusations against the thakur, Lakhan blames Shera for all misgivings. At this point, the whole village takes his side and asks the thakur to punish his son but Shera manages to escape: the father-son relationship however takes a beating. The thakur, in order to save his own skin, also publicly blames his own son for all the murders: this can be read as an instance of the familial structure of the decadent feudal world being destroyed by new-age class mobilisations. With the hey-day of its glory behind, the feudal order does attempt to incorporate new class formations in order to prolong its existence: this explains Shanti’s secret love for Lakhan, and the thakur’s own hidden fondness and fascination for Lakhan. However all these attempts fail: Shanti’s love remains unrequited, and the thakur, of course, cannot fight his fate.
Another explanation of the thakur’s masculinity crises can be sought in his own sexual anxiety as a male, an anxiety that is a recurrent theme throughout the film. Jwala Prasad’s getting poisoned by his bride on their wedding night is a classic instance of male sexual anxiety. The film uses conventional horror possession episodes to articulate masculine anxiety in the narrative. The thakur is also possessed for the first time when he is about to spend a night in a deserted cave with his beloved, implying sexual union. His being possessed every time he sees a newly married bride and the suggestion of sexual union of the marriage night can be read as his own fear of women and his anxiety about his own sexuality. Most horror films use a strong dark-coloured schema to create a foreboding horrific atmosphere on screen. Keeping with this tradition, this film depicts thakur’s anxieties through possession each time he sees a newly-wed bride in her red wedding costume.

The body of the thakur lies at the epicentre of all these crises. The striking contrast between the gorilla-thakur and non-gorilla thakur sets up an interesting exploration of his masculinity. The choice of the actor Sanjeev Kumar to play the role of the thakur also serves to highlight the intensity of the contrast. He was generally known to play the role of a gentle and soft-spoken protagonist in middle-class cinema comedies (Angoor (The Comedy of Errors), 1982), or of a repentant father (Trishul (Trident), 1978), and his most famous role—the wronged thakur of Sholay (Embers, 1975). His raping and killing of newly-wed women when possessed by the ghost, besides symbolising the cruelty of the feudal world against women can also be read as the crisis of his own masculinity. The decadent feudal masculinity is on the verge of extinction and in comes the newer age masculinity, essentially a product of new-age class formations. The film narrative shows the thakur and the feudal world’s inability to adjust to the new societal patterns, which leads to their downfall. The film also at another level explores the rampant violation of human rights during the Emergency period and establishes a dialogue with the audience in this regard. The thakur’s body also becomes the site of the typical male sexual anxiety.

Punnami Naagu

The 1980 Telugu film Punnami Naagu is deeply rooted in the feudal and caste politics of 1970s and 1980s Andhra Pradesh. Unlike Hindi cinema, which tries to cater to a pan-Indian audience and in the process often deliberately avoiding local issues (Raghavendra 2010, 175), regional films are ‘far more culture specific and rooted in their communities in terms of subjects and their treatment. They use their local idioms, manners and customs to make a greater claim on realism’ (Benegal 2007, 232). This potboiler starring Chiranjeevi narrates the story of the protagonist Naagalu who is fed snake poison by his father right from childhood. As a result his body
becomes snake-poison resistant, but it also turns out in the end that the poison has transformed his constitution, turning him into a snake every ‘punnam’, that is every full moon. His repentant father tells him the secret of his remedy before he dies, but it is already too late as Naagalu’s skin moults with a periodicity akin to snakes, accompanied by a powerful desire for sexual union that leads finally to his death—discovered by the community, ultimately, he ends up committing suicide by jumping from a mountain-top. The film follows Naagalu through adolescence quickly to bring him to a full-grown youth when his vocation every full moon was to mesmerize some pretty young woman, who, hypnotically drawn by his eyes, would be found dead the next morning, with Naagalu nowhere near her. The body-politics permit the exoticisation of Naagalu’s body. The visual and audio iconography of the film draws on the horror genre conventions to establish Naagalu’s predatory tendencies. The mise-en-scene of these full moon narratives permits reading between the lines: the naive but often buxom women would suddenly find themselves lurching towards the very virile Naagalu, whose physical attractiveness sets him apart from the average local male body-type. The film’s soundtrack confirms that there is a structural equivalence in how the prey is drawn: the same song accompanies their drift towards Naagalu. The setting—surreally entangled in what appears to be the branches of a lone and very old banyan tree in some forest wilderness—is also the same for all of them, as is the hour of night: dark, yet ethereally lit up by a moon that appears to mimic daylight. Naagalu’s and the women’s gazes meet at midpoint of the song; both appear hypnotically drawn to one another and the romantic song narrative suggests coitus through this embrace of the eyes, followed by bodily contact—a chaste but intense embrace of bodies. The context however suggests that this embrace is a metaphor for sexual intercourse. The next morning sees these women dead: the first such woman is Naagalu’s beloved; the next prey is a female teacher—clad in markedly urban clothing and carrying a camera, the emblem of advanced technology and emancipation. Out of every such encounter a repentant Naagalu would emerge traumatised with his uncontrollable lust and desire for sexual union. The film perhaps best magnifies his uneasiness with his masculinity in the scene when the camera focusses on a highly traumatised Naagalu in front of a mirror peeling off his facial skin. At a metaphorical level, this scene shows a male subject frustrated with his inability to fashion a coherent understanding of his changing masculinity, and who can feel his masculine self-disintegrating beyond public acceptance. The film, once again, uses horror to depict this turmoil in his mind.

Naagalu’s body becomes the site of the interplay of class and caste politics depicted in the film. It is obvious that the snakes themselves synecdochically represent the tribal world of the snake charmers who are then considered to be a dangerous
entity within the premises of both class and caste. The snake-charmers represent a
de-notified section of the Indian population who not only lie at a very low level of
class and caste hierarchy, but whose profession is considered illegal. The Wildlife
Protection Act passed by India in 1972 prohibits anyone from exporting or owning
snakes. Tribal communities like the Irulas of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and
Kalbelia of Rajasthan, known for their snake-catching prowess, had a harrowing time
after the passage of this Act. This had a bearing on their personal lives too:

In the 1970s, most of the Irula were immobile; if they had to get anywhere they walked. No
bicycles or public transport for them. You couldn’t blame them, they were paranoid about
being identified and getting kicked off buses for carrying snakes. They are a dark people
with curly hair, and when armed with a crowbar, their tool of the trade, the Irula stick
out from the rest of the population. As with many tribal peoples, the focus of the Irula’s
interaction with the world is to blend in as much as possible. (Lenin 2011)

This blending was also necessitated by the fact that more and more forest areas
were dwindling because of ever expanding urban world. However, this blending with
the society was far from smooth. They were looked down upon and were repeatedly
refused caste certificates by the authorities concerned, which led to their loss of
educational and professional opportunities (Karthikeyan 2008). Naagalu’s tragic
predicament has undertones of the hardships that an average individual belonging
to the snake-catching community has to face even today. The crisis in masculinity of
Naagulu in the film is evident in his three major relationships: with his father, with his
love-interest Menaka, and with Menaka’s adopted brother. Naagalu’s tragedy arises
from the fact that without his knowledge or acceptance, his father fed him snake-
poison since childhood. His fate is thus of an average young snake-charmer who
perforce inherits his ‘illegal’ profession. The burden of inheritance is something that
Naagalu is never able to shed as it defines his own existence, his own masculinity. And
the film narrative constantly vilifies the subaltern snake charmer class by showing
them in a dangerous light. In the initial part of the film, it is shown that Naagalu’s
father deliberately summons his captive snake to bite a Brahmin priest after the priest
prevents him from raping a woman. The priest dies of snake bite. The film thus posits
the lower-class and -caste snake charmer as the violator and the upper caste Brahmin
priest as the protector. This class and caste warfare continues with the next generation
too, in the form of hostility between Naagalu and Menaka’s adopted brother who turns
out to be the dead priest’s son. Predictably, he is the hero and Naagalu the villain in
the film. In a twist to this class and caste warfare, the film shows Naagalu sexually
involved with Menaka and her brother romantically involved with Naagalu’s sister.
While Naagalu kills Menaka during their sexual consummation, Menaka’s brother and
Naagalu’s sister are shown to live happily ever after. The film thus makes a statement,
which is very parochial and serves to maintain the interests of the upper class and caste.
Symbolically the film affirms the stereotypical upper class/ caste views that inter-caste marriage outside the class tampers the ‘purity’ of the blood. This is emphasised using characteristic elements of the horror genre. Naagalu is shown as a monster (read lower class/ caste) out to prey the vulnerable (read upper class/ caste), and Menaka’s death will be the fate of all such upper class/ caste individuals who are involved in relationships unsanctioned by the class/ caste patriarchs. At the same time, it is also shown that the upper class/ caste man can choose to take a woman much lower from his social position provided that she severs ties with her family. Thus towards the end, Naagalu’s sister is shown suspecting Naagalu of monstrosity, spurred on by her lover’s own doubts about him. Her emotional separation from her brother will be complete with her physical separation in the form of his death. Thus with all ties to her family finally severed, Naagalu’s sister is swiftly accommodated within the family structure of the dominant social caste/ class of the society. Metaphorically, the film then depicts how the normative understanding of ‘family’ is limited to the upper class/ caste structure, which maintains its status quo by destroying all alternative structures. Thus at the end of the film, Naagalu’s family lies totally disintegrated. The final cog of that disintegration lies in the final face-off between him and Menaka’s brother, the hero of the film: he berates Naagalu, in a sermon tinged with strategic sympathy, for his crossing over to the non-human realm of monstrosity. With nowhere to go and utterly disgusted at the shame of his own uncontrollable monstrous masculinity, Naagalu commits suicide in the end.

The film uses horror to ‘other’ the lower class/ caste snake charming communities from mainstream Andhra society. This othering is located very much through the body, with Naagalu’s moulting skin serving as a marker of the passage. The narrative mirrors the cruelties meted out by the feudal upper caste/ class through a physical, emotional and mental assault, a feature quite common in Andhra Pradesh of the 1970s and 1980s where the entire state machinery would collude in secret understanding with the cash-rich upper castes to deny Dalits their fundamental rights (Satyanarayana, 206–16). Naagalu’s masculinity is the focal point of such cruelties and assaults. His masculinity is as much shaped by his inheritance as by the swelling resentment and antagonism against him. The enigma of his non-normative masculinity is a product of the social othering of his caste, class and profession. The film depicts horrific images of his draconian sexual self to vindicate the construction of his virile, and if one may add, villainous masculinity. It is another matter of course that the actor playing the role of Naagalu, was soon going to be christened the reigning superstar of Telugu cinema for decades to come.
Conclusion

To conclude, this article has striven to explore how animal transformation Indian horror films can be a significant articulation of gendered subjectivities of their times. Without any doubt, all the films discussed above might have other equally valid interpretations; yet, this study shows how these films enter in a dialogue with the audience in a way of which film scholarship in India has yet to make a serious critical study. Animal transformation horror films are an essentially read as a product of their socio-political macrocosmic world. These films have valuable ideas and perspectives to contribute and in the process, they do refer to the social, political, economic and cultural developments of India, sometimes overtly, other times more discretely. While *Jaani Dushman* can be read as a disguised critique of the National Emergency, *Punnami Naagu* brings to the fore the issue of caste politics of the 1970s and 1980s Andhra Pradesh. It can be that these films were inspired from their Western counterparts or even other regional cinemas of India, yet the filmmakers have always adapted them to their local settings in the process bringing to light some of the lost indigenous folk-tales, customs and beliefs. The focus of this study has been more on the male body of the protagonist(s) who undergo the transformation. However, it cannot be discounted that the other characters in these films, major or minor, male or female, also might have useful critical perspectives to offer. At times, this article examines the role and the usefulness of such characters. But mostly, this study has been faithful to the primary focus of these films: an individual getting transformed to animal and vice-versa. And it has been very interesting to observe that while woman-to-animal film narratives offer reciprocal gender negotiation dialectics, man-to-animal horror films works within the ambit of a masculinity crises.

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‘I Wasn’t Born with Enough Middle Fingers’: How low-budget horror films defy sexual morality and heteronormativity in Bollywood

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Abstract. In the early 1980s the Ramsay Brothers gave Bollywood a new genre of monster flicks with blockbusters like Purana Mandir, Hotel, and Veerana. Following the work of the Ramsay Brothers, low-budget horror films that were made exclusively for the small towns and rural market increased in the decades of 1980s and 1990s. These films are primarily known for their unintentional humor owing to poor production and acting, but they have never been acknowledged for their actual content. This article argues that Bollywood low-budget films fulfilled the basic function of horror movies—that is, they subverted mainstream moral order and sexual morality. These films opened up space for dialogues that the mainstream cinema had totally neglected; particularly, in the areas of incest, female lust, ‘othering’ of male sexuality, and transgendered identities. On a different register, the relationship between low-budget horror films and mainstream Bollywood can be compared to folklore and canonical literature, where folklore repeatedly resists the conformities endorsed by the mainstream prescriptive texts.

I start by describing a scene from a movie released in 1993. A group of young women decide to have a ‘kitty party’. They get together in the Mumbai suburban farmhouse of one of their friends and there, they party hard, get drunk, and soon they want more. As the lone male servant quietly brings drinks, one of the women comments on his attractive appearance. The ladies start to dance and one of them goes inside the kitchen to seduce the servant. He rejects her overtures, but soon the other women join her. The servant tries to get away but the young women pin him down to the floor and rape him, an action that is indicated by the flickering of the chandelier. In the next shot the servant is lying on the floor in his vest and jeans, his shirt is gone, and there are bite and lipstick marks all over his body. He gets up, walks towards the group that is still partying, and accuses the women of taking advantage of a helpless poor man.

This scene is from the movie Shaitani Badla (The Devil's Revenge) directed by Harinam Singh, who also plays the servant. And this is the exact reversal of what happens in mainstream Bollywood.

Bollywood has almost always exploited female sexuality and used rape as a tool of titillation, and sanitized the violence and horror of rape. But Harinam Singh challenges this existing code of sexuality and treats male rape in the traditional Bollywood style.
The treatment of the scene is very much like a mainstream film where flickering lights, the breaking of a pot, or the extinguishing a candle flame are all used to symbolize forced penetration. Here, as the chandelier flickers, we know Harinam Singh is being violated. He gets up and walks slowly; hair disheveled, and there are marks of lipstick on his body and his upper torso is bare. He accuses the women of the heinous crime and threatens to take them to the authorities. He is then killed by one of his rapists, and no one has any remorse for the act. His body and sexuality is used in the exact same way as women’s bodies are used in most Bollywood films.

Now the question becomes—where to put Shaitaani Badla? Undoubtedly, it comes under the umbrella of Bollywood, but movies like Shaitaani Badla negotiate and redefine the boundaries of Bollywood. The movie is a low-budget horror flick especially made for small towns. When I started this research, I categorized them under ‘horror’ and ‘B’ movies, but later realized that B movie aficionados further categorized them under B, C, and D, depending primarily on the production. So, the ones that were really low-budget flicks were grouped under D. But my paper is not about these nuanced categories of B films; instead, I focus on how these low-budget horror films subvert the existing notions of sexuality and open up space for incest, transgender sexuality, and the female gaze to enter and renegotiate the discourse on the prevailing sexual morality of mainstream Bollywood.

It is extremely difficult to describe the horror genre in India. Unlike in Hollywood, horror took a long time to penetrate the Indian scene. Traditionally, Indian horror films are synonymous with the Ramsay Brothers; a group of seven brothers whose monster flicks were hugely successful in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the Ramsay Brothers are a household name, and it was primarily their influence that led others to join the horror bandwagon.

The Ramsay Brothers undoubtedly introduced the horror genre in India. Although their first movie, Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche (Two Yards Under the Ground), was neither the first monster flick nor the first movie dealing with the supernatural, the success of this film, and later the unprecedented success of Purana Mandir (The Old Temple), created a niche for monster flicks and the horror genre. The films that were not consciously made as horror, but still had elements of the supernatural, and films such as Rajkumar Kohli’s Jaani Dushman (Sworn Enemy) or Raveekant Nagaich’s

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1 I am aware that the term Bollywood is controversial, but I am using Tejaswini Ganti’s definition of Bollywood where she calls it a recognizable international brand name (Ganti 2012).

2 During my fieldwork in Mumbai in 2012, I interviewed several B movie fans who are very active on social media and the Internet. Most of them are professionally connected to Bollywood and have a hug collection of these films. One of them told me, ‘Mohan Bhakri’s Roohani Taqat is somewhere between B- and C+, but Harinam Singh is C to D. Almost all of Ramsay Brothers are of course A- to B+’.
Jaadu Tona (Hocus Pocus), also belonged in this category. Similarly, early Bollywood blockbuster films including Raj Khosla's Woh Kaun Thi (Who Was She?), Kamal Amrohi's Mahal (The Mansion), Biren Nag's Bees Saal Baad (Twenty Years Later), and Mehmood's Bhoot Bungla (The Haunted Bungalow) can all be categorized as horror even though their creators were not conscious of the genre. The films were just referred to as suspense thrillers with spooky elements and none of these old films had anything to do with the supernatural. The inexplicable spooky events always had a 'scientific' explanation. But the 1980s and 1990s saw a major boom in thrillers and horror. The success of the Ramsay Brothers played a major role in that. This period also saw the rise of the horror genre, chiefly in the form of monster flicks, and many filmmakers besides the Ramsays dabbled in horror. Most important among them were Mohan Bhakri and Vinod Talwar (Tombs 2003).

Even though Bollywood horror was clearly influenced by Hammer Studio Gothic themes and some American horror films, there was always a signature style in filmmaking that made the difference. While the themes were often about the clash between tradition and modernity, the Ramsay Brothers did not consciously subvert mainstream values. Their films were 'safe' as order was always restored in the end, and good succeeded over evil. Ramsay's most important achievement was to create a genre of self-conscious horror films. They gave Bollywood memorable monsters like Saamri (Purana Mandir, 3D Saamri), Nevla (Bandh Darwaza), and Nikita (Veerana), who later became the prototype for future Bollywood ghouls. Bollywood always had a market for low-budget suspense films with a spooky content, but the Ramsays created something unique; they brought out the latent horror that was continuously sidelined by mainstream cinema (ibid., 252–3). Mainstream cinema was afraid to acknowledge superstition and folk traditions or to give credit to anything that could not be 'scientifically' proven. The Ramsays simply called a ghoul a ghoul and embraced the supernatural; their spooks existed beyond the realm of scientific explanation.

By the mid 1990s the Ramsay Brothers' films had run their course. The critics had never been kind to them, and after a few failures at the box office the Ramsay Brothers concentrated less on the big screen. Their lost prestige was restored in the late 1990s on TV, as the Zee Horror Show (later called Anhonee) became a huge success. The Ramsays again became pioneers, this time with horror shows on Indian TV, and the later horror shows like Aahat (Knock), Shhhhh ... Koi Hai (Hush, Someone's There),

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3 I have taken some liberties with this translation. Jaadu Tona's literal translation would be 'Magic Spells', but in the context of the film I felt 'Hocus Pocus' made more sense because the protagonist sees black magic and spirit possession as psychological disorders and sees science and not magic as the solution. Both Jaani Dushman and Jaadu Tona were made after Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche but whether they identified themselves consciously with the horror genre is not known.
Mano ya Na Mano (Believe It or Not), and Kaala Saaya (Black Shadow), all of which followed the Ramsay Brothers format.4

By the mid 1990s there were plenty of low-budget horror filmmakers making films mostly to cater to small towns, rural areas, and small, single-screen local theatres in the big cities.5 This was the time when horror films consciously started fulfilling their basic role—subverting the mainstream moral order. What made subversion possible was the Censor Board’s attitude towards these films. The Censor Board’s idea of ‘adult content’ was limited to topless shots and butt cleavage, so if they did not find any of these things, the films passed the test.6 It was this myopic vision of the Censor Board that finally allowed the filmmakers to create actual ‘shocking content’ that was not limited to topless shots and indecent exposures.

I admit that when I started watching these films my sole purpose was humor. Poor production, bad acting, lack of continuity, inconsistencies in the script, and bad editing undoubtedly make these films hilarious.7 All the B movie fans I have interviewed watch them simply for laughs and to be amused, and they typically watch these films after getting drunk on a Saturday night. To quote Aseem Chandaver,8 a B movie fan I interviewed, ‘[T]his stuff is just so cool. It’s never about the cleavage or the thighs, but the monster who runs to attack you, his mask falls, he picks it up, and runs again, and the victim waits for the monster to resume his monster identity and again starts yelling “Bahchhao, Bachhao, Bhoot, Bhoot’ (Save me, there is a ghost behind me)’.

But once one looks past the obvious humor, what emerges from these films is the content. These films are what David Cronenberg says is the purpose of his films: ‘to show the unshowable, to speak the unspeakable’ (quoted in Lowenstein 2005, 144). Perhaps my comparison with Cronenberg is not fair since he is very conscious of his art, but I want to use his vision to explain and emphasize how low-budget horror consciously violates all the social norms and manages to get away with extreme content. My definition of shocking content, unlike the Indian Censor Board’s idea,

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4 These are the horror shows I am aware of; there may be more that might follow a different style. By ‘Ramsay Brothers format’ I mean their production values, plots, and narrative styles that are very similar to the Ramsay Brothers shows.
5 I interviewed actor Amrit Pal last year who had worked with Harinam Singh and even produced his own low-budget horror flick, called Woh Kaun Thi. My information about these films also comes from Bollywood screenplay writer Kiran Kotrial, who is not only a connoisseur of low-budget flicks and also has a website about these films. His website is www.fulpopat.com.
6 I interviewed five low-budget filmmakers and a distributor who talked about the censorship process.
8 Aseem Chandaver is known for sharing his passion for films on YouTube and in the social media. He talks about D grade films more in this article: http://ibnlive.in.com/news/decoding-10-b-grade-films-bwood-should-revive/230543-8-66.html.
revolves around themes that are considered disturbing by the mainstream cinema such as female lust, homoeroticism, incest, and transgender identities.

The Shaitaan and incest

Joginder’s **Pyasa Shaitaan** (The Thirsty/Lusty Satan) violates every possible code of sexual morality and does it in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way. The narrator of the story is Shaitaan himself, played by Joginder, and the famous filmmaker/star Kamalhasan plays his minion. The main plot revolves around Shaitaan asking his minion to seduce virgins and sacrifice them so that his powers become endless, and in return the minion is promised immortality. But the story soon becomes surprisingly complex. The two initially have success. You can see the demon dancing as his minion has sex with a girl, and the demon continuously updates the audience about his plans and even reminds them how this sacrifice will make him powerful. Just as the audience begins to enjoy this face-to-face conversation with Shaitaan and gets drawn into his narrative, he jolts the audience. He adds a disconnected scene, where the minion is not involved, but Shaitaan himself makes a brother witness his elder sister’s rape and tells the audience ‘Main Shaitaan hoon main aisa hi karoonga’ (I am Shaitaan; this is what I do).

The rape of a sister is not at all uncommon in Bollywood. But the treatment of the rape scene in **Pyasa Shaitaan** is unique. The elder sister is raped on the day of Raksha Bandhan, the auspicious day that symbolizes the love of a brother and sister. The Shaitaan rapes the sister but the brother can’t see her rapist. All he sees in a dream-like haze is his elder sister stripped to her underclothes, sprawled on the bed, and moaning. The audience can see the Shaitaan, who keeps them informed about how much fun he is having, but he remains invisible to the brother, who looks utterly disturbed by this image of his elder sister. But Joginder does not stop here. After the brother witnesses the rape, the sister disappears from the bed and her photograph on the wall becomes alive. She is back, fully clad in her sari, and calls out to him holding a rakhee. As he goes near the photograph the sister starts laughing, and the rakhee turns into a poisonous snake and kills him.

It’s not the first time that these unusual brother-sister relationships have been depicted in Bollywood. **Bahen** (Sister) revolves around an extraordinarily possessive elder brother who manipulates situations to keep his younger sister under his control. Raj Khosla’s **Bambai ka Babu** (Bombay’s Babu) also borders on the idea of incest though it has nothing to do with actual incest. But in **Pyasaa Shaitaan** Joginder eliminates

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9 A decorative piece of thread that the sister ties to the brother on the day of Raksha Bandhan. This thread symbolizes the purity of sibling love and the idea that the brother must protect his sister from evil.
all the subtleties. He openly mocks the tradition of *Raksha Bandhan*, demeans the hyped chastity of Bollywood sisters who are usually portrayed as the epitome of good virtue, and even though rapes of sisters are not uncommon in mainstream cinema, he makes the brother witness the rape in the form of a dream. He does something that is unthinkable for the mainstream cinema—he takes away the purity from the sister’s body and sexualizes her. He forces a brother to see his sister as a woman and as an object of sexual desire. Furthermore, the role of the elder sister is played by actress Bina Banerjee who is typecast in Bollywood as the kind elder sister, the gentle and loving sister-in-law, and later in her career, played the part of the doting mother. Joginder violently shatters her stereotypical image, having her murder the younger brother she loves. The idea of casting Bina Banerjee in that minor role is significant. Until recently Bollywood seldom took the risk of breaking the screen image of an actress. For example, actresses like Nirupa Roy and Sulochana Latkar frequently played the widowed mother who toiled to raise their children. This image became permanent; they blended with their screen personas. They were not viewed as actresses who could play a variety of roles but they were offered the same type of roles repeatedly, and this has happened to many stars in Bollywood. It was also this screen persona that Joginder challenged; a risk that mainstream cinema rarely dared to take.

And Joginder does not stop here. After twisting the core value of *Raksha Bandhan*, Joginder deals with the actual act of incest. The minion has one failure in which the girl escapes after sex as she realizes that the minion is about to sacrifice her. This lapse happens because the minion falls in love with the girl and their sex results in her pregnancy. She then bears a daughter but never reveals to her, her father’s identity. The Shaaitan knows about this and thus makes his minion have sex with his daughter. The film ends after this act of incest as the Shaitaan dies because of an error he has made, and not because the forces of good kill him. He is dead merely because of an accident, a slip on his part; the idea of good or conformity is nonexistent. This is the Shaitaan’s story. He does not appear in the othered (Wood 2002, 13) ambivalent space like the Ramsay monsters; instead he assumes the role of the storyteller and involves the audience in his acts. I call Joginder the Antichrist Superstar because, like Marilyn Manson, he too has made the audience a part of a blatant defiance of predictabilities and conformities.

I am not claiming that Joginder’s film is totally original. He has clearly copied scenes from *Evil Dead* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. It is well known that Hollywood films have always played a major role in Bollywood, but Bollywood has always modified the content to ‘protect’ the Indian viewers. Joginder refuses such protection. The incest element is important; however, it is significant to bear in mind that Bollywood films with a mild hint of incest have always failed at the box office. Thus,
the failure of star-studded films such as Bambai ka Babu (Bombay’s Babu) and Lamhe (Moments) have been blamed on the questionably incestuous theme, even though there is no direct incest in these films at all (Ganti 2012, 300).

What is important here is that Joginder has successfully altered the existing taboo on incest with apparent ease, and the Censor Board that was busy looking for something else totally missed this scandalous disobedience of social values. Joginder makes a very important statement, not just on the act of incest, but also on the festival of Raksha Bandhan. Through his attack on the festival he exposes the deepest fears of a family. But there is more to his attack on Raksha Bandhan.

The festival of rakhee or Raksha Bandhan itself has been used as an object to control sexuality. On the one hand it symbolizes pure sibling love that is tied together by a decorative thread; on the other hand this thread is also used by society as a weapon to control sexual behavior. There is also the concept of the ‘rakhee brother’ that implies that a boy and girl have no real relation but they have become siblings simply because the girl has tied a rakhee to the boy. The idea of the rakhee has been abused blatantly by society. Frequently young women in India are forced to tie a rakhee to someone they have been seeing getting friendly with. Tying a rakhee supposedly washes away sexual feelings and replaces them with love and affection. Women also use a rakhee to protect themselves from men who are perhaps attempting to transgress the limits of a platonic friendship, hoping this thread will act as a deterrent. The rakhee is a thread of abuse, a thread that induces shame about sexuality, a thread that forces people to give up their normal instincts and submit to suppression. Even more than shocking people with incest, it is this symbol that Joginder confronts; a decorative thread that stood for love but that society twisted and turned into a poisonous snake. Raksha Bandhan has a very ugly side and Joginder forces the audience to face it.

Female lust and the ‘othered’ male body

I started this paper with a scene from Shaitaani Badla where the rape victim is male and the rapists are female. Unlike traditional Bollywood or even Hollywood, the female gaze occupies the central space here. The rest of the movie is a revenge story in which the ghost of the murdered servant kills his rapists. Their night of debauchery is punished by death, but one of them escapes. Even though she is guilty of rape and

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10 If a girl had an affair before marriage, they forced her to tie him a rakhee so that her husband did not see that affair as impure. The movie Zehreela Insaan (Poisonous Man) shows how the heroine is forced to tie a rakhee to her lover before being married off to someone else.

11 In the movie Ghazab Tamasha (Amazing Show), the villain continually tries to rape the heroine, who finally tricks him by tying him a rakhee, upon which his sexual feelings immediately disappear and he accepts her as his sister. This movie is an exaggeration but shows how Bollywood and mainstream culture has treated rakhee.
being an accessory to murder, the ghost does not kill her because he is in love with her. He is her servant who has been in love with her but she was always unaware of his affections. Yet, the object of his adoration later gang rapes him and is a party to his murder.

Before I discuss further the significance of the female gaze, it is important to see how Bollywood has viewed it. The female gaze always comes from the ‘bad/loose’ woman or the vamp who is usually pitched against the heroine. The vamp normally appears in western clothes and represents the westernized woman stripped of all her Indian values. She makes no qualms about her lust for the hero, and her sexuality almost always causes him discomfort. Her sexuality is beyond his control and the only way he can deal with it is to end it, to run away from it, or in some rare cases to successfully mold her into a good woman. The female gaze also appears sometimes as comic subplots where overweight women lust for the hero. Unlike the gaze of the vamp her gaze is not seen as a threat; instead, her sexuality is seen as something comical. Her sexual desires are ridiculed, humiliated, and used as a source of laughter simply because she transgresses the acceptable codes of beauty and is unaware of her limitations. Her body is denied any sexuality, and she becomes a pathetic figure who deserves to be mocked and burlesqued in order to reiterate the societal norms of beauty and sexual desirability. The female gaze is therefore either hilarious or dangerous; they never come from the ‘good’ women, the leading lady and hero’s sister.

In 2012, the movie Aaïya, a comedy that focused on the female gaze and satirized arranged marriages, failed badly at the box office. There were many reasons behind the failure of Aaïya but in the big picture, Bollywood found it very hard to digest a leading lady who displayed shameless lust, rejected the ‘good’ boy, and ran after the handsome man to whom she was sexually attracted. Two other Bollywood films that dealt with female choices, Paheli (Riddle) and Mirch (Hot Pepper), both flopped at the box office. A star cast like Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, and Amitabh Bachchan could not save Paheli, although the movie was critically acclaimed.

The female gaze appears in low-budget horror flicks, not just in Shaitaani Badla. In Kanti Shah’s Virana (Barren Land), a girl introduces her younger sister to the world of pornography. As a young girl reads a horror book, her elder sister enters the room

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12 Almost every Bollywood film had a vamp. But Imtihan (The Test) is one of the few films in which the vamp is redeemed at the end.

13 A common theme in Bollywood. For example, in Khel Khel Mein (Take It Lightly), Priti Ganguly’s attraction for Rishi Kapoor is seen as something so ridiculous that she is repeatedly humiliated for it. In fact, actresses like Tun Tun, Priti Ganguly, and Guddu Maruti often played these roles.

14 The movie had very bad reviews, but blogger Beth Watkins had a very different take on it: http://bethlovesbollywood.blogspot.ca/2012/12/mini-review-marathon-new-ish-hindi-films.html.
and startles the girl. The elder sister scolds her for reading horror and offers her another book. The younger sister reads a few lines of the book and closes it. When her elder sister asks what is wrong, she says she can not read these books, since after reading them ‘pyar karne ko jee chahta hai’ (I feel like making love). The elder sister laughs and says it is normal for her to have these feelings, and then switches on a porn film. This kind of sisterhood is unthinkable in the mainstream cinema simply because of the stigma attached to porn, which is meant solely for male consumption.

In films like Haveli ke Peeche (Behind the Mansion) and Khooni Raat (Bloody Night), we see men bathing. It is not uncommon in the conventional cinema to show a man bathing, but the scene in Haveli ke Peeche is very similar to the bathing scenes from blockbuster hits like Abhinetri (Actress) and Padosan (Girl Next Door), that show the leading lady bathing. In both cases the actresses are covered in soap bubbles and are joyfully playing with them. In Haveli ke Peeche a man is doing the exact same thing. The man here is shown in the same way as women are presented in these two films, and it is not part of a comic subplot.

The male representation is either a suggestion of homoeroticism or female scopophilia. It is not a subject of humor but rather an unpretentious acknowledgement of the multiplicity of sexual desires. Sexual arousal is not limited to male or female bodies but is much more nuanced than that. In Khooni Raat we see a woman peeking through the peephole of the bathroom door at her boyfriend bathing. The object of her gaze is not a six-pack body builder but a nondescript balding man, someone mainstream cinema has completely dismissed. Here, sexual arousal is not limited to conventional definitions of ‘beautiful’, ‘hot’, and ‘sexy’; instead it is about the rest of humanity, the vast majority who did not make it to the desirable body club. These horror films attack fixed notions of beauty, make sexual arousal a totally porous category, and dissolve the boundaries between the grotesque and the erogenous.

Transgressing gender barriers and bodily inhibitions

Male and Female are not the only two natural choices. As Vinay Lal puts it, ‘Though most men will be socialized into behaving like men and exhibiting manly characteristics, and just as most women will learn to conduct themselves as women and display those characteristics said to be common to their sex, that can furnish no warrant for supposing that persons of one sex biologically speaking, always construe themselves as having a gender identity commensurate with their sex. Logically, womanhood and manhood need not have any relation to genitalia’ (Lal 1999, 123). Mainstream Bollywood has completely ignored the hijras (the third sex), who are
usually present in Bollywood films as added vaudeville or seen as dangerous threats. Even a biopic based on the life of Shabnam Mausi called _Shabnam Mausi_ turned out to be a disappointment despite a very strong cast. Very rarely do we see a compassionate depiction of the third sex, and the roles of hijras are always played by male actors in Bollywood films. Bollywood's uneasiness is not just limited to the third sex—even cross-dressing is seen as evil and harmful.

But all these stigmas totally disappear in low-budget horror films, and what happens is a complete deconstruction of sexual identities. The best example of this is Kanti Shah's _Maut_ (Death). _Maut_ has an incredibly complex storyline. An evil female spirit called Kamini has an insatiable lust for men. Her biggest enemy is a woman who, with the help of a magician, traps Kamini in a bottle. But Kamini manages to escape and then finds a body in a morgue and enters it. Once Kamini has found the body (belonging to the protagonist of the movie, played by Sapna), she immediately sets out to satisfy her lust but makes a startling discovery. The upper part of her body is female (she has breasts), and her sex organ is male. The moment she makes this startling discovery she realizes that now, with the new body, she is attracted to women, and this creates the main twist in the movie: she is now sexually attracted to her enemy. In the most matter-of-fact way, Kanti Shah transgresses the set notions of gender and even casts a very attractive woman to play this role. What really stands out about _Maut_ is the straightforward handling of a multifaceted narrative. The evil spirit likes men, but when she enters the body of an intersexed person, she internalizes the body’s sexual preferences, clearly demonstrating that sexual attraction is a very volatile concept. While mainstream cinema has totally failed to deal with anything besides heterosexual relations, low-budget horror films have repeatedly confronted heteronormativity. In another of Kanti Shah’s movies, _Darwaza_ (The Door), a male spirit enters a female body in a morgue because of a mistake, but decides to stay in

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15. Mehmood's _Kunwara Baap_ (Unwedded Father) has a childbirth ceremony song. Another famous song featuring hijras is from the film _Amar Akbar Anthony_, where the hero uses the hijras to harass his girlfriend's father who would not consent to their relationship.

16. The character of Maharani played by Sadhashiv Amrapurkar in _Sadak_ (Street). Maharani is a powerful pimp who runs several brothels in a red light district.

17. Shabnam (Mausi/ Aunty) Bano is the first hijra to be elected to the public office. She served the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1998–2003. She did not get reelected to her seat but still continues to be an activist working actively for HIV/ AIDS awareness.

18. _Welcome to Sajjanpur_ has a major character who is a hijra who enters politics and wins from the village. It is clearly a tribute to Shabnam Mausi.

19. The evil aghori/ kapalik is dressed in sari in _Sungarsh_ (The Struggle). In _Milan_ (The Meeting) the villain is a closet cross-dresser with a penchant for lipsticks.

20. In the comedy film _Masti_ (Fun), Rakhee Sawant plays a transgendered person who seduces the hero, played by Riteish Deshmukh. But when he discovers that he has kissed a transgendered person, he is horrified and cleans his mouth with a plunger.
her body and avenge the wrongdoers. The idea of a male spirit in a female body again challenges the notion of masculinity and femininity, reiterating the idea that the sex organ does not determine one’s gender.

Ghosts in Ramsay films have clearly displayed heterosexual behavior: Saamri has always preferred women; in Bandh Darwaza (The Closed Door) the monster Nevla has sex with the thakurahin (the feudal lord’s wife) and impregnates her. In Veerana (Barren Land) the witch Nikita also has sex only with men. Bollywood has been clearly afraid of challenging gender boundaries. But before Kanti Shah made the radical statement on gender identity, a few horror films tried to break down the conventional notions of gender and sexual behavior. In their hit film Hotel, the Ramsays explored the theme of gay relations in a comic subplot. In the film Hathyarin (Murderess), the statue of a Laughing Buddha sexually violates a shaman in order to prevent him from performing his magic. Hathyarin has several scenes where men are sexually violated by inanimate objects. Closely connected to the idea of gender identity is Bollywood’s discomfort with the human body itself. Very rarely does Bollywood deal with bodily discharges (unless it’s a comic subplot) or even sexual fluids. Once again, horror films manage to easily contravene all these stigmas.

Khatra (Danger), a film clearly inspired by many Hollywood films including Ridley Scott’s Alien, also borrows several scenes from Omen and the usual favorites of Indian horror filmmakers like Evil Dead and Nightmare of Elm Street. Khatra is a zombie movie, but I use the term zombie rather loosely here. It is not Hollywood’s idea of the brain-eating monster — the monster here copies the gait and look of a zombie, but the resemblance is purely superficial. The story revolves around a scientist who brings a dead man back to life; this dead man was a rich businessman, who was very kind when he was alive. After he dies in an accident, the scientist steals his body from his grave and brings him back to life. However, he has no memory and has lost the power of speech. The scientist decides to train him and tells him to imitate him all the time. One day, he watches the scientist having sex with his fiancée and tries to copy that. The scientist attacks him; the monster kills the scientist, rapes his fiancée, burns down his house, and runs away from the place. He then continues to rape women, and all his victims die because his semen contains uric acid — it is the concentrated uric acid in the vagina that causes their deaths. It is important to note that the hero does not kill the zombie, but just as in Pyasa Shaitaan he dies because of an accident. The hero only comes to know of his identity because he bleeds uric acid instead of blood, thereby confirming his identity. But there is compassion for the zombie in Khatra. In one scene where the cops are discussing these rapes, there is an unusual dialogue

21 I am talking of the modern Zombie films. Old Hollywood films like White Zombie and Voodoo Man have zombies that are very similar to Khatra
where the chief of police says, ‘Iske paas sperm nahi hai, acid hai toh yeh sex ka mazaa kaise leta hai?’ (If he does not have sperm and has acid, how is he enjoying the sex?). This kind of natural curiosity is totally absent from mainstream cinema.

Acts like urination and defecation are also seen with complete revulsion in mainstream Bollywood. But here they form an important part of the narrative. In Sar Kati Laash (The Headless Corpse), a woman badly needs to urinate during a long drive through the woods, and she keeps telling her husband how bad her situation is. He tries to dissuade her, saying, ‘Let the rest house come’. He then scolds her for drinking a lot of water, and there is a long discussion on the subject. She finally manages to persuade him to stop the car, and as she goes to urinate, the headless corpse possesses her. In other films, such as Maut ka Badla (Revenge for Death) and Adamkhor Hasina (Man-Eating Beauty), people are possessed during the discharge of bodily wastes. The act is not seen with abhorrence, but these acts open people to susceptibility and spirits take advantage of that. These acts form a major part of the narrative, not something gross, laughable, or unnatural. The vulnerability of a person in their bath is a common occurrence in horror films. Similarly, these acts make people susceptible, exposed, and helpless, providing a perfect opportunity for evil spirits to strike.

**Conclusion**

Sudhir Kakkar describes Hindi films as ‘a regressive haven for a vast number of people’ (quoted in Gehlawat 2010, 28–9). This view of the Indian viewer and Hindi cinema is not uncommon. As Ajay Gehlawat points out, Indian viewers are like children that ‘the national cinema panders [to]’ (ibid., 3). They are considered incapable of watching anything that is slightly different and beyond their realm of morality. Bollywood filmmakers also share this view and see the Bollywood audience as simple, naïve, unintelligent, and incapable of understanding anything complicated. Yet these films that are especially made for the small town/ rural audience seem to have themes that totally shatter the idea of the conservative audience. Clearly, horror films are a world where incest is digestible, women’s sexual desires are acknowledged, and gender categories are transgressed. The moral universe of these films is almost like a bizarro world to mainstream cinema. They subvert everything that mainstream cinema stands for. However, as I mentioned earlier, the very nature of horror films is

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22 My interview with Kiran Kotrial also reiterated this idea. The idea is dealt in detail in Ganti 2012, 281–358.

23 Bizarro World of Htrae (Earth spelt backwards) appears in Superman’s comics. It’s a cube-shaped world where they do exactly the opposite of what earthlings do. This concept has also been explored in popular TV shows such as Seinfeld and Saturday Night Live.
to challenge existing morality. Should these horror films with their limited appeal be viewed as something akin to underground metal bands with a limited cult following?\textsuperscript{24}

I will answer this by first looking at Valentina Vitali’s appraisal on the necessity of Ramsay Brothers horror films (Vitali 2011). She argues that horror films in India are a product of the political turmoil and that the Ramsay Brothers monster flicks were essential in those turbulent times since they represented the clash between modernity and religion. The 1980s saw Indira Gandhi’s attacks on the Golden Temple followed by her assassination and the Sikh riots, and also saw the rise of communal parties and Hindu extremism. The Ramsay Brothers’ films were about the loss of this known world and the coming of modernity. Vitali also adds that horror films ended in the 1990s since their whole purpose was to satisfy the subconscious conflict in the people’s mind. India needed horror films to deal with the radical changes in the socio-political scenario. In fact, scholars like Brigid Cherry (2009, 53–65) maintain that horror films are a way to express anxiety towards changing times and to preserve horrifying memories; Vitali seems to be on the same plane with her.

While Vitali raises some excellent points, the horror films did not end with the 1990s. True, the Ramsay Brothers started failing in the early 1990s, but the genre had taken a very different form. The 1990s saw the peak of these low-budget flicks and the start of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century saw horror films becoming mainstream again with the success of Vikram Bhatt’s \textit{Raaz} (The Secret) and Ram Gopal Verma’s \textit{Bhoot} (Ghost).\textsuperscript{25} Horror films have enjoyed huge success recently. Vikram Bhatt’s \textit{1920}, \textit{Haunted 3D}, and \textit{Raaz 3: The Third Dimension} have become major box office successes.

Vikram Bhatt is the most successful horror filmmaker, and Tulsi Ramsay claimed to be a big admirer of his work.\textsuperscript{26} My reason for mentioning Bhatt is that while he chose a conventional plot with \textit{Raaz},\textsuperscript{27} where he reiterated the Bollywood values of the devoted wife protecting her husband while the themes of his later films became more and more consciously subversive. In \textit{Haunted 3D} he covered serious sexual perversions, and \textit{Raaz 3} touched on necrophilia. Bhatt has begun to do what directors like Joginder and Harinam Singh did in the past; challenge mainstream sexual morality. Bhatt is not as radical but, again, none of these directors were as mainstream as Bhatt.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} When I say limited appeal, I compare it with major Bollywood releases such as those from the Ramsay Brothers, Mohan Bhakri, and Vikram Bhatt. Films like \textit{Pyasa Shaitaan} and \textit{Maut} made a huge profit, so it is not their money-making potential that I am referring to.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ram Gopal Verma had earlier directed a critically acclaimed horror film called \textit{Raat} in 1992, but \textit{Bhoot} opened up a new style in horror films. It brought the Asian style of horror filmmaking to Bollywood.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Tulsi Ramsay, personal communication, 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{Raaz} is a remake of the Hollywood film \textit{What Lies Beneath}, but the story was reworked to fit the Savitri/Satyavan mode where the devoted wife (\textit{pativrata}) was much more powerful than all the forces of evil.
\end{itemize}
Even though Bhatt is still far from conscious subversion, he is gradually becoming aware of the full potential of horror cinema, and the process is gradually entering mainstream cinema. This porosity between conventional cinema and what I referred earlier as the bizarro world is very similar to the world of canonical literature and folklore. Indian folklore is filled with innumerable stories that challenge the existing myths and moral order (Raheja, Gold 1994, 30‒73). They are unpolished, sometimes rather raunchy tales that twist canonical stories, and the identities that are lost in the sieve of Brahmanic Hinduism find their voices here. For example, the theme of *triya charitra* (the character of a woman) plays a very important role in folklore. In these stories the woman always emerges as a winner. Even though the patriarchy used these stories to show how immoral women were, they could not change the fact that women emerged as the winners. These were tales of resistance (Raheja, Gold 1994, 168‒9).

Similarly, mainstream Bollywood is a construct of this patriarchal set-up, and is concerned about preserving order by selecting certain values over others, by oppressing the less powerful and sanitizing everything that does not fit their moral frame. Stripped of all glamour, completely marginalized by the mainstream, horror films document the voice of the repressed who have been humiliated, disgraced, and ignored by tradition. Even though horror films have seen successful recently, Bhatt continues to be ridiculed by the critics, and Bollywood still has an ambivalent relation with the horror genre. These low-budget horror films are exactly like those ignored folktales but they keep doing their job. Resist.

**References**


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28 The tales have been explored in the Bollywood film *Mirch* (Hot Pepper).

29 Many canonical texts depict women that way but the most important among them is the *Manusmriti*. 


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Demure Heroines Expressing Sexual Desire. 
Hints of traditional motifs in popular Hindi cinema

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Abstract. In some of the most successful and representative popular Hindi films released between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the depiction of amorous feelings often takes traditional forms. The reference here is essentially to those films that come more or less within the broad category of classical family dramas: love stories that come up against all sorts of opposition, characterised by the celebration of the traditional Hindu values and the sacrality of the Indian joint-family institution. A particularly interesting aspect emerging here lies in the way in which the sexual desire of the heroine—typically a chaste and virtuous maiden—finds representation. On the strength of studied re-elaboration of traditional themes and motifs, these films achieve high levels of stylistic inventiveness and poetic refinement, albeit often limited to certain individual sequences. The apparent purpose of this aesthetic sophistication is to endow amorous feelings—always leading inexorably in the direction of marriage—with an aura of purity and authenticity. Indeed, it is a matter of sentiments so noble and intense as to win over the consent and blessing of the families by the end of the film. The paper proposes to identify and analyse the conscious use of these traditional motifs in some of the most representative films in this area.

This paper aims to analyse a selection of scenes of popular Hindi films in which the depiction of amorous feelings seems to draw on some traditional themes and motifs of Indian classical literature. The reference here is essentially to those particularly successful family-centred films, the most prevalent genre which emerged in the mid-1990s, coming more or less within the broad category of classical ‘family dramas’.

1 An important point to make here is that we are not referring to Indian cinema in general. Rather, by ‘popular Hindi cinema’, more commonly known as Bollywood, we mean the popular Indian film industry based in Mumbai. It is cinema made in Hindi or ‘Hinglish’, as the mixture between Hindi and English is journalistically termed, and it is essentially commercial—not ‘art’ cinema, that is—and so designed for distribution on a wide scale in India and abroad, especially throughout the South Asian diaspora.

2 The marked continuity with the ancient Indian dramatic tradition has been underlined by Prof. M.C. Byrski, see Byrski 1980.

3 More precisely, following Rajadhyaksha (2003, 28), reference is to a reasonably specific narrative and mode of presentation that emerged in the early 1990s: a particular genre of glossy ‘feel-good-happy-ending’ romance, family-centred, packed with songs and dances. The film that pioneered this genre is Hum Aapke Hai Koun..! (Who Am I to You!, 1994). For the purpose of analysis I consider some of the most successful films belonging to the genre that came out between the 1990s.
These films present the romantic stories of young lovers overcoming all sorts of opposition, to arrive at the happy end with celebration of the marriage and indeed with the celebration of the traditional Hindu values and the sacrality of the institution of the Indian joint-family.

In these films, as Rachel Dwyer observes, romance not only unifies, but also purifies, turning the vices of the emerging middle class (resident and non-resident) of the new powerful India—first of all consumerism, modernisation and eroticism—into virtue and aesthetic pleasure (Dwyer 2004, 66). The apparent purpose of this aesthetic sophistication is to endow amorous feelings—always leading inexorably in the direction of marriage—with an aura of purity. Indeed, it is a matter of sentiments so noble and intense as to win over the consent and blessing of the families by the end of the film.

On the strength of studied re-elaboration of traditional themes and motifs, these films achieve high levels of stylistic inventiveness and poetic refinement in certain sequences. A particularly interesting aspect emerging here lies in the way in which the sexual desire of the heroine—typically a chaste and virtuous maiden—finds representation. Here four typical situations can be distinguished: the girl blossoming into a woman, sexual excitement in women, the amorous skirmish and evocation of the act of love. The conscious use of these traditional motifs will be identified and analysed in some of the most representative films in this area.

### The girl blossoming into a woman

The plots of the films we will be examining here always revolve around romantic stories developing between adolescents. If youth is universally recognised as the ideal season for love, classical Sanskrit literature, and most notably that of Kālidāsa, celebrates this aspect in particular. Then again, the tradition attributes great importance to the stage in life to be dedicated to kāma, i.e. love, a noteworthy example being the Kāmasūtra. A fundamental element both in cinema and in the literature is the essential innocence of the young girl, and in both cases it is usually pointed up with her first entrance on the scene in playful and even possibly childish attitudes. Thus the contrast is prepared for with the situation that is subsequently to develop, just before or just after the first meeting with the hero, which sees the girl coming into full blossom as a woman.

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and the early 2000s. The names of the films, the titles of the songs, and the names of the characters are spelt as in the credits and advertisements for the film. All the translations from Hindi to English are ours.

4 Although all the movies considered in the paper display different kinds of influences, for the purpose of analysis we are here focusing only on the influence of Sanskrit love poetry and drama, which emerges in the depiction of heroine’s sexual desire in certain sequences.
The protagonist’s childish lightheartedness finds expression in the films through her exuberant and at times even unfeminine behaviour. Of the most representative examples we might mention the opening scenes of the film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (I’ve already given my heart away, my love, 1999) with the irrepressible vivacity of Nandini (Aishwarya Rai), in particular in the musical sequence ‘Man Mohini’ (Captivating), where the girl performs a spectacular dance-play in the middle of the desert, bringing out her innocence, beauty and vitality all at the same time.

Often at the beginning of the films the leading girl comes over as a real ‘tomboy’. Exemplary here are the protagonists of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something is happening, 1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham…* (Sometimes happiness, sometimes sadness, 2001), both named Anjali and played by Kajol, or the case of a character like Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) in *Hum Aapke Hai Koun..!* (Who am I to you!, 1994), who spins around the house on roller skates while gorging on chocolate. In all these cases the girls discover their femininity on falling in love, the event marking their transformation into women.

In various other films, however, this transition takes place just before the meeting with the hero, as if to underline the fact that the girl is ready for love. Such is the case, for example, in the films *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The brave heart will take the bride, 1995) and *Taal* (Rhythm, 1999). In these cases the young heroine expresses her desire by dancing more or less gently and charmingly in the privacy afforded by her own home or by nature—in any case when she finds herself alone. At the most, other women of the family particularly close to her (like her mother or sisters) may be involved.

In the celebrated musical sequence of the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ‘Mere Khwabon Mein Jo Aaye’ (The one who entered in my dreams), for example, after having her bath Simran (Kajol) dances in her room wearing only a bath towel which she opens and closes following the rhythm of the music, in a mixture of virginal chastity and sexual allusiveness, titillating the audience with voyeuristic pleasure. As Patricia Uberoi (1998, 316) observes, the sequence marks the coming into maturity of the girl. Later in the sequence the girl is dancing in the rain in the courtyard, barefoot, wearing a short top and a mini-skirt, both white in colour. The prevalence of the colour white clearly expresses purity and chastity, but at the same time the sequence evokes an almost erotic image. Mention must also be made of the importance of the erotic force of the rain songs in Hindi films (Dwyer 2000), and in particular what is

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5 In this case, however, Kajol is not the heroine, but is to take on that role only as the film develops. Here her exaggerated spontaneity serves only to underline the case of an immature adolescent and a hero that prefers a more mature and feminine sort of girl.
known as the ‘wet sari look’,\textsuperscript{6} a device that has found very liberal use in Indian cinema from the very outset.\textsuperscript{7} It is worth noting that in this song sequence, the director does not play on the effect produced by the transparency of the wet material, but the shots of the girl with her wet skin, hair and clothes evoke a highly sensual—if not erotic—image. The presence of the mother, who has hastened out into the courtyard to gather in the washing mitigates the erotic effect of the sequence to some extent, endowing the girl’s dreams and desires with an air of normality and legitimacy.

In the film \textit{Taal}, on the other hand, during the celebrated song sequence ‘Taal Se Taal Mila’ (Match my rhythm to yours) the representation of the situation takes on a far more poetic style. It is the typical case of love at first sight: the young protagonist, Manav (Akshaye Khanna), an NRI travelling in India, falls in love with a lovely young girl, Mansi (Aishwarya Rai), secretly watching her in hiding while she plays and bathes in a pond with her sisters.\textsuperscript{8} This scene evokes a typical motif of the Indian literary tradition, frequently taken up and developed in a number of different variants. In particular, in India’s popular collective imaginings the motif is represented in the myth of Krishna and the \textit{gopīs}, also thanks to the wide circulation it found in miniature paintings.

Traditionally the bathing motif celebrates, among other things, the maiden’s youthfulness and innocence. The device used to this end in the literature is to describe a typical landscape and the various elements composing it, employing wonderful metaphors that stress the beauty of the blooming maiden—the white lotus flowers, the water lilies, the pond itself and, more generally, water as a female element\textsuperscript{9} and, finally, the moon in virtue of the traditional comparison with the maiden’s radiant face and the magical light it sends out. The same sensation of extraordinary purity is rendered in the song sequence ‘Taal Se Taal Mila’ with a wealth of details: the propriety the girl shows in her attitude and appearance—the snow-white dress, extremely natural make-up, hair decorously plaits. Moreover, slow motion is used to bring out the gentleness of her movements; the atmosphere mists almost magically in the soft rain;

\textsuperscript{6} As explained by Yash Chopra, one of India’s top directors since the 1950s, and one of its most successful producers since the 1970s, as well as being the director’s father and producer of the film in question: ‘I think rain is a very sensuous thing. A woman in a sari or \textit{churidars}, who has a good body looks very sensuous in the rain. There is a thin line between vulgarity and sensuousness in films’ (Dwyer 2002).

\textsuperscript{7} The film in question is \textit{Raja Harischandra} (King Harischandra, dir. D.G. Phalke, 1913). Note that the scene was shot despite the fact that the female roles were played by men! (Dwyer 2000, 154).

\textsuperscript{8} Actually this is the first real meeting between the two young people although Manav had already seen Mansi, promptly falling in love with her, in a photo that showed her only as a silhouette against the light when, taking some photos of the landscape at sunset, he had unwittingly immortalised the girl practising \textit{yoga} amidst nature.

\textsuperscript{9} For thought-provoking research on water and womanhood, see Feldhaus 1995.
the bright green of the meadows and trees of the forest contrasts with the water in the pond, while sweet music enhances the intense expressiveness of the scene.

Despite this aura of purity, the image that emerges in the literature and cinema is singularly sensual, if not indeed downright erotic. In part this is due to the voyeuristic situation that develops, and in part to the girl’s unconstrained deportment, since she is convinced that she is quite alone. In the film the scene highlights the flowering of the girl into a woman, her quest for love and her growing desire, as the lyrics reveal. In fact, just before the water play, the sequence sees the girl rejoicing in the rain, first dancing and frolicking with her sisters, and then alone: lying face down in the soaked grass, then turning on her back, her body tense with desire, hands clutching at the grass, and finally abandoned on her side, almost as if acting out a series of amorous embraces. Here, too, there can be no getting away from the erotic suggestions evoked by the water in the lake and by the rain. Thus, the viewer is able to grasp all the intensity of the most intimate sensations experienced by the heroine (and by the hero, too) during the song sequence, thanks to the delicate and indeed poetic style with which the director represents the passion and increasing desire.

**Sexual excitement in women**

It is a tradition in India for women to take great care of their hair, which is usually braided in a plait. By contrast, an image of a woman with ruffled hair suggests a state of excitement and, in the specific context of Sanskrit love poetry; it evokes the end of a night of love. In films, too, the image is often used to represent amorous passion, both in the poetic lyrics of the songs and on the film set itself.

In the film *Dil To Pagal Hai* (The heart is crazy, 1997), and to be precise in the theatrical representation of an extremely modern and slyly allusive dance which formed part of the first musical sequence inserted into the plot, we find an example of the symbolic use of a woman’s hair. In the words of the song ‘Le Gayi Dil’ (Stole my heart away), which describe the protagonist’s sensations smitten by love at first sight, the girl tells us she wears her hair loose and walks as if drunk. Then we have the particularly explicit invitation by Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) to Megha (Aishwarya Rai) to unbind her hair in the text of the song ‘Humko Humise Chura Lo’ (Steal me away from myself), which accompanies the long sequence celebrating the reciprocity of sentiments in the film *Mohabbatein* (Love stories, 2000): the girl replies that this would turn day into night.

When the theme is acted out, however, it takes on less explicit tones. A significant example is to be seen in the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham…* when Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) invites Anjali (Kajol) to go with him to the Chandni Chowk fair, as a sort of first date. For the occasion the girl wears her hair loose—an unusual hairstyle for her—and
indeed the young man remarks on it complimenting her, saying how well it suits her. This detail is a sign of the growing interest that Anjali is taking in Rahul, and of a change in the girl, who is rapidly progressing from childish to more feminine ways. In the delicate transition from girl to woman brought about on falling in love, her loose hair serves as an outer sign: on the one hand it symbolises her desire while at the same time it represents a subtle attempt at seduction, as if to communicate that she is ready for love.

Another representation of sexual excitement in a woman is to be seen in the film Taal: at the end of the sequence we have been looking at, we see the first true meeting and physical contact between the couple, when Mansi, attempting to save Manav who has fallen from a cliff, appears with her long hair flowing over her shoulders to a particularly fluffy effect, with something almost wild about it. The sensuality of the scene is heightened when the two slip into a long embrace in the void—a situation allowing for a reversal of roles. The appearance of the young girl with her hair loose is in sharp contrast with her look in the previous images where a prim plait added a sense of purity to her gleaming white garments as she bathed in the pond—a contrast all the more striking in the sequence of scenes following one upon another as the plot develops.

Finally, another particularly suggestive image is to be seen in the film Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam, in the scene in which Sameer (Salman Khan) has just arrived in the palace and, with an uncertain grasp of palace etiquette but also with a touch of narcissism, shows off his fine physical form, taking the sun half naked in the courtyard. The girls of the house are gathered in a room combing their long hair, which is then to be braided in the traditional plait. When they see Sameer from the window they run out to get a better view, hiding and giggling playfully. Nandini, an older cousin, reproaches them in stern tones, but also looks on. In their hurry all but one wears their hair loose. The scene immediately calls to mind the motif of women looking on in admiration, very dear to the classical literature, as we find, for example, in a splendid image described almost cinematographically by the great poet Kālidāsa in the Rāghuvaṃśa of the fourth-fifth century A.D.—the scene in which the princess and prince Raghu traverse the main street of the city. All the onlookers admire the couple showing great enthusiasm, but particularly the women, who abruptly abandon their personal care to run out and admire the royal couple, and above all the handsome prince, some with their hair loose, some even only half made up.

The amorous skirmish

The first meeting between a couple is clearly a matter of great importance both in classical poetry and in popular Hindi cinema. Here, body language plays a fundamental role, finding expression above all in a theme that enjoys great popularity in poetry, namely that of looks, of gazes. The interplay of glances often takes the form
of a loving skirmish, a body language with typically Indian connotations, which we find described in detail as early as the *Kāmasūtra*. Here, as in the poetry, it constitutes an element characteristic of *sambhoga śṛṅgāra*, love in union, while in films the skirmish generally develops right from the first meeting of the couple, with a fair dose of initial coyness and diffidence on the part of the girl.

We have a good example of this in the previously mentioned film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, in the memorable scene of the candelabrum. With an intense exchange of glances the first meeting between the hero and the heroine assumes the air of a challenge expressed with decidedly stereotyped attitudes: Nandini (Aishwarya Rai), sulking because she has to give up her room for the guest, and Sameer (Salman Khan), the seducer come from afar, who applies a particular technique for the approach, alternating boldness and sweetness. The camera lingering on a close-up of the girl and crisp dialogue playing on the definition of her gaze, which she herself describes as sharp, make the scene all the more pointed.

The *kāvya* captures and combines the various facets of the feelings expressed, creating metaphors and images of extraordinary beauty regarding above all the sidelong glances launched by the girls, *kaṭākṣa*. Traditionally, these glances reveal alternations of various emotions: they may be flirtatious and charming when used as means of seduction, coy or with eyes downcast on falling in love well and truly. Again in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, for example, during the long musical sequence ‘Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyan’ (The impertinence of the eyes) this seductive ballet of gazes is staged to masterly effect in the wedding scene where, amidst a great revelling crowd, Nandini encourages Sameer’s bold advances with an exchange of looks.

Returning, now, to the love skirmish, it is to be noted that in films it usually takes a decidedly playful form. The innocent, almost childish play between the lovers constitutes a veritable language of courting and love. In a culture in which young couples hardly ever have the chance to be alone together in privacy, joking, making faces and teasing seem to constitute, in reality as on the film set, a way to establish initial contact and intimacy between the couple, and can be shown to the general public without any problems. This we can see in the film, during the same musical sequence itself when Nandini and Sameer tease each other against the background of a great throng of revellers, with hardly anyone noticing.

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10 Reference here is to the representation of love in union, according to the well-known distinction made in Sanskrit poetry between love in union and love in separation.

11 For women sulking has a particularly significant role to play in Indian love poetry. In general it is the response when the man’s advances grow too insistent or when the girl is racked by doubts about the reciprocity of the relations, and is thus a prey to jealousy. Obviously, the situation puts a particular edge on the challenge for the man.

12 See the *Kāmasūtra* on courtship, and in particular the sections on winning over young girls and the wives of others.
Evoking the act of love

In the films we examine here, love in union is never evoked with scenes of sex, which would obviously clash with the rules laid down by the censors, but even more, with the moral values that this genre of movies tends to celebrate. Actually, the situation of love in union generally occurs only temporarily in the plots of classical theatre and literature as well as films, as a starting point or point of arrival for the development of a series of dramatic events that will lead to the separation of the couple. In the films, moreover, it is not usually a matter of a truly erotic union, but rather of reciprocal sentiments that find expression in courtship and in the central musical sequence in the film which seals the love of the couple. The kāvya, on the other hand, reaches its highest point of poetic expression precisely in describing the night of love, and above all through the body language evoking the initial and final moments with the help of highly refined images.

The filmmakers take up these classical motifs and combine them in the staging or simply in the lyrics of the songs, offering actual quotations designed to evoke the act of love. Particularly representative in this respect is the second part of the previously mentioned musical sequence ‘Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyan’ in the film Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam. In a rare moment when Nandini and Sameer manage to get away from the crowd taking part in the celebration, just when their two faces come very close and one would expect a tender kiss, the girl, following the words of the song, applies to her lover’s lips a little of the kājal with which she has made up her eyes, echoing a typical scene which follows upon the amorous union in the kāvya, evidently indicating signs of passionate kissing. In the scene immediately after, when a kiss now seems inevitable, Nandini gently bends her head and softly blows out the oil lamp. Here, the themes seem to blend together: the first, highlighted by the lyrics of the song, sets off the beauty of the young girl’s face, which has to be hidden from the envious sun and moon; the second evokes the classical situation, with excitement mounting as a night of love lies ahead and, with desire and modesty competing in the woman’s feelings, so as not to be seen by her lover unveiled, she puts out the lantern tossing a handful of powdery perfume or petals over it. Here it is worth noting that the core of the film consists of a love story between the daughter and pupil of the guru—a relationship seen as incestuous in the ancient sacred Hindu texts, an ‘adharmic’ romance which is represented through highly poetic language and aesthetics.

In conclusion, let us take a look at another motif characteristic of Sanskrit love poetry, regarding the marks left on the woman’s body by her lover’s bites and scratches

13 On the ban on kissing in Indian films and on the ways of dealing with it, see Prasad 1998, 88–100.
at the climax of excitement. Proving extraordinarily evocative of the erotic union, the image recurs in the movie genre we are considering here in two particularly significant cases. The first example is in the film Pardes (Foreign country, 1997) when Ganga (Mahima Chaudhry), having been subjected to the harassment of her fiancé Rajiv (Apoorva Agnihotri) who had drunkenly tried to possess her in Las Vegas, shows the marks left by his kisses on her breast as evidence of the event. Another quite singular episode that takes up the motif occurs in the previously mentioned film Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge when, on a journey through Switzerland, the protagonist Simran wakes up in the agony of doubt wondering whether she had had sex with Raj while she was drunk. The young man takes a mischievous delight in making her believe she had, showing her as irrefutable proof the marks of her kisses on his chest, and then, when she bursts into tears, confesses that he had drawn them with her lipstick for fun. The scene offers the hero a chance to show his sound moral values when, becoming serious again, he solemnly swears to his sweetheart that he is a true ‘hindustani’ and knows how valuable honour is for an Indian girl.

It is worth noting that both episodes take place during a holiday and that in both cases the person apparently responsible for the marks is drunk. But while, on the one hand, the abuse of alcohol puts the dissolute Rajiv in an even worse light, in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge the innocent Simran indulges only out of necessity, to withstand the harsh night temperature. In these films it seems almost as if the characters could abandon themselves to passion only in exceptional circumstances, on holiday or, indeed, under the effect of alcohol. Finally, the use of the traditional motif of the marks left by kisses as sole proof demonstrating that sexual intercourse has taken place is indeed a singular feature, above all in the case of Pardes where the girl could more tellingly have shown the marks left by the blows delivered by Rajiv as evidence of the violence endured.

Filmography

Dil To Pagal Hai (The heart is crazy), dir. Yash Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 1997.
Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The braveheart will take the bride), dir. Aditya Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 1995.

Pardes (Foreign country), dir. Subhash Ghai, Mukta Arts Ltd., 1997.

Taal (Rhythm), dir. Subhash Ghai, Mukta Arts Ltd., 1999.

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Framing the Body and the Body of Frame:
Item songs in popular Hindi cinema

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Abstract: The basic framework of this paper is to deliberate upon the emergence of item songs as a reinstatement of the dominance of the 'song and dance sequences' in popular Hindi cinema, and its inferences as a sub-text in contemporary cultural forms. While doing so, the paper argues that the transition in consumption and the circulation/distribution of Hindi film songs, and other visual/audio media has affectively facilitated the course. In the given context, the paper further attempts to address shifts in the filmic techniques that have consistently regulated the production of such songs, revealing a spectrum of negotiations between and among the 'body', 'performance', and 'frame', with which the spectator becomes familiarized over a series of visual/audio leaps that have taken place in the traditional media forms like that of television and in newer forms like the internet.

With more than a decade of history and dozens of box office hits to celebrate, academic research on the 'item songs' of Bollywood cinema is often in danger of being dismissed on various accounts. 'Kitsch', 'apolitical', 'vulgar', 'not so intellectual to be read', are the charges that cloud any deeper investigation into the phenomenal presence of these songs in contemporary Hindi cinema. This paper is an attempt to recognize the intricate process of experiences and events that have come to the fore in the multiple historical conjectures of Indian visual culture and Hindi cinema thereby generating norms in both form and content for these songs.

Arguably, these item songs will be investigated through the readings of the various 'frames' they play in. In this connection, the idea of the body that transgresses the temporal and spatial grids of cinematic text and the lack of reference to it suffers in the narrative, which is achieved in other sub-texts, ingrained in social structures and mediated through the means of which the mass-media is read. To make the connections between the seismic titillations that occurred in the means of Indian spectatorship visible, the assimilation of 'item songs' into the visual culture may not necessarily be established in a teleological manner. However, the paper's objective is to locate the erotic economy rendered by the seamless signifiers of bodies in the

1 The use of the word 'frame' suggests assumptions that organize, promote or configure the structures of understanding or interpretation of a given text in familiar/obvious or in unknown/volatile realms. Conceptually, here, it would suggest deviation from any monolithic reading of a performative text.
cinematic frame as well as in the sieve of the tabloid, situated at the very core of capitalistic conventions.

It is this convergence of the very idea of the body in the ‘frame’ explicitly contained in the case of item songs that I find helpful for the reading of, and defence against or for the technological epistemology of contemporary Hindi popular cinema. What is most characteristic in this reading is that a tangible context of the cinematic frame is invoked to critique the visible sexual abundance and gluttony for filmic techniques relentlessly levied by a filmmaker, while at the same time observing item songs as a dramatic interjection in the passivity and ennui of the spectatorship. The scrambling of (and a) plethora of formal strategies that have eventually finessed the alchemy of cinematic space; the primal space of bodies and syntax of the camera are consistently referred to in this paper to address the construct of visual codes and language that define these songs categorically. It is in the locus of this dyad of frame that the paper tries to readdress the dynamics of visual pleasure that inevitably constructs the diegetic relationship between these songs and their spectators.

The various charges often made by critics on item songs for being not serious, arise from the similar indifference that film scholars conceived of in reading popular Hindi cinema at its initial stages. It is however, in the understanding of the celebration of fluidity, and eccentric framing that item songs are to be perceived as another filmic technique. With glossy costumes and bawdy lyrics these cinematic pieces cannot be simply dismissed without a meticulous investigation at various levels of comprehension. The discontinuities, rendered in the visual narratives, constitute the making of these songs, which is in a way an expression to represent a critique of Hindi popular cinema.

The readings of popular commercial forms have often been reviewed in the wake of changing paradigms in both the cultural and technological articulations. Songs, too, form an important part of reader’s curiosity as a popular commercial form. Not very often, the ‘song and dance sequence’ in Hindi cinema is a subject to categorization. Any peculiar category is intrinsic to an appreciation of a style that is an amalgamation of similarities and the repetitions, available to a spectator, forms a discreet basis of this categorization within the industrial framework. The construction of what composed an ‘item song’ in terms of the cinematic practice in Hindi cinema and what functions, in response to a wider process of consumer consumption and quite crucially, in the dynamics of public opinion, is what the paper attempts to explore. The first section of the paper seeks to comprehend the conceptual meaning of item songs as a cinematic oeuvre that had evolved in parallel to and as an input to the idea of spectacle in popular Hindi cinema with a language that rigorously carries traces of collective memory of traditional popular songs in the Hindi cinema, and simultaneously cultivated ‘tools of difference’ in the visual experience. In the process of knowing what contains the
concept of an item song, I have construed the idea of body, i.e., the body of an item girl, which incessantly, creates the meaning of and for these categorized songs. In the second section of the paper I briefly elaborate on the deployment of cinematic techniques in the regime of the non-filmic domain as an essential link of studying transitions in the visual lexis in film songs. A few representative music videos that have taken a cultural leap in the popular realm of Indian television are analytically approached to substantiate the debate on the development of the stylistic frame.

**Popular Indian cinema and item songs**

Song and dance sequences in popular Indian cinema have perpetually demonstrated affiliations with the use of lurid elements in costumes, music and lyrics that became rampant in the 1960s and 1970s with an increased sense of fashion, style, dance and thrill. The spectators of Indian cinema (in and outside India) are repeatedly exposed to these norms of cinematic tradition and continue to enjoy the presence of songs in Hindi films. Contemporary filmmakers continue to rely on this tradition and invariably experiment with songs for the entertainment. Even realist contemporary Hindi cinema could not resist the dependence on songs for their commercial success. But how ‘item songs’ offer its spectator a different expression from the earlier songs, and at the same time, maintain the logic of pleasure and commercial success is one of the key objectives of the paper.

A lacunae in the conceptual understanding of ‘item songs’ is that it remains largely identified as merely a reminiscence of the sexualized cabaret songs of the 1970s—an immediate link that happens to deduce the gravity of the scholarly engagement in this area. It is however interesting to note that the nuances registered in the collective memory of spectator vis-à-vis cabaret songs in popular Hindi cinema are consistently evoked while one watches ‘item songs’, yet with increasingly marked tools of difference. These tools of difference are grounded in the contemporary consumer realities that are to be clearly made visible through an inclusive study of the transitional phases in Indian visual culture from the post-liberalization period, i.e., 1990s. Also a comprehensive reading of the ‘function’ and ‘nature’ of the ‘song and dance sequences’ categorized as cabaret songs is to be complemented. In the readings of motifs, objects, and gestures that curtailed structure, nature and the form of cabaret songs, it can be seen that their presence was validated as an essential interlude to the logic of the narrative in the realm of film production (the making of the film) as well as reception (the experience of watching) for the spectator. Ranjani Mazumdar, the Indian film scholar says, in the context, ‘Films of the late 1960s and the 1970s had to have at least one cabaret dance; it was considered almost mandatory by distributors’ (Mazumdar 2007, 86).
Likewise the obviousness with which ‘item songs’, have acquired the status as a commercial ‘necessity’ in popular films for more than a decade suggests a typified function. Yet to comprehend them merely as a ‘pleasurable interjection’ in filmic text would be a limiting approach. While they provide a familiar junction for a spectator as a memory-linkage of images and motifs in cabaret songs; stage-space, close-ups of various parts of the body, deco, lighting effects, etc, in the interpolations that item songs seem to cling to and continue to regularize, they at the same time disrupt the conceptual and cinematic protocols of the 1970s. This paper deliberates on the ambiguous ways in which these protocols are disrupted and addresses the cinematic moments that have adequately contributed in the conception and formation of the form of item songs.

**Body in spaces: Literal and/ or symbolic?**

In a reassessment of the Bollywood songs of the 1970s, Ranjani Mazumdar, in her book *Bombay Cinema*, devoted a chapter titled, ‘Desiring Women’, which speculated on the economic frivolity around cabaret songs and further extends her argument to explore the elements of cinematic space and gaze in the view of cultural context and the transitions in the consumer culture of Bombay in the 1990s, and relates it to the mise-en-scène of the songs.

> [T]he prevalence of certain techniques have become important in the 1990s as the heroine began to occupy the space of the vamp … the space of the nightclub has today lost its iconic status … the dances were no longer located in a morally coded space, but moved into multiple locations. These fragments negotiate fashion, the female body, dance and music, to present a performance through which a ‘spatial relocation of the metropolis occurs’.

(Mazumdar 2007, 90)

Although in her research, Mazumdar laments the loss of opulent dance spaces such as ‘the nightclub’ with respect to the role of the vamps, Helen and Bindu, who acquired a desirable status in the wake of the stylistic cinema of the 1960s but also divulges in the argument to the foreground idea of the multiplicity of spaces in contemporary cinema. Jerry Pinto, too, in his extensive book written on Helen, has argued about the limiting territories marked for Helen out of which ‘the hotel’ was a prominent one. The hotel, he says, ‘is full of transients … it comes second only to the *Kotha*, the den of the dancing girls … a brothel—as spaces in which heartbreak may be expressed’ (Pinto 2006, 57). A search for new sensibilities in aesthetics through which the ideas of freedom and revolt could be articulated, which were otherwise absent in the existing content of Hindi cinema, became visible in the cabarets. The films were not overtly political; yet, I would argue that the receptivity of the enduring cultural movements across the globe and in India, peculiarly the hippie movement and its corollaries in
music and fashion, were cinematically imbibed in the cabaret songs of Hindi cinema in this period. A brief appearance of lookalike Beatles groups, flamboyant hair-dos, tacky makeup, hipsters and several other iconic images of the movements were flirted with in a number of these cabaret songs. They collectively composed the space of the ‘nightclub’ and ‘hotel’ in the context, and served as a compendium to the elements of crime, romance/eroticism, and psyche in the film narratives, reiterated for years, which quintessentially led to the artistic canon formation of cabaret songs in Hindi cinema. They facilitated narratives with the characteristic attributes of being dark, noir and sinful. An analysis of Helen’s oeuvre in the films of the 1960s and 1970s suggests the strategic use of cabaret songs by the filmmakers that would authenticate the nature and role of the songs in terms of both content and form. Such a study would comprise of the understanding of stylistic cinema that constantly seeks to generate or develop certain filmic practices and later aligns them for selective genres and thereby invests in the spectator’s perception of ‘style’. Later in the paper I bring the similar argument on the development of ‘item songs’ via specific genres such as gangster films at the end of the 1990s. These filmic practices, I argue, conform to the ideological framework of narrative i.e., the storytelling and the suitable genre of the film. The songs and the vamp were essentially an intrinsic part of the narrative/plot of the thrillers or suspense films, whereby both would be equally placed like any other episode in the film’s unified dramatic structure. Except for the few, these songs’ popularity was deeply connected to the films’ success and vice versa. Apart from performing dance numbers, vamps occasionally played second lead to the love interest of the hero—bold, frivolous, and sexy. As opposed to the personality of the heroin—docile, ever so committed, simple—she is the one who symbolises the crime world that the hero enters into as a result of transgression: he crosses over the realm of innocence and meets her, where she could hold a gun if need be, either to kill or to save him. In turn, an inevitable death awaits her in most of the mafia tales. She is the ‘drama queen’ in her ‘act’—maligned at one point of the narrative and a saviour in another. These plot-driven songs added commentary to the ‘act’ and other events that were to be unfolded later in the film. Helen’s songs such as ‘Piya tu ab to aa ja’ (Caravan, 1971), ‘Aaj ki raat, kaam nehi Sharaab se’ (Aag aur Daag, 1970), ‘Har raat chahtee he chupke se’ (Beenam, 1974), ‘Deewana, deewana yeh mera dil deewana’ (Don, 1978), ‘Mungda mungda’ (Inkaar, 1978), ‘Aa jaane jaan’ (Inteqam, 1969) were songs in the thrillers that registered some of the above protocols. The space of the ‘nightclub’ and the ‘vamp’ vis-à-vis Hindi cinema, gradually disappeared with the fading of stylistic cinema, thrillers and suspense, and the later proliferation of domestic and family drama in the popular cinema of the late 1970s that was involved in the dialogue with subjectivity and engaged in authenticating itself through a social self. Consequently,
issues like the breakdown of big families, brain drain, conflicts in relationships set in the mood of angst and unrest—developed in the popular image of Amitabh Bachchan, a protestor for several social institutions. Thereafter a wave of realism seeped into Hindi cinema in the 1980s, often termed as the ‘Indian New Wave’ (Wood 2000, 60), a cinema that persuaded spectators for years to believe in the expression of truth: a cinema of representation that sought to achieve excellence in form. On the one hand, an array of alternative cinema was produced in this era that argued for the underprivileged section of society and pledged to narrate reality. On the contrary, it is the popular cinema of these times that was frequently discredited and rejected for being extremely oblivious to the social cause. From within the neatly divided cinema of high art and the popular, it is these popular films that have now begun to be politically critiqued in the understanding of the notion of ‘camp’ and ‘style’ (Thomas 2006, 280). Meanwhile, the camera oscillated between outdoor locations and/or to domestic spaces. The only female roles with villainous intent were played by paranoid and hysteric mothers-in-laws or sisters-in-laws in the family dramas of the late 1970s and later occasionally by variable characters such as pimps, in the realist cinema of the 1980s while the ‘nightclubs’, ‘hotels’ and the ‘vamps’ became images of a bygone era. In the 1990s rigorous use of metropolitan spaces, in the performance of songs, sought the attention of scholars on the discussion of ‘spaces’. Ranjani Mazumdar illustrates her meticulous work on the design of the cinematic frame that includes multiple urban spaces in the performance of lead heroines like Raveena Tandon in the song, ‘Sheher ki ladki’ (Rakshak, 1995) or Karisma Kapoor in the song, ‘Sona kitna sona he’ (Hero, 1997) shot in India and abroad. Such instances in Hindi cinema have acquired responses from the academic circle, engaging in the discourse of voyeuristic pleasure, body and performance. However, the understanding of the various historical junctures of Hindi cinema require rigorous scholarship, and the brief commentary made here is merely intended to suggest to the reader the leaps that Hindi cinema had taken in the preceding decades. In the current scenario, popular Hindi cinema seems to have escaped the categories of melodrama and realism. Yet the emergence of a few genres such as the ‘gangster genre’ in the 1990s and post-2000 has predominantly acquired economic success in the Bollywood Industry (Vasudevan 2010, 219). The gangster genre provided context to the item songs as a category.

The idea of space, vis-à-vis the presence of item songs in contemporary Hindi cinema can be read as a part of the processes of the dissemination of the body—where the body of an ‘item girl’ performer opens from within the structured space of the film as a text, creating opportunities for itself to produce anti-texts i.e., plural spaces outside the text. I would argue that the spaces within the filmic text act like memorabilia—lavishly exhibited look-alike visual scrapes of the 1970s club spaces,
now reenergized into pubs and discotheques or a revisit to the stage/public or dance situations of the 1950s and 1960s, fusing elements of folk and rural songs with a tang of lingo. The readability of these textual spaces is foregrounded in the memory of the spectator; whereas, it is in the dissipation of the item girl's body that spaces cease to be localized and seek territories outside the cinematic text. Jerry Pinto contrasts between the ‘vamp’/‘cabaret’ and the ‘item girl’/‘item song’:

There has been a tendency to reduce the figure of a bad girl to a caricature…this ignores the moral role the vamp had played in the films in which she appeared. She was not merely about eye candy, which makes the claim that the vamp has returned in the item-number sequences that began in the late nineties nonsensical. The item-number girl has no other function than to appease the male desire to be voyeur while a woman dances. (Pinto 2006, 86)

The above statement is precisely referring to the ‘function’ of the vamp and the singular act of an item girl in the cinematic text. Whereas, it is chiefly the dispersal of the spatial narrative—continually reframed for/by the bodies of item girls in the cinematic text and conversely in other mediating structures—which constructs meaning for an item song.

**Form of item songs and the body of item girl: Displaced?**

The discerning factor that differentiates item songs from other songs in contemporary Hindi films is the nature of its ‘form’. The form of item songs is displaced in its nature. The comprehensibility of the differences in which the nature of these songs is inflicted obliterates any dependence on the earlier versions of the sexualized songs except for in ‘nostalgia’ and ‘memory’. For it is only in the arising consumer practices that what is called an ‘item song’ has acquired its taxonomy and its form, and is further able to sustain it. Having been established as a constitutive element of contemporary Hindi popular cinema, it requires a reading into the feasibility of the potential form that questions its very own autonomous nature and transcendence of the grids of cinema as well as assimilation into cultural and economic imperatives, equally, assisting us in the understanding of the construction of the item girl’s ‘body’.

In the last few years, the classification of certain songs came to be known as ‘item songs’, gained currency when these songs would appear somewhere either in the middle of the narrative, and yet in more experimental way, at the end of the film, where it was also called a ‘promotional song’. Etymologically, the word ‘item’ which means ‘also’ is quite congenial to the understanding of the usage of the word that eventually committed itself to the classification. In the most serious way, it is like the filmmaker telling the audience that we will show you an ‘extra bit’ other than the
film's narrative. Who would not want something more for what one is paying? An extremely lucid principle of a marketing strategy like this can vouch for the presence as well as the usage of the word. While I presented this paper at the conference on ‘The Body in Cinemas of South Asia’ (2011) held at Vilnius University, most of the audience was intrigued by the classification and the beginning of the usage of the word. I was asked ‘why’ and ‘when’ we began to use the word ‘item song’.

Unlike cabaret songs and the vamps of the late 1960s and 1970s, the physical demographics of the female body, masochism and the desire of item songs are denied a character role in the grand narrative. The item girl invariably appears in the film, yet she does not contribute to the plot of the film, neither does she ever meet the ‘hero’ outside the realm of an item song. In an absence of any reference to the plot, the body of an item girl mimics the elusive frame of cinema, the intangible topography of an ‘item song’ in the filmic text. It re-arranges, re-configures and corrects the territories of spectacle in the infinite possibilities fuelled by the capitalist structures of the mass-media. Nevertheless it is the intrinsic space of the film, where the body begins to accessorize the nuances of performance, yet the rhetoric of materializing it takes place elsewhere. Surrounded by heterogeneous media practices, it seeks to plunge into the privileged situations of arbitrariness becoming the carrier of the dominant cultural iconography of contemporary society. It is outside of the filmic text, where the item girl exercises, validates and normalizes images of the expanding industry of consumer culture in a given time. She affirms the common man’s fantasies of transforming bodies by indulging in the choice of sculpting, modifying, and correcting it through surgeries and tattooing—glorifying the body that is different, fashionable and fun. Rakhee Sawant’s statement: ‘What God doesn’t give you, the doctor can’ (Shreshtova 2011, 61). Media structures like television play a vital role in order to organize, perpetuate and sustain the pattern, releasing several narratives of campaigning, in the interests of creating markets for these bodies. In defeating that which is ‘homogeneous’, an item girl effectively competes to achieve look-alike prototypes of each other. Despite the fact that she is dictated by the norms of her own lobby, she freely claims the ‘liberated space’ she has earned by resisting not only the dominant forms of performance but also rejecting the idea of having the slender, ‘zero-size body figure’ of her fellow performers like the lead heroines of the film (much popularized by actress Kareena Kapoor) and glorified her curves, of which she robustly boasts in the interviews or press conferences, which remain accessible on internet websites such as YouTube. Cultural ‘differences’ continue to be celebrated while value judgment and opinion formation are contested by item girls such as Rakhi sawant, Mallika Sherawat and Mallika Arora, through interviews on television and the internet, sensual dance performances at stage shows, high-end private parties & award functions, dance shows, and other reality shows such as
dating programmes on television. On the one hand, ‘bodies’ perform in the film; the elements of ‘desire’ and ‘spectacle’ are appropriated within these sub-cultural spaces. These scattered locations simulate the ‘absence’ of space in the text of the film and the character role is the same, where she is inertly restricted to perform. Here in the structures of media gallantry, she enacts various roles—‘villainous’, ‘funny’, ‘sexy’, ‘bold’—creating a number of characters for herself. On the other hand, these multiple roles are perpetually gesturing towards the form of the item song that is displaced in it is apriori, looking for meaning in the production and further reproduction of the positioning of bodies, challenging the generalizations about gender, class, performance and sexuality manifesting itself in the hierarchies of patriarchy in the Indian society. In viewing vamps of the 1960s as synonymous with ‘transgressive sexuality’, Sangita Shresthova asserts, ‘the sexually explicit dance movements were complemented by habits like smoking, drinking, and sexual promiscuity. Through her, an intensely objectifying sringara, or erotic meaning, claimed its space in Hindi films’ (Shresthova 2011, 27) A repertoire of orchestrated performances by item girls in the pluralistic regime of ‘viewing’, operates in a dialectic fashion, in comprehension of a singular visual piece, i.e., the item song.

The conception of the ‘item song’ is thus significantly rooted in the spontaneity that equip bodies to play with ‘what’ and ‘how’ they can be framed, boundless of textual meanings, and a tendency to divulge in other discursive narratives. The ‘voluptuous bodies’ celebrate the act of dance beyond the conventional experiences of a spectator with the sense of fantasy and realism, deeply grounded in the construction of images in the narratives of daily-watching. Conversely, they negotiate with the ambiguities of desire that are choreographed in other platforms of visual culture. Item songs thus reveal interplay between social relations, material forms and subjective position. In the wider process of achieving this subjective position in spatial reality at multiple levels, several constructions of image formation takes place, most importantly, that of the spectator’s perception. A flurry of these sexually rebellious bodies, displayed in various apparatuses of social reality, attempts to understand the meaning of this new form, thereby achieving a symbolic significance.

**Spectatorship and performativity**

Research on item songs as a concept also indicates the practice of a market relationship between bodies that perform in films to other visual realms where new parameters of entertainment are set. In a projected performance on various television shows hosted by item girls, a constant validation is sought, constructing the idea of being ‘creative’. The body engages in a complex dialogue with the urban visual experience, precariously specific to leisure, which is highly accessible and collectively experienced by the
masses. Fiddling with her own image on several occasions, the item girl’s body generously suspends the plethora of information and mimics each other. Several item girls have become regular interviewees, divulging in frenzies of various kinds, capturing the spectators’ imagination in their fabricated stories of being betrayed or exploited. Many interviews contain accusations directed at male authorities, more so, concretely either at their boyfriends or the patriarchy at large. Numerous scandals are inflated, exaggerated and proposed as news items on prime time news channels and the print media. Where on the one hand, other film actors seem to suppress their personal affairs, item girls indulge in media coverage, further clinging to the scandals for an unthinkable stretch of visual pieces. One interview would lead to another and at times, to the creation of a new concept of TV show or else a new song in the domain of music. Rakhi Sawant’s (a famous item girl) kiss scandal with the Punjabi pop singer Mikka Singh at a party was one such instance. The infamous scandal not only boosted the series of other interviews given by Rakhi on television news channels, where the clips of the kiss were repeatedly shown, and her conceited statements on the denial of being the singer’s girlfriend were sensationalized for many days. Later, Mikka Singh recorded a song too titled, ‘Kissa ek kiss ka’, based on the event. These erratic media-hype events provided an axis for the performance of the item girls. Given the contemporary media realities, entertainment is removed from the binaries of the old self and practices a symbiotic relationship to carve a market for each other. In the due process, the spectator does not register, but consumes. The locus of conflict is thus transported from the production of images to its consumption in the daily dose of spectatorship. ‘Popular texts must offer popular meanings and pleasure. Popular meanings are constructed out of the relevance between the text and everyday life’ (Fiske 1989, 101). In this context, the Indian spectator is engaged with these bodies ‘before’ and ‘after’ he sees them in the film, while he watches them on television. The ever-present floating images of the performative bodies become nodes of endorsement for spectators to read in the item songs.

The general trend of the item girls’ participation in the various media platforms that seem natural today can be seen as an appropriation of dancing bodies into the large canvas of revenue collecting opportunities that have been amplified by the technological advances in the media forms. Where the Hindi film industry was ushering into a new age of filmmaking, newer audio and video streams for film songs became available and the fluidity of music exploded the consumer’s imagination. Anna Morcom remarks about the sales drop in the music market in her essay, ‘Tapping the mass market’. She says, ‘[t]here has been a large drop in sales volumes, with the post-2000 market standing at around 30–40 percent of the pre-2000 market’ (Morcom 2008, 80). A report published by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce, states:
Technological advances and increased access to these newer technologies have made the distribution function a critical success factor and thus an important tool for the business of entertainment. (FICCI 2004, 58)

The report reveals the extent to which the digitised format has revolutionized traditional media forms like FM radio. In fact FM radio was compelled to play Hindi popular music to compensate for the fixed license fee, which over-exposed the consumption of music. The digitised format also allowed music to be cheaply recorded, copied and distributed. Online music consumption downloads onto handheld devices such as iPods, cell phones, blogs, fan-sites and many such shifts eventually transformed the consumer experience: behaviour decentralized, music consumption became multifaceted and thus began to override the old school media and enable new creative energies to search for forms. ‘Ringtones have also become an important income stream for music companies and film producers’ (Morcom 2008, 80). The survival of radio is an industrial outcome of flexible and sophisticated sound recording. The report further reveals:

New technologies have brought in new revenue streams and value to the business. It has done so by bringing in new modes of delivery and therefore changed the content of consumption. New technologies warrant a change in consumer perception too. The consumer must realize that as new technologies bring in additional values and services, they will have to how the willingness to pay for them. (FICCI 2004, 58)

Amidst the new consumer realities, item songs soon negotiated the newly-revealed spaces of the contemporary entertainment industry in India and today practitioners procure revenue out of it by mostly accentuating the role of the ‘item girls’. Like that of radio, Indian television too, witnessed an amplified consumption of music through the burgeoning of dance reality shows as an essential part of revenue streams; and item songs submerged into the glaring manifestations of hyper reality. One of its first kind: Nach baliye in 2005 featured tele-serial actors in a dancing competition. It was the beginning of reality shows. Thereafter, sequels followed and in 2008, Dancing Queen, a new concept of the dance show was telecast on the ZTV channel. The show presented competition between popular item girls such as Sanobar Kabir, Mink Brar, Sambhavna Seth (more popularly recognized as a participant of reality show Big Boss, the Indian-version of Big Brother), Shwetha Menon, Anita Hassanandani, Barkha Bisht, Ishita Arun, Meghna Naidu, etc. Publicized as a ‘bootylicious war’ in print media, it endorsed famous actors as the judges like Hema Malini and Jeetender. The video clips of these shows with the tags, ‘behind the scene’ and ‘dance tips’ were available on the internet. Such narratives conjure in and outside the film text, framing item songs with a bid to transpose the spectator to another realm of pleasure. The text, event, performer, role play and the spectator—all these constitute the act of performance that is extended beyond the grid.
Bodies in perspective!

The spatial expanse of media images in articulation seems to offer a kind of vocal subjectivity for a characteristic body in question. In the act of performing in these spaces, whether in the film or outside, the sexual splendour of item songs’ performers is disseminated in various ways—cleavage-exposing dresses, voluptuous bodies, sensuous remarks, inviting gestures, indecent scandals, and so on. These dissembling tools are like gizmos that carefully calibrate the body-image of the item girls. Yet, while this is the body-image into which the item girl invests her creative energy, to enunciate her performance, the questions becomes: what kind of body-image is this? Is it lewd, vulgar, bold or bawdy?

Popular pleasures must always be those of the oppressed, they must contain elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous, the offensive, the vulgar, and the resistant. Pleasures offered by ideological conformity are muted and hegemonic; they are not popular pleasures and work in opposition to them. (Fiske 1989, 101)

In this context, it is a matter of debate as to whether it is the bawdiness that empowers these inevitable performing bodies, resisting the more dominant performance forms (Nead 2010, 519). Excessive seepage into the media is a contradicted reality in their freedom of expression in opposition to the hierarchy of female leads, who have although successfully performed in the item songs on certain occasions, they have not achieved the cult status of item girls. Kareena Kapoor’s ‘Yeh mera dil, Fevicol Se’ (Dabangg2, 2012), Urmila Matondkar’s ‘Chamma Chamma’ (China Gate, 1998) Amisha Patel’s ‘Lazy Lamhe’ (Thoda Pyar Thoda Magic, 2008), Aishwarya Rai’s ‘Kajrare Kajrare’ (Bunty Aur Babli, 2005), Katrina Kaif’s ‘Sheila ki Jawani’ (Tees Maar Khan, 2010) are such examples. The actresses are contained in limited spaces of performance and do not invest in the precipitating media. A dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion, thus, offers the idea of playfulness in the construction of body-image, which is evident in other global techno-cultural forms.

Vulgarity or a parody

It is interesting to observe how in its prolonged and continuous conformity of certain tropes over the years, within the overlapping media frameworks, the representation of the bodies of ‘item girls’ seems to have acquired a dimension of parody. Initially these bodies that have constantly refused to submit to the coded norms of film and the television screen, and frequently came into view as ‘vulgar’ and a threat to Indian culture soon became the pretext for other discourses, and in turn creating a niche. With a relentless energy to produce images of self-contradiction, item girls tended to

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2 Sequel to the 2010 film Dabangg.
seize moments of ‘androgyne’ in the verbal discourses; while vaunting their swinging full busts and hips, they free themselves of gendered categories. The paradox of ‘lewd’ and ‘pious’ is staged within the parameters of TV shows. Rakhi ka Insaaf was one such reality TV show telecast on the channel NDTV Imagine where Rakhi Sawant, a very popular item dancer, hosts one of those so-called confrontational face-off shows between participants seeking justice. Precariously callous, cocky in her tone, she became known for her profanity while announcing her judicious statements. In fact, in one of the episodes, she accused a male participant of being ‘unmanly’ and ‘impotent’, which resulted in his suicide. The episode became a sensational rage in the Indian media. In December 2010, the TV serial was shut down by Information and Broadcasting Ministry of Indian government for Rakhi Sawant’s use of obscene language. So she moved on, appropriating the image of the ‘Indian bride’ by role playing a docile, decent ‘bahu’ in the mega reality show Rakhi ka syamvar (June, 2009), although she still teasingly exhibits her silicon breasts implants, (still taboo in Indian society). The show was set as a sincere search for a groom by Rakhi Sawant, where she actually gets engaged to the contestant-winner Elesh Parujanwala, a businessman; however, the engagement ended immediately after the show. After nearly three years, she recently admitted, in a sloppy manner, in an interview on the show All Famous (telecast on TV channel Zoom) that the engagement was a professional deed required for the show so it had to end after the show finished.

These self-conflicting roles weave a labyrinth and put the self-consuming female-body on display. The contradictory attributes of deceit/villainy and honesty/naietv exhibited by the vamps in the films of the 1960s and 1970s, are playfully enacted by item girls in the narratives of television.

The traditional relationship between the spectator and the objectified bodies in the popular media is unsettling and disrupted constantly by rendering the dichotomy of eroticism and righteousness. Mallika Shehrawat, a highly paid item girl, not only initiated the debates on the ideas of eroticism and vulgarity in popular Hindi cinema after she acted in sensuous lead roles in many popular films like Khwahish in 2003 and Murder in 2004, but also engaged in a series of verbal discourses on television about the exposure of nudity. She became peculiarly famous for her use of phrases such as ‘I have balls’ in her interviews telecast in news channels. The lingo was a new proposition on Indian television to claim the right to free speech by a woman celebrity. In each of her interviews she swears by her integrity with which she pledges to survive the ‘hypocrisy’ of the film Industry. Many interviews included the story of her underprivileged status and class and the conservatism she faced in her own family and the rift with her father because of her decisions to join the film industry. The latest show of hers Bachelorette (2013) was telecast on TV channel Life OK, where she was
to select her husband and unlike Rakhi Sawant’s show, she was projected in a new avatar of an elegant lady who is sophisticated about her relationships.

It is in the show of the ‘private-self’, playing through contradictions, which organizes the order of anxieties, attitudes, views and desires for the item girls’ spectators. Uttering opinions over flesh display, dictating to anchors about being bold and comments on the conservative censor board is a routine endowment of the item girls’ performance. These undulating contours of self-display are often readily available material for stand-up comedians on comedy shows like Great Indian Laughter Challenge and Laughter Show in the last few years, enunciating the verbal mocking of the item girls, mimicking their gestures. What is interesting to note is that they offered circulation and therefore normalcy to the body language and verbal discourse floating in a sieve of tabloids by item girls. These shows became an intense site of critique and perpetual discussion on the item girls. With such a plethora of continuous referential points, the item girls’ bodies become carriers in the informational landscape, and yet remain visible in the cinematic experience for their audience. With their extended selves, a parodic exhibition in several scandals, the cinematic space—which is their primal space of performance, is rendered in a renewed perspective with contours of display, now and then.

The idea of vulgarity and item girls, along with the body exposure, has been further renewed recently through the likes of Sunny Leone, a famous porn star and Poonam Pandey, a popular model known for scandals and her semi-pornographic home videos on YouTube, both of whom have entered Hindi cinema as ‘actresses’. On being asked about feeling threatened by these actresses, Rakhi Sawant has repeatedly maintained in the media that she cannot over expose herself like them and also confirms her role as a dancer who earns her way by maintaining dignity in its own right. Such confirmation further reiterates the role of an item girl who is not interested merely in exposing bare nudity but rather is being playful about it, which further reinstate the idea of travesty that I have tried to establish here.

The next section of the paper will argue about the patterns observed by item songs. These repetitive patterns rather necessitate the spectator to bear a psyche, a complex weaving together of anticipation and expectation/culmination in frame on which the spectator’s response is evoked. The expectations are nested; it is hope and anxiety instead of the suspense element that propels pleasure in such a case. A domain of predictability is offered to the spectator both in conceptual and empirical view of the visual experience.
**Bodies, space and camera: In performance**

The visual experience of what came to be known as ‘item songs’ as a peculiar form depends on it being seen through a lens of difference in which they are filmed, choreographed, edited and also written vis-à-vis other songs that existed in the films. The process of selection in the frame is governed by the negotiation between the film technicians’ know-how and the filmmakers perception, which is in itself historically contingent and drawn within the possibilities of generating a language for the filmic text and also is considerably regulated by the market dynamics. In this section of the paper, through analysis of a few commercially successful songs in the cinema and Indian pop music, I would argue that now as a clearly distinguishable form it has absorbed the visual nuances from the persistent changes in the framing of songs—both in the filmic and non-filmic domain in the mid 1990s.

In this connection, bodies of dancers in the ‘item songs’ cannot be separated from the theatrical spaces in which they are framed; spaces that are limiting, edged, and staged. These spaces have replaced the lost spaces of nightclubs of the 1960s and 1970s that I had referred to earlier in my paper and contributed to the viewing of stylized songs. ‘Theatricality’ and the ‘tempo’ created in these songs are rooted in the way the filmmakers wanted to represent the urban visual experience to their spectators, renewing the norms of the cinematic frame. Through the performance of the camera, the dancers rebel against a static temporal-spatial frame that was normative in mainstream films, thus referring to the titillations in the wake of the digitized world.

In a closer study, it becomes evident that various stylistic conventions in mainstream Hindi film songs were a direct transport from the Tamil films out of which a few were later dubbed into Hindi. Tamil Films such as *Indian* (1993) dubbed as *Hindustani* and *Jeans* (1998), directed by Shankar popularised the use of expensive technology for filming songs and also of digital sound, bringing in creative possibilities in sound editing. Mani Ratnam, in his films has evidently been reenergized theatricality in the spaces-studio and outdoors, and equally in his songs. As an interjection to the narrative, many of his films’ songs can be reported as not only the faltering steps to highly stylised songs but also to the items songs that arrived on the scene much later. It is the song called ‘Hamma Hamma’ choreographed by Prabhu Deva in *Bombay* (1994), a dubbed version of the Tamil film *Bumbai*, which I feel is a notable example in this regard.

Being positioned as a central figure of the gaze, Sonali Bendre, a lesser-known actress dances in the song, instead of the female lead, Manisha Koirala (almost like in later item songs where the heroine would not perform). Interestingly, voice is lent to a male figure, who also performs. The song is actually posed as one of the
two visual narratives played against each other to construct a meaningful context to the story. Yet the song is a distant and exclusive visual piece that has no actual connection to the narrative, like contemporary item songs. The songs contain several recognisable camera strategies infused with spatial and temporal grids that have become essential to item songs. Here, Sonali Bendre performs the functional act of desire being transposed from the grand narrative, i.e., Manisha Koirala to an alternate ‘body’, which is consistently referred to, mimicking physical reality in the phantom space, which is a large open space, choreographed in the sections, designated with a camera technique suited to the geometrically-placed dancers in performance. Parallel editing allows the frame to generate perception. The nuptial bed is contrasted with the exterior space of the performers; an intricate multidimensional perspective is evoked with panning and the shifting use of low and high angle shots. Sonali Bendre, emerges from the white drapes, a common linkage of chastity from which she breaks free and enters the frame like a model walking on the ramp. The camera follows her at a low angle resulting in desire, awe and excitement. For a few moments she is isolated from the space altogether, bringing a dramatic perspective. This is also one of the earliest songs in the popular Hindi cinema of the 1990s to use several random cuts, masking an action, to build a peculiar pace in the narrative. Evidently, the song can be seen as a seminal one in terms of using a plethora of camera movements that help establish the protocols of stylized songs.

A similar reading of another cult song—to locate such a leap in the visual excess in the history of songs and dances in popular Hindi cinema where ‘spectacle’ was given prominence—is given by Madangopal Singh, who in his study of the song, ‘Mehbooba Mehbooba’ of the film Sholay released in 1975, suggests:

In this sequence the camera gropes the dancer’s body and, by an extension, provides us with a point of view that was hitherto unavailable in popular Hindi cinema. (Nelmes 1996, 369)

In the film’s narrative, (which was unconventional in many ways), the song was a sincere proposition to the excessive relayed performance in the stylistic logic of the film. Sung and composed by R.D. Burman, the visual narrative broke many conventions of filming songs. While we observe the visual of the song, it follows that it is the synchronization of the movement of the performer, Helen’s body, in the frame and the movement of camera, which contributed to making the song ‘cinematic’. Editing patterns too amplified the aestheticism. Unlike the cabaret songs of the era, such as ‘Piya tu ab to aaja’ (Caravan, 1971) and ‘Aa jaane jaa’ (Inteqam, 1969) where the camera mostly panned to chase the movements of Helen, here it is predominantly individual movements of body parts, like hips that respond to the rhythm in the music, and are well-coordinated with the camera and editing. The male performer, Jalal Agha is a lent voice, and focused while she dances. The coded convention of the
vamp is taken away. This bifurcation between the male and the female dancer, visibly noticeable, divulge the spectator into an intricate visual liaison between the two images. Her face expressions are seldom in focus, whereas her hips are. The camera follows her, shifts to close-ups of the male dancer with the use of the camera zoom. There are frequent zooms to get the face close-ups of the male while only the body of the dancer is focused and further dramatization is created by keeping the camera at a low level at the height of dancer’s waist. Long and medium shots foreground the desiring body. Track shots suggest a sense of space and depth of action, i.e., by placing the performance in the context. To create contrast with the other high paced shots, there are few slow moments too. The immediate focus from one image to another is more at random than previous cabaret songs. An element of ‘rapidity’ is maintained by keeping the duration of shots short as well as accelerated cross-cutting, which provides the spectator with juxtapositions.

Selecting between ‘pan’ and ‘cut’ approximates perception in the visual narrative. With linked shots and sequences, including combinations of camera angles and montage as an editing pattern, the sense of high speed is maintained.

It is evident from these two cult songs in popular Hindi cinema how ‘rapidity’ is a desiring element and it renews itself with the changing cinematic techniques and conversely, with the variable perception-image drawn in the visual culture of a given society. The desire to bring pace in the frame had already begun in Indian cinema in 1990s; however, it was heavily sought in the dance moves themselves. The dance performed by Madhuri Dixit, (a famous actress and trained dancer) in the cult song ‘Choli ke peeche’ (Khalnayak, 1993) and Prabhu Deva (a choreographer famously known as India’s Michael Jackson) in ‘Urvasi urvasi, take it easy policy’ (Humse he Muqabla, 1995) are notable examples. The latter song brought a different spatial context with the geometrics of space and tilted camera angles, increasing drama in the mise-en-scène. The song marked a difference with its oblique spatial planes constructed within various city architectures, providing plural perspectives on metro space vis-à-vis the earlier songs’ picturisation, where flat geographical orientation was predominant. Many other dubbed versions of Tamil cinema, Roja (1992), Kadhalan (1994), Indian (1996) received huge commercial success and presented the spectacular song and dance sequences to the Hindi cinema audience. The urban spaces reintroduced in these songs, with oblique spatial planes, provided perspectival changes in the frame. With a quantitative increase in shots along with the performance provided stylistic codes in the visual narrative. Two songs, ‘Sundra Sundra’ and ‘Shehar ki ladki’ (Rakshak, 1996) exploited the geographies of the youth culture. Drawing from images of fashion photography, pillars and columns once again appeared, to renew perspectives in the frame. Ranjini Mazumdar, reads these two
songs in the context of the ‘new temporal logic of globalisation’. She says that the ‘camera uses several foregrounding techniques’ along with ‘barbed wires, gates and steps to add to the staging quality of the sequence’.

With a reading of these songs, it appears that they provided futuristic creative possibilities in the making of stylized songs. Interestingly, the flagpole and the pole that became a bystander of statement in these two songs, reappears at the turn of the millennium in the item song, ‘Maahi ve’ (*Kaante*, 2002) as a metaphor of sexual freedom. In the literal sense, the song relocates the night clubs of 1970s to the erotic space of pole dancing, a Eurocentric space of nudity and appropriates it to the context of Hindi cinema. The film ‘Kaante’ (Hindi version of Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*) shot in Los Angeles, with stylised cinematography in the digital format, introduced several other nominations in expression (Rai 2009, 61). Editing appeared here as a notable example of the shift in the frame. Audio and image editing changed the meaning of an image in Hindi cinema that could bring spectacle and performance in perspective. ‘Repetition’ and ‘alteration’ of images and the strategic filming of Malaika Aroras’ performance, (the item girl in the song), regularly provide multiple perspectives along with the fade-ins and fade-outs and the superimposed images that define transition in time and space. What would be conventionally employed in the early cinema as a temporal marker reappears here with renewed purpose. ‘Who’ is looking and ‘what’ is being looked at is thoroughly established through multiple cameras. Low angles are preferred, maintaining the ramp-like walk. Diagonal settings are borrowed from plastic modelling. Angles thus cover the front and side and the top and bottom—where the performer stands poignant. A shift from high-key lighting to low-key is another element that reconfigures the planes of composition. A similar rendering was provided in another song, ‘Ishq samander’ in the same film. Soon several songs in Hindi cinema followed the similar pattern of elements in the filming of the songs, which were peculiarly-suited to the genre of the film.

The element of plastic space in the stage setting renewed the mise-en-scéne of the film songs and gradually became a coded function of stylisation and later, that of the ‘item songs’. An extremely popular song performed by Madhuri Dixit, called ‘Ke sera sera’ (*Pukaar*, 2000) is a considerable example. Shohini Ghosh in her famous article on Madhuri Dixit, ‘The importance of being Madhuri’, says that ‘the choreography of the song ‘Ke Sera Sera’ ushers in an androgynous and plastic style that has so far not been performed by any woman in Bombay’ (Ghosh 2000, 167).

The statement of Shohini Ghosh is true for Bollywood films, but it certainly doesn’t apply to the Indian pop music that had already evolved new stylistic conventions. The visual ascendancy with the advent of cable television in India not only increased the spectatorship of western pop, but also accounted for the production of domestic pop
music and the increase in production of remix videos produced by various DJs in the late 1990s. At least four of the top 10 numbers on the music charts in 2003 were remixes’ (FICCI 2004, 74). The music videos frivolously displayed the ‘plastic setting’ rendering a playful space to the female gaze and a voyeuristic space over experimental camera angles. The original songs of the popular Hindi cinema that contained merely connotations of sexual imagery in their lyrics were now given materiality via the global visual articulations. This transition in the content and the form of Indian pop music reveals the consumer realities observed in the post-liberalisation era in India. For instance a romantic duet song called ‘Tu tu he wohee, dil ne jise apna kaha’ (Yeh Wada Raha, 1982) is implicated in a whole new regime of sexual opulence by setting the female-body in suggestive paid phone sex in its remix video, done by DJ Aqeel. The song is picturised in the plastic Barbie-like, pink-collared space, which is supposedly a call centre where three different women pick their customers’ calls and sell dreams of love. The rise in ‘call centres’ in the 1990s provided context to the song. Coquettish, the Barbie pinks to sexier dresses, the tales of seduction, begin to be part of such videos. MTV and other music channels of Indian television flooded the airwaves with such videos. Initially viewed as extremely provocative, these commercially successful videos introduced stage space and the performance of the female dancer in a new perspective for the Indian spectator. Another remix video of song ‘Sajna he mujhe, sajna ke liye’ (Saudagar, 1973), which was performed as a housewife dressing up while waiting for her husband is re-set in the ‘green room’ of a fashion show, corroborated the changing sensibilities of teen culture. The video of ‘Kaliyon ka chaman’ (Jyoti, 1983) used tools for the filming of the remix video that was international in character. The video, had a similar closed space with a central performer, with no dramatic situation like the earlier song, yet shot in professional zest. These videos flashed images of sexual freedom on the old media like television in a most popular and cinematic way. The remix video of song such as ‘Kaanta laga’ (Samadhi, 1972), celebrated verbal punning and extended it in the visual imagery. A nude male picture on the magazine cover that appears to be purposely focused by the camera, evoked a new sensibility of the female gaze vis-à-vis the male body, disrupting the conventional gaze for the female body. Most of these videos kept the lyrics of the songs intact and played with the visual potential to produce iconic, indexical and symbolic meanings, symptomatic of the emerging city cultures in India. Nilanjana Bhattacharjya explains the commercial and critical success of the song. Released in February, 2003 the album had sold more than two million units by December of that year. Although the video received awards such as Channel V, the Zee Music Awards, the Screen Videocon Awards, The MTV Awards and the Bollywood Music Awards, it angered many Indian institutions including members of Vishva Hindu Parishad and BJP (Bhattacharjya, Mehta 2008, 114).
On the one hand, the rise of music video remixes captured the mediating images of the evolving subcultures in urban reality for a few years: experimental in language, interacting with the media and fashion industries globally, and placing itself in the multimedia context undreamt of in Hindi songs otherwise. Yet it was realised soon enough by the music industry that these songs have very short shelf life. However, the innovative styles of filming the songs and breaking taboos of sexuality had already become popular among the Indian audience. The desire to reframe similar events of visual excess in the film easily seeped into the making of stylized songs in cinema. A series of departures from the conventional definition of songs appeared on the screen. The item song, ‘Dhoom macha le’ (Dhoom, 2004) featuring Tata Young, the Hong Kong singer was placed at the end of the film and was extensively used in the promotion of the film. This remix version of the film’s title song was a testimony to the historic development of ‘item songs’ where highly stylized filmic techniques amplified the commercial success of the film. This song also came to acquire another term—the ‘promotional song’ as a branch of the item song, which is designed especially to promote the film’s launch.

Montage vs mise-en-scène

In the given choice of technological advancements in both production and post-production arenas where filming with handy cameras and digital editing exist at the same time, the visual lexis of the item songs seems to have made its choice in the montage.

Montage is above all an integral part of mise-en-scène. Only at peril can [one] be separated from the other ... what one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time ... ‘cutting on a look is almost the definition of montage’. (Monaco 1977, 411)

In this connection, it is a ‘bricolage’ of post-production innovations, the rigorously constructed visual lexis of later item songs (post 2000). The endless choice of tools in the editing software has made it easy to play with the images. The random use of editing techniques with a revised intent, such as ‘wipes’ in its variables—flips, pushovers etc.—appeared in the editing of these item songs, almost like a nostalgic resonance to the black and white era in a renewed fashion. The recurrence of the use of editing tools superseded the basic and conventional syntax of cinematography and thus became a ‘statement’.

One such example is ‘Babuji zara dheere chalo’ (Dum, 2003). The sequence itself is bifurcated into two patterns—a nautanki and a retro-pub, both of which are separate, essential situations. The image distortion effect in the song, achieved by playing with the aspect ratio, was the credo of this song. Yana Gupta’s item girl dance was framed with low angles, using ‘tilts’ and ‘blurs’ and shifts in the camera axis to
create a retro effect along with the stage set up and the disco lights in the song. An element of the frequently changing camera axis was later reiterated and very popular in Rakhi Sawant’s item song, ‘Dekhta he too kya’ (Krazzy 4, 2008). Although in this song, the post-production elements are kept lower and it is above all the swinging-effect’s capturing of the dancer’s body movement, achieved through the changing of the axis frequently from horizontal to vertical and vice versa along with the rhythm in music.

The conflict between the choice of a ‘pan’ from a ‘cut’ is clearly reflected in the filming of item songs vis-à-vis other experimental songs in the Hindi films that have opted to exploit light weight cameras in reinforcing ‘long takes’ to bring the notion of spectacle to another level. Whereas item songs continue to confirm to the style of filming by rejecting ‘long takes’ or ‘panning’ for a longer duration and to rely heavily on brief shots and editing to cut sequences into smaller units thus reiterating the ‘style’ of item song filming. Songs ‘Chali hawaeyein’ (Mein hoon na, 2004) and ‘Ae chhori’ (Cash, 2007), strikingly capture the space of performance, where the use of the ‘long take’ is clearly visible in the film’s style. While integrity of space is maintained in the former song, the division of song into two episodes—to sustain the long take—is well-suited to the performance of dancers. The first sequence positions the female lead Amrita Rao in the frame, which is kept open for her to move around where she could shift off-screen and return back with ease. The camera follows her for a while until she goes off-screen and later focuses as she her returns. The song experiments with the stage space providing a literal and extremely technical sense to the ‘long take’. Throughout the song, the subject is shifted—a fine example of the displacement of the subject in the frame. Four performers, synchronise their body movements with the space available to them in the course of camera following them throughout the duration of the song. In the filming of these two songs, digital editing as the primal domain of creativity in the visual medium is reduced. It is clearly evident that the ‘long take’ is equally appealing to the choreographer if there is not any major technical impossibility to implement it, yet it is the ‘cut’ that constructs the discourse of popularity in the visual of item songs.

The ideological choice of the ‘cut’ continues to be implemented at present in the making of an item song. Numerous recent item songs would conform to the protocols. An extremely popular item song, ‘Jalebi bai’ (Double Dhamaal, 2011) performed by Mallika Shehrawat is a recent example. In addition, each item song attempts to use a new editing tool to provide titillation. For instance, this song contained a consistent flickering effect of lights in the video set in the stage space of a retro bar. The excessive use of ‘cuts’ has also raised scepticism at times at the dancing capabilities of the performers. Indeed, some item songs have extensive use of ‘cuts;’
however, others maintain a shift between the completion of longer duration dance moves. I find ‘Munni badnaam hui’ (*Dabangg*, 2012), a hugely successful item song an exemplified instance. In the song, the performer, Malliaka Arora’s dance moves are given prominence, with a slighter longer duration to register the completion of a single move for the spectator before it cuts to another visible dance move. Several item songs extended their role in the comic genre in the subversive act of going overboard with their visual effects—‘Tinku jiya’ (*Yamala, Pagla, Deewana*, 2011), ‘Dil De do dil ka achar dialogi’ (*Bin Bulaye baraati*, 2011)—filmed for the comic genre, became extremely playful, synchronizing camera angles and editing tools, extending the comic flavour and the sexual overtones in the song. For instance, the former song’s lyrics and thereby, dance moves with erratic camera angles are more like an addition to the buffoonery in the film. The latter song consists of an electrifying effect in editing, strategically synchronized with dance moves, when in the lyrics in the song; the male performer compares her touch to be as vivacious as a sprig of electric wire.

The process of ordering and quantifying such stylistic conventions in item songs has reconfigured the traditional and dominant space of representation of the songs popular in Hindi cinema. The intrusive character of this form arises from the point of resistance, to intervene in the conventional discourse of representation, through a vocabulary, to contest from within the text and thus creating an autonomous space for itself.

**Conclusion**

The paper argued that the varied possibilities of spectacle, which never existed in connection to Indian spectators through Hindi film songs, has been evoked in the practice of watching item songs. And the overwhelming presence of item songs is unquestionably accepted as an integral part of marketing in Bollywood and has gained credibility as a cinematic experience. I have attempted to indicate the emergence of a new form in these songs, which allude to the capitalistic trajectories in the growing consumerism in India. In the recent rise of debates on ethics and values, especially in Indian academic forums, the demonic aspect of the media is frequently contemplated upon and item songs have predominantly become an important part of all such discourses through the sexual sumptuousness in the lyrics and the videos. Nevertheless, one would argue that in understanding the evolution of these categorical songs, a conceptual and stylistic intervention of a distinct kind in the filmic world is perceived. In the politics of culture, it represents a potent ground for the exploration of contemporary sub-cultures—not only those of the metropolitan but also of small towns in India where smaller budget films and the regional versions of original film songs with bawdy lyrics have long existed in the parallel small music industries in India.
In the excessive accessibility to the mass media, it has evidently become more crucial to question the consumption of relayed images and investigate the extent to which they impact our beliefs, ideologies and aspirations. We are consistently disturbed by the question, if what appears to be more propelling and appeasing as a visual piece, can it be perceived as ‘cinema?’ In the paper, I have tried to observe the impending categories of gender and filmic practices, which the form and nature of item songs recuperate in newer ways. The brief instances from film texts and media practices present a fair view of an analytical approach in the spatial-temporal frames, wherein item songs seek the production of meanings. Nevertheless, in my understanding, the discourse of ‘item songs’ suffers from the radical positioning it could have realised, more so, in its lyrics to achieve an act of subversion. The problems of experimenting with the use of newer motifs and themes in the lyrics enunciate the disbelief of the probability of form. Having established the structures of promoting and executing protocols of the body-image and style, there is a further scope of the opening avenues of radical thought and process that can easily seep into the very form. The reason to believe so comes from the pragmatic use of the songs by a few contemporary filmmakers in their films who are well-known for stretching experimentation in their films. I will end my argument with the instance from one of such filmmaker, Anurag Kashyaps’ film Gulal (2009), where the song ‘Rana ji’ was technically an intrinsic part of the plot but captured the essence of the ‘item songs’ by following few elements of the existing norms of the ‘item song’. It is the lyrics of the song that captures the spectator’s attention with the visual. The song is filled with sexual innuendos, yet carries motifs of contemporary socio-political reality: national as well as international: 9/11 terrorist attack on U.S. twin towers, American imperialism, consumerism, the rise of multinational companies in India, and finally the breakdown of democracy. Witty, colloquial and rhythmic—the song is a sheer poetry in writing, which truly exploits the cinematic space of an item song.

References


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A great number of books on contemporary China, written by leading Chinese and Western specialists, are published every year around the world, meeting the demands of the recent ‘boom’ of Contemporary China studies. However, this book without a doubt is an outstanding and very timely book among the current writing on Post-Maoist China. At least four features makes this book distinguishable: 1) its peculiar disciplinary approach (medical anthropology and cultural psychiatry), 2) subtle subject matters (the hidden spheres of the personal, emotional, moral life and social practice), 3) the multiplicity of the perspectives in discussing the ‘remaking of the moral person’ (from the general landscape of the transformation and change of traditional morality and perceptions of moral crisis, to the perspective of sexual desire, the practice of voluntary blood donation, urban spatial hierarchy and gentrification, mental and emotional diseases, family politics and social stigmatization—the perspective of ‘non-persons’), 4) the main focus of the researchers on the ‘self’ in post-Maoist China as ‘the divided self’ (between the past and present, public and private, moral and immoral) rather than a single or uniform entity. As it is remarked in the Introduction, in most anthropologic and sinologist writings, the ‘self’ is usually presented and conventionally discussed as changing from the ‘collective self’ to the ‘individual self’, or from ‘ascetic’ self to the ‘enterprising self’, ‘desiring self’ (p. 3–4). Such treatment of selfhood ‘is quite out of step with depth psychology, psychodynamic psychiatry, and a vast terrain of modernist literature and the arts that present the self as torn between self-interest and collective good, struggling over desire and responsibility, negotiating contradictory emotions, shifting attention between things in and out of awareness, and juxtaposing imagination and practical action’ (p. 5).

This is what has been happening in recent years in the deep spheres of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, in their daily emotional and moral life, or in what the authors of this book call a Deep China. However, it is often silenced or obstructed by more popular studies of the changing market, the economy, and social and government policies. Such studies, which are dominant in the vast sea of literature on contemporary China.
China, rather distort the image of the real China, since they constitute ‘the surface of a changing China’ (p. 2–3). This observation provokes the collective aim of the contributors of this book, a group of social anthropologists and psychiatrists, to take ‘a closer look at one facet of this deep China: the remaking of the person in China’s changing emotional and moral context since the 1980s’ (p. 3), in order to deepen the superficial, simplified and one-sided knowledge of contemporary China and the Chinese, and to gain ‘a better understanding of the Chinese self and what it implies for getting at the new China’ (p. 10).

The problems of the ‘divided self’ and dual morality are discussed extensively in the opening article on the changing moral landscape in Post-Maoist China, written by Yunxiang Yan, who is one of the leading specialists in social relationships and the problems of the individual in 20th century China. He describes that the most important trajectory in the change of the individuals’ inner life is ‘a shift away from an authoritarian, collective ethics of responsibilities and self-sacrifice towards a new, optional, and individualistic ethics of rights and self-development’; accompanied by the rise of a new ethical discourse that favours the individual (p. 40). However, he suggests viewing this process not as a mere replacement of the old morality by a new one, but rather as a coexistence of both. Such coexistence results in the contradiction and a ‘gap between the Communist ethical discourse and the people’s actual moral practices’ (p. 42), various sorts of immoral behaviours, confusion of different values and behavioural norms, and conflicts in moral practice, which are often called in a heated public debates simply as moral ‘crisis’ or ‘vacuum’.

The article makes an important contribution by emphasizing a methodological question about the perception of this moral crisis, or the evaluative perspectives. As Yunxiang Yan remarks, ‘the judgment on each specific change brought about by this moral shift to a great extent depends on the perspectives of different individuals: where some see moral decline and crisis, others may find the rise of a new ethics’ (p. 47–8). He suggests to avoid the common mistake in any generalization about those changes and instead, to take into account the specifics of the temporal, spatial and social contexts, such as the generation, gender and other ‘parameters’ of those involved in the discussion. He also suggests to keep in mind one universal tendency in the debates on contemporary morality, found in China as well as elsewhere—the idealization of the past, which is usually used by the elder generation ‘to critique unsatisfying aspects of the present’ (p. 49). The author presents many examples of conflicting trends in moral practices, which stem out of the coexistence of traditional and new (‘individualistic’) moral arguments, thus coming to the conclusion that ‘moral changes in the post-Mao era are certainly not unidirectional or one dimensional’ (p. 54). In his opinion, the individuals today ‘apply different moral logics that seem to be the most appropriate to
a given case in a particular time’ (p. 54). For example, they try to justify the pursuit of their self-interests and particular behaviour, which can coexist paradoxically with such new trends as philanthropic activities and compassion toward strangers. This is why it is often difficult to make the clear distinctions between individualistic and altruistic behaviour of some Chinese youth, or to view its morality in a simplified and generalized way.

Those methodological insights seem very valuable for the studies of contemporary China and a deeper understanding of its society. They are further extended and illustrated by another contributor to this book, Wu Fei, in his chapter ‘Suicide, a Modern Problem in China’. Wu Fei discusses the main traditional and some contemporary types (or reasons) for suicide in post-Maoist China and their causes, such as conjugal conflicts, filial piety, the relationships of in-laws, mental disorder, parental biases, sexual or psychological problems, poverty and serious disease. As he demonstrates by his insightful analysis, one of the traditional and very common types of suicide—filial piety—today often results not from the lack of filial piety of children, but rather from the different understanding of the meaning of filial piety between two generations, parents and their children, or elders and the younger generation, as well as from misunderstood expectations of the parents by their children (in the cases when the parent commits suicide). Wu Fei considers such suicides of parents or parents-in-law, resulting from their dissatisfaction with the respect and care received from their children or daughters-in-law, not only ‘a tragedy of generational change’ (p. 221), but also the ‘consequences of incomplete modernity’ (p. 224).

What he calls ‘incomplete modernity’ is the ‘divided’ condition of the family, as constituting ‘neither traditional nor modern, but something unstably-in-between’ (p. 224). It is the inability of traditional morality to rebuild itself in a modern world, when, for example, the new freedom to love, to express or fulfil one’s individual interests is ‘not accompanied by a parallel transformation in family relations that represents the full modernization of the family as is seen in Western societies’ (p. 220). However, the author doesn’t detail how he understands such transformation, or whether in its cultural-historical context, it is meaningful and possible for Chinese society. He just remarks in general terms, that ‘[C]hina has become quite modernized; on the other hand, Chinese modernization is accompanied by profound moral conflicts and emotional struggles, which make people in modern China unable to feel at home or content. The more modernized China is—in technological, institutional, and economic ways—the sharper such conflicts become. In order to make modern Chinese civilization more comfortable and less conflicted, China needs to complete the modernization at the level of relationships, subjectivity, and moral experience’ (p. 215).
A second important argument in this chapter is that the most important cause of suicide in contemporary China is family politics. It is related closely to the moral politics (the issues of respect and responsibility) as well as emotional life (attachment, expectations and disillusions), and results from trivial things. Those trivial things (family conflicts and misunderstandings) as the causes of suicide actually constitute the deep and serious issues of individual emotional experience and social relationships in modern China, revealing its changes from the most subtle, daily, and at the same time dramatic perspective. The article from its peculiar perspective of family politics contributes to the main argument of the book about the cardinal importance of the daily and intimate matters of individual life for the understanding of contemporary China.

Suicide in post-Maoist China is often related to depression, especially as viewed by psychologists and psychotherapists. However, their relation, as Sing Lee shows in his revealing article, ‘Depression. Coming of Age in China’, was that in the 20th century, depression in China is far more complicated than in the United States and other Western countries. He starts his investigation from a paradox, which I would reformulate as a question for the investigation: why is it that in China until the early 1990s, depression was 35 times less common than in the United States (p. 177)? (keeping in mind the fact, that the historical and social climate in the United States was far less dramatic than in China at this time). And why is this outburst of depression (or the proliferation of its diagnosis) in China found only in the post-Maoist period (which because of successful economic reforms and the improvement of material life brought evidently ‘brighter’ experiences and psychological moods, such as happiness, pleasure, the satisfaction of individual desires and interests)? The answers could be found in at least three changes discussed in the article: first, the change of the party-state’s (or officially accepted) view of emotions; namely, the move from their suppression and control in the Maoist era to their unleashing or ‘liberalization’ in the post-Maoist era; second, the move from the negation of individual life, of problems and interests in Maoist era to their valuation in post-Maoist China; and third, the transformation of the officially regulated diagnosis of mental disease from the generic term of ‘neurasthenia’ (shenjing shuairuo) to the Western term of ‘depression’.

However, the spread of depression in China, as Lee shows, lies not only in the dramatic reconfiguration of the material and emotional experience—facilitated by Maoist party-state’s politics, economic and social changes. It is no less influenced by the change of the medical ethics of psychiatry and psychology, or the inner division of the doctors between their professional duties (to make a right diagnosis of the disease and to treat the patient accordingly) and material—economic interests (to gain as much material profit from the treatment as possible). It is exactly here, where the answer lies to the first question or solution to the paradox mentioned above: the transformation
of nonmedical problems into a disease, resulting into the ‘commercialization of depression’ (p. 192), formed through the medicalisation of traumas, moral and social problems, and suicide. Thus, besides increased emotional self-expression, the openness to express problems of the inner individual life, and the division of subjectivity, an equally important reason for the ‘booming’ of depression in contemporary China is the growing interest of mental health clinicians, psychiatric research, and especially pharmaceutical companies to gain a profit from this disease. Although, as Lee shows, this is a part of the global process, or maybe exactly because of this fact, he indirectly suggests to view any statistics of depression in China and especially the statement, that ‘China is one of the most depressed countries in the world today’, with great suspicion. The material interests of new markets and powers in fact distort considerably the real picture of the mental condition of the Chinese people. This article, with such warnings, seems very valuable for a better understanding of the problems concerning mental health as well as its context in contemporary China.

The division of the ‘self’ between self-interest and the concern for others among common Chinese people is evident in another sphere; namely, blood donation, which is discussed by Jing Jun in his chapter ‘From Commodity of Death to Gift of Life’. The author views this division of the self from the perspective of giving blood versus selling blood, trying to explain, why, as he remarks, ‘until 1998, China relied on compulsory and paid blood supplies’ (p. 99). Jing Jun sees the main reasons this practice of paid blood dominates are due to the traditional Chinese views of the human body as well as the disastrous policy decisions and morality of China’s government authorities, which are extensively discussed in the article. The change of such politics and public moral practice from the pursuit of individual financial gain to one of social compassion and volunteerism began only after the AIDS outbreak in central China—the most dramatic result of the blood market, which, according to the author, transformed human blood from a potential gift of life to a commodity of death. Jing Jun believes that China has many possibilities to rely on voluntary donations of blood and through them to perform acts of altruism, which challenges traditional and Maoist public and individual morality. However, this new moral practice of social compassion and volunteerism has to meet its own challenges, the individualistic and highly competitive market economy, which deepens the division of the moral self in Post-Maoist China.

The AIDS problem in contemporary China involves not only the issues of self-interested morality and death, but also issues of social stigma, which help to gain a particular and more intimate view of individuals and their social networks in contemporary China. This issue is addressed in two articles, although from different perspectives. The first: ‘Place Attachment, Communal Memory, and the Moral
Underpinnings of Gentrification in Post-reform Shanghai’ by Pan Tianshu. He accounts for the process of self-making and moral hierarchy from the perspective of locality-based identity—in this case, the renewed emphasis on the opposition between the upper (International Settlement) and lower (urban slums) quarters in Shanghai’s ongoing transformation of its geographical and social spaces. In his article, based on the ethnographic research and field observations of different urban communities, the author argues that such binary opposition ‘has furthered a pre-existing discourse on how cultural and moral personhoods can be identified, differentiated, and judged on the basis of spatial hierarchy’, or the segregation of moral worlds, which correspond to ‘different and unequal kinds of morality and citizenship’ and help to articulate one’s socioeconomic position and moral status in society (p. 156–7). The most valuable contribution from this chapter to the general topics and problems of the book is the author’s argument that the persistence of such a dichotomy and the moral and social stigma attached to a particular locality by local governments coexist with the recent projects to build a ‘civilized community’ and cosmopolitan citizenship in post-reform Shanghai, which again furthers the division between local and global self-awareness.

However, far more dramatic is the social stigma of persons with AIDS and mental illness, which is discussed by Guo Jinhua and Arthur Kleinman in their chapter ‘Stigma: HIV/AIDS, Mental Illness, and China’s Nonpersons’. The authors claim that due to the traditional importance of social networks and collectivistic (family oriented) modes of social life with a strong moral reasoning of social obligations, such stigmatized persons acquire the status of ‘non-persons’, thus involving the stigmatization of the persons who are connected with a person who bears a stigma. They come to the conclusion that ‘stigma is neither a problem of the stigmatized nor a problem of stigmatisers; instead, it is a problem of the whole of society’. In their words, ‘stigma shows us what really matters in Chinese society today is security’—the individual as well as societal (p. 257). This is why Guo and Kleinman view the rise of individualistic values and morality as ‘a double-edged sword’ in the solution of its problem, thus complicating or dividing the moral behaviour of a person as well.

On the other hand, one of the main sources of HIV/AIDS in China is considered to be sexual deviance, which accordingly could be traced to so-called ‘sexual revolution’. This topic is discussed by Everett Yuehong Zhang in his chapter ‘China’s Sexual revolution’, viewing the change in sexuality as one of the most significant changes in Post-Maoist China. The author reveals the emergence of a new experiential awareness of subjective sexual identity and morality, detecting it from a number of examples, such as the acceptance of self-interested pursuits and the expression of personal desires in literature and other media, the emergence of the ‘epidemic of male impotence’ with its various treatments, women’s heightened awareness of their sexual
desires and pleasures, the increasing tolerance of homosexuality, the rise of the sex industry, the increase in sexual intimacy in dating, conjugal love and premarital sex, the re-emergence of romantic love and the emergence of ‘sexual love’ (xing’ai) as an unintended consequence of the one child policy, the separation of sexual pleasure from reproduction, the emergence of a new subjectivities, and finally, the search of a proper place for Chinese sexuality in the transnational scholarly field. However, the author avoids giving a clear answer to his main question, related to the main topics of the book, namely, ‘whether or not the increasing importance and prominence of sexual life in post-Mao China contributed to the well-being and happiness of the Chinese people’ (p. 108). He rather suggests to us not to ‘underestimate the significance of justifying sexual desire on its own terms, not the freedom gained from delinking sexual desire from reproduction’ and thus to view its mapping and practice as uneven (p. 145), since the pursuit of sexual pleasure often coexists in China, as elsewhere in the world, with sexual abuse, violence against sex workers and an overwhelming pressure on sexual minorities, as well as a new form of ‘a regime of sexual health’ and the state’s power in the form of the one-child policy.

In conclusion, Deep China is not a simple collection of individual articles, but rather a result of the fruitful collaboration of all its contributors. Every article extends from a different perspective and leads the topic and discussion to another direction, to another particular article in this volume, and all articles are interconnected in one way or another. Moreover, all the contributors were unified in their investigation by the idea about the ‘emergence of a new and original Chinese bourgeois culture that centres itself on the outer and interior furnishings of a new Chinese self’, which, as they believe, forms ‘one of the great historical pivots of Chinese society’ (p. 30). What seems the most important and most valuable insight of this book is the claim that ‘Chinese lifestyles and values are more diverse and pluralistic than the state often articulates’ (p. 25). As Arthur Kleinman shows in his concluding chapter ‘Quest for Meaning’, all life practices and experiences in post-Maoist China are concentrated on the quest for happiness, which for the Chinese forms the core of the meaning of their life—moral, emotional, physical, individual as well as communal. This quest, as a common narrative and a story of ordinary Chinese, helps us to better understand not only the general acceptance of the current political reality, but also the rethinking of selfishness, justice, respect, the women’s place in society, together with the growth of altruistic ideas and global philanthropic practices, or ‘the quest to do good in the world’ (p. 282).

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