THE “OTHER” PARALLEL CINEMA: SONG AND DANCE IN INDIAN CINEMA

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The classification of Indian cinema into Art/Parallel cinema is based on a significant hierarchical distinction which presupposes that judgment about Art films requires an understanding of the western cinematic language, especially its realist filmic grammar, and its shying away from "degraded" techniques of commercial cinema, like song and dance. Thus the "modern" elite class of the urban audience becomes the target of parallel films — even though parallel films have historically been social issue and minority issue films — while commercial cinema and its "implied viewers" are relegated to an antediluvian frame (Gehlawat 55). This theoretical classification of Indian cinema restores an elitist and Eurocentric bias in film history, which defeats decolonial, postcolonial, and subalternist vision of Indian cinema, and leads to a segregation and othering of audiences. To address and correct the complication posed by the limiting dichotomies of art/commercial cinema, I propose a reclassification of Indian films into artivist and commercial films based on their socio political activist potential or commercial intent, rather than genre and style. Implicit in the term artivist film is the potential for transforming not just the hierarchical relations that exist between high and low art, urban and rural classes, or elite and subaltern communities, but an expansion of the role of cinema in India. Furthermore, foregrounding here before neglected artivist film songs that reemphasize local voices and subject matters can destabilize the history of Bollywood cinema that reserves films as the de facto space of dominant class and castes. Reading film songs, in the heavily regulated cinema space of India, as voices from below is especially important at a time when the Hindutva movement

has strengthened its efforts to establish Hinduism as the true locus of national identity by ideologically and physically targeting Muslims, Christians, Dalits and women.

DEDICATION

This is for you, Ishaan.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The classification of Indian cinema into Art/Parallel or commercial/Bollywood cinema is based on a significant hierarchical distinction which presupposes that judgment about any Art film requires a good understanding of the western cinematic form and language, especially its realist filmic grammar, and its shying away from degraded techniques of commercial cinema, like song and dance. Thus the "modern" elite class of the urban audience becomes the target of parallel films — even though parallel films have historically been social issue and minority issue films — while commercial cinema and its "implied viewers" are relegated to an antediluvian frame (Gehlawat 55). This theoretical classification of Indian cinema restores an elitist and Eurocentric bias in film history, which defeats decolonial, postcolonial, and subalternist vision of Indian cinema, and leads to a segregation and othering of audiences. Thus, Indian cinema as an ideological apparatus seems to reproduce the axes of difference and power in our society and raises serious questions about location, class, caste, and gender, questions that can perhaps only be answered through a more rigorous interrogation of these arbitrary categories of cinema.

To address the complication posed by the limiting dichotomies of art/commercial cinema, I develop and deploy the term *artivist films* to reference Indian films that do not fit the commercial category and should not be categorized as art films because they try to subvert Eurocentric definitions of cinema, and chart out an identity of their own. I propose reclassifying Indian films, especially films that eschew hegemonic narratives, hegemonic Eurocentric models of realism, and the hegemony of image over voice in film grammar, as

artivist films based on their sociopolitical activist potential rather than style and genre. Categorizing films by their political intentions can also help to spot differences in films over time, which can testify to the social and political changes that appear across regimes. By highlighting important questions about identity and citizenship, inclusion and exclusion, personal and community conflicts and struggles, and local/global relationships of characters and groups through nonconventional narrative mediums, artivist films can disrupt the coherence of cultural/self identity in the exclusionary politics of the post-colonial nation state.

Artivist film is by no means an established or homogeneous category since it can include a variety of films in different languages representing disparate political struggles. Artivist films can have a wide array of characteristics, but they are united by certain decolonial moments sustained by a new and deviant subjectivity that uncovers and critiques the ideological defects of the dominant political regime. All artivist films try to destabilize the West or Europe as established signifiers in the field of film scholarship. This can widen the field's focus to be more inclusive of and responsive to the diverse and dynamic film cultures and practices of the world. If mainstream movies are considered homogenous, then artivist films are marked by their political differences and struggles. The activism in artivist films emerges from the displacement of characters along the lines of class, caste, gender, religion, nationality and sexuality. Artivist films defy both social formations and cinematic practices by transgressing the limiting and generic boundaries of hegemonic narrative practices and undermining cinematic realism. Artivist films use indigenous narrative techniques, disrupt homogeneous secular historical linear time and are

marked by a sense of ambiguous time and place. For example, they use elements like supernatural story telling, rely on allegories and mythologies, and use songs.

Thus, this dissertation attempts to decolonize the category of art films through a historical and textual analysis of landmark Indian films and by situating it within a framework of Indian cinema, not a derivative of European cinema in Dipesh Chakrabarty's sense of history's "waiting room". Since art film — generally considered to be a form of resistance against Bollywood — is presumed to be the standard criterion for cultural modernity, focusing on art/ivist film's continued efforts at indigenization and interrogation of a Eurocentric oeuvre of filmic modernity can decolonize the classification of song and dance in Indian cinema as either high or low art and lead to an understanding of Indian cinema on its own terms.

The restricted definition of "High Art" cinema refers to the emergence of a strand in European cinema in the1950s with distinct formal and thematic elements that achieved the status of "high culture," some of which came to be labeled as twentieth-century modern art. High Art films began to be established in terms of their relationship to the traditional established high culture, like literature, and the fine arts, driven by the aspiration on the part of producers to attract a more refined, "respectable" and educated audience. High Art films had formal elements that set them apart from mainstream Hollywood films.

Inspired by Italian Neorealism, Indian "High Art" or parallel cinema came into practice just before the French New Wave and Japanese New Wave, and was followed by the Indian New Wave of the 1960s. The movement was initiated by internationally acclaimed Bengali filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha and others, but other Indian states soon started making their own regional parallel

films. Indian Parallel cinema was characterized by its serious content, realism, naturalism, and symbolic elements with a keen eye on the contemporary sociopolitical climate, and for the rejection of unrealistic dance-and-song routines that are typical of mainstream Indian films.

However, traditional Indian storytelling or narrative theatre, which takes many ritualized forms, predominantly uses song, dance and *abhinaya*. For example, *Koottu (Chakyar Koottu)* from Kerala, *Pandavani from* Madhya Pradesh, Oja-Pali from Assam, *Villu Pattu from* Tamil Nadu, *Daskathia and Chhaiti Ghoda from* Orissa, *Baul* from Bengal, and *Keertan*, which are all popular narrative forms prevalent all over India, rely more on songs/poetry than prose. The main aim of these indigenous narratives was to worship, exalt, praise, extol, the deity by chanting, or celebrate mythical characters or war heroes with music and singing. They were intended as much to spread knowledge and awareness about history, mythologies, and folktales as to entertain. The use of narrative singer, co-singers, and musical instruments, along with a mix of prose and song and dramatic gestural style became the most common narrative technique across India.

Thus, by deemphasizing the technical or experimental elements — that rigorously exclude song and dance or "pure entertainment", be in it in western or Indian film — considered exclusive to "High Art" cinema, and by refocusing on regional styles and methods, spectators, artistic intent and Indian historical and cultural contexts, this dissertation attempts to redefine art films to diffuse European cultural hegemony in cinematic analyses, and expose Indian films as **decolonial art** that has resisted the

language and form of European cinema. While analyzing films that specifically use several indigenous storytelling methods like oral history, proverbs, legends and popular beliefs, this dissertation primarily focuses on the cultural decolonizing potential of film song and dance — the use or exclusion of which has been one of the crucial distinguishing factors between Art House Cinema and Commercial Cinema. Focusing on songs as counterhegemonic narrative can decenter the omniscient narrator and narrative system of western realist films, and potentially recover the voices of the marginalized. Foregrounding here before neglected artivist film songs as decolonial storytelling method that reemphasize local voices and subject matters can lead to an understanding of Indian cinema as decolonial art that has resisted the European cinema paradigm, and thereby contributed to cultural decolonization. Thus, this dissertation tries to ascertain how Indian artivist films can negotiate and destabilize the Eurocentric definition/prescription of cinema — which tends to dismiss film songs as populist, irrational irregularities — while simultaneously undercutting the national dichotomized definition of art and commercial cinema.

This dissertation attempts to resituate song-dance in the Indian cinema context to argue that it is a more serious and deliberate trope than generally accepted. In other words, this dissertation looks at the enunciative and artivist possibilities of artivist film music, and in so doing, reevaluates the classification of film song as a non-serious genre, and art/ivist film as a song-less (Europe-derived) genre of cinema.

While several scholars have discerned the “fragility of the frequently artificial barrier between the ‘commercial’ and the ‘art’ product in Indian cinema” (Bhattacharya 590), this distinction has continued to flourish in the Indian cinema industry and

scholarship. The monolithic dichotomy of art versus commercial cinema is untenable, owing to the distinctive plurality and heterogeneity of Indian cinema and its audiences. And it is in this regard that the category of artivist films becomes useful both for film theory and practical filmmaking, because, there is a reciprocal relation between film theory and filmmaking. In fact, "film theory closely shadows the progress of film production, and often launches general enquiries concerning coeval phenomena, e.g. thriving generic trends, technological innovations, new forms of consumption and so forth" (Rushtam 2).

Artivist cinema, by fusing commercial and art forms, can highlight the postmodern embrace of blurred boundaries between high and low culture. This "other" parallel cinema can present the somber aspects of minority cinema with popular ingredients, which can disrupt conventional narratives and realistic modes of speech and performance. In other words, with this new category of artivist films, the demarcation between art and commercial, which also seemed to delimit the viewership, can be corrected. In the field of film scholarship, this new category of cinema, unlike the limiting category of art or parallel cinema, can facilitate a more egalitarian discussion surrounding serious social issues and minority issues in order to address the Eurocentric and bourgeois bias in film scholarship.

I further break down artivist cinema into popular artivist and high-art cinema to show that song-dance perform very different functions in popular mainstream and popular artivist films, at the same time as they differentiate these two mainstreams from the exclusively dialogue-based model of "high art" cinema. This category of mainstream artivist cinema, which is the focus of this dissertation, can be expanded to include many films that were previously termed Bollywood or Commercial (apolitical). These films mark a new movement against the hegemonic model of a "good cinema". These are films

that do not just amuse and entertain and that are not made for the economic and ideological interests of the bourgeois classes, but cinema of dissent that creates political sensitivity to minority issues.

Therefore, instead of using a Hollywoodian realist basis of classification of film, this dissertation uses an activist model leading to an intellectual and political regrouping of Indian cinema and its audience. My aim here is not just to establish artivist films as a decolonial category or to delineate its difference with Europe, but to see how films may be perceived by communities inside India, or how they can function as activist texts.

Several scholars have attempted to decolonize Indian films through a deployment of postcolonial theories, analysis of indigenous historiography and storytelling methods. Most notably, Priya Jaikumar's book, *Cinema at the End of Empire* (2006); Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (2006); and Komal Kothari's "Myths Tales and Folklores: Exploring the Substratum of Cinema", analyze how Indian cinema actually overlaps with forms of ritual and myth, folklore and traditional oral tales, and attempt to decolonize established routes of film enquiry to resist a universalization of Indian cinema. Yet, in tracing the influence of oral narrative traditions on Indian cinema, scholars have focused exclusively on Indian popular or mainstream cinema. The bias of film scholarship in categorizing art films as an elite genre following European avant-garde framework can be seen as suppression of the social, historical, and cultural conditions and a renunciation the institutional frameworks that brought cinema into India[1]. By resisting such homogenizing discourse surrounding Indian cinema, by decentering Europe, and by

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[1] When Dadasaheb Phalke made *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), India's first full-length

highlighting the similarities between art films and commercial films in India, this dissertation shows that the Parallel cinema of India is a continuation of the Indian cinematic form, and not just a new "hybrid" style that "mimics" Hollywood or uses a universal language of cinema to dismantle or correct indigenous techniques, and, in fact, is quite uniquely regional.

I want to be careful, however, not to conflate indigenous models of storytelling with the infantilizing trend that sees Indian cinema and Bollywood audiences through the lens of *darsana* as "devotional viewing". Commercial cinema viewers are considered to be lacking the cognitive skills necessary for film viewing, which is why, the assumption goes, the filmic experiences must be mediated through religious and theatrical experiences (Madhav Prasad). Relying on this Hindu devotional paradigm is problematic as it ghettoizes other Indian audiences, because being Indian does not mean being Hindu and vice versa. Instead, Gehlawat argues that it is only by "paying close attention to the structure of narrativity" (xvii) that we can truly appreciate the cinematic discourse, and in the process enable the idea of active spectatorship.

However, in order to nuance and defuse that charge of essentialism or cultural exceptionalism, this dissertation proposes that indigenous storytelling methods should be understood as deliberate and tangible forms of social action rather than as passive cultural codes or pure realism standing outside the realm of politics. Artivist films, through indigenous storytelling, become a methodology and praxis that can distribute knowledge/political awareness throughout communities that situate the film text, spectator, environment, and technologies as active participants in the knowledge-making process. Facilitated through modern technological devices like television and mobile phones, and

with the widespread use of Whatsapp (200 million active users), sharing knowledge and activist organizing through films and film songs is no longer a distant possibility for poor India.

By rejecting the arbitrary and ambiguous definition of art and commercial cinema, this dissertation argues that if there is any difference between artivist mainstream and popular mainstream commercial films, it is in the former's continued conviction in bringing to the forefront issues that plague minorities, give voice to the marginalized and bring to national focus ignored topics. My research will show that the "art" versus popular mainstream and commercial cinema is a false dichotomy with no discernible or fixed characteristics. Both Art and Commercial films can have overlapping themes, styles, audience reach, and entertainment value, star text, song and dance, critical acclaim and box-office success.

I.1. De-class-ifying/Decolonizing Indian (Art) Cinema

After World War I, taking advantage of the void left by the severely affected European film industries, Hollywood had established its name as the main cinema industry in many parts of the world. The European art film was a response to this monopolizing effect of Hollywood, as film industries of Germany, France, and the Soviet Union started reconstructing their film industries, creating a diverse range of cinemas, that particularly differed in style, technique and format from the Hollywood films that filled European theaters. Such films established themselves as alternatives to the Hollywood cinema of stars and genres and were supported by intellectuals and artists in metropolitan centers like

Berlin, Paris, and London, as basically any film that followed the stylistic formats of these European films.

In the Indian cinema context, it was Marie Seton who formally outlined the genre of art films. In the article "Problem of Film Making in India", Seton argues that a film that showed very good promise of being a good film with "its dynamic camera work, good art direction, casting and a generally sophisticated cinematic polish" suddenly "fell into pieces" because of the alleged "box office demands" of a romantic angle, flashbacks, sexual titillation, and the "inevitable songs" (138). She argued that even if one wanted to make a different kind of film, they could not because the conventions long established by "producers, distributors and exhibitors remain rigid and virtually unchanged". The filmmaker, if they dared to deviate from this convention could manage to raise the money to make the film, but getting these films to a larger audience became a difficult task because of how these conventions dictated the markets. Seton adds that art films are not profitable because they do not conform to the commercial formula of the Bombay film industry in that they do not use song and dance. In laying out the category of "good films" or art films, Marie Seton adhered to the strictly European definition, and in so doing she "privileged images over the linguistic diversity of India, as though the visual were a surer guide to the essence of India than the confusing babble of languages" (Mazumdar 576). Naturally, films with indigenous narrative elements, like song and dance, had no place in the art film category as far as Seton's definition was concerned.

Seton named only Ray as the acceptable art film director in this category, even though there were directors like Nimai Ghosh who made *Chinnamul* (1950), and Ritwik Ghatak who made *Nagarik* (1977). While neither Ghosh nor Ghatak received even a

fraction of the acclaim of *Pather Panchali* (1958) at the time of release, nor made its way into Seton's canonical listing of art films, their very making was a "testimony to the desire to diversify modes of expression and narration within Indian cinema circles", by creating an intensely regional film idiom that defied the European standards of art films. Both Ghosh and Ghatak[2] "braided the local with the popular to create a cinema that departed from the normative aesthetic of neorealism and universal humanism championed by Seton" (Mazumdar 604).

In an interview, Satyajit Ray blamed the commercial failure of *Ajantrik* (1958) on its "uniqueness". He noted "it took phenomenal courage on Ghatak's part to make a film whose hero was a taxi driver and the heroine probably his jalopy. Ghatak's 'anthropomorphism', as evidenced in the driver's relationship with the car, was an unprecedented experiment in the world of Bengali and even Indian cinema" (Mazumdar 603). Ray's remarks highlight the problem of both international and national reception of Indian art films that prioritize the western style over the regional in cinema. Ray described Ghatak as much more Bengali than himself and in that offered a subtle explanation as to why Ray was included in the category of art cinema while Ghatak was not.

Ghatak defended "the much-ridiculed musicality of popular Indian cinema", and endorsed the "folk- and classics-derived aesthetic of film song and dance sequences (though he recommends a revolutionary and critical use of it) because to him the song and

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[2] Ghatak has enjoyed some small level of popularity in Europe over the decades and he seems to finally be getting noticed in the US. Two of his films, *Cloup-Capped Star* and *A River Called Titas*, have recently been released on Blu-ray and via streaming services like The Criterion Channel.

dance sequence captures a crucial essence of the cinematic subject: the national subject's longing for aesthetic form" (Bhattacharya 589). Ghatak brought together "sonic elements from the Bengali everyday — the sound of boiling rice for instance — together with *puranic* and folkloric elements such as in the use of *agamani* and *baul* songs (mystic). His relentless exploration of death invoked by framing Nita's face in a manner analogous to the immersed face of Durga idols and by her cry at the end of the film 'I want to live', reverberating in the hills where she has been taken to live in a sanatorium by her brother, has its lineages in stage melodrama of IPT movement" (Mazumdar 608). And in all of this Ghatak is extremely regional. While the shots of the city may have multiple resonances in their international circulation, they also demand a certain contextual specificity, which only people who still have emotional affiliations with Calcutta can apprehend. The recurring images of the roadside grocer stall, the cane huts with tin roofs, the refugee colony¸ the trams, the British architecture interspersed with the sounds of *dhaak, ektara*, *tanpura* and *tabla*, which have the same contemporaneity that characterizes the first shots of Bengali regional films like *Mahanagar* (1963) or *Parash Pathar* (1958), add several layers of meanings to these images and set up a regime of identification and empathy between the film maker and his 'community' (Gooptu 151), through an evocation of familiarity and allegiance with the local Bengaliness, even in the diasporas. The repetitive images and idioms as referents lead to a simple and realist representation of Calcutta. Calcutta thus becomes a real existence, and a referent through which Bengali history can be signified. Mazumdar notes, "Deeply rooted in the cultural context from which they arose, the comprehensibility of these film texts to even an Indophile like Seton, had she seen them, would probably have been tenuous at best" (609).

Ghatak's craft was inherently regional and meant to appeal especially to those who understood the Bengali way of life. Ghatak's films, including *Ajantrik*, *Nagarik*, and *Komal Gandhar*, were overlooked again and again in favor of "rubbishy sentimental and melodramatic films", particularly because of how local they were in appeal. The excessive regionalism of Ghatak's films, which excluded him from Seton's Eurocentric definition of Art film, is precisely the kind of artivist counter art that this dissertation aims to focus on, because the appreciation of the local, folk, mythic and melodrama as good cinema can widen the discussion of film as art/ivism beyond Seton's definition.

I.2 Reframing Art Films

There seems to be little agreement surrounding the definition of art films. Films may have widely different styles, but as long as they satisfy some loose parameters, they may be termed Art films. Movies that challenge earlier models of representation in Indian cinematic entertainment; challenge mainstream heteronormative representations; experiment with narrative styles; or challenge the protagonist/antagonist dynamic; break conventional rules of happy ending, love stories; films by certain directors, or certain actors; or films that display "ambiguity, for example, ambivalence without closure, quietude, quiescence, subjectivity, a non-Manichean universe, a subversion of expectation, to name a few" (Nayar 65) may be classified as art films.

Movies that used social realism as opposed to classical realism as their representational strategy were also classified as art films. They carried important social messages, they spoke for the silent, "downtrodden minority", and were about some "terribly vital issue in Indian society" (Krishen 36). They were always small budget films

that didn't, with a few exceptions, reach large audiences or dominate the box office. They were known for their serious content: either intensely political or focused on rural lives and traditional values in an apolitical way. These films used realism and naturalism with a keen eye to the sociopolitical climate of the times.

However, mainstream commercial films could also use any number of these styles/models, but if they used song and dance, they became *masala* films and were dismissed as tasteless commercial films. Some critics have dismissed the political impact of mainstream Indian cinema owing to its "popular" status. Vijay Mishra in his essay "The Texts of Mother India" (1989) has argued that Bollywood cannot be termed Third Cinema, despite its "defiantly subversive" stance because it is so "outrageously conforming" (136). He adds, Indian Cinema is so "conservative and culture-specific as to make a radical post-colonial Indian cinema impossible - and not only that, it tries to subvert the radical, as in *Mother India*, by drawing it into its fold and then neutralizing it or reabsorbing it back into Hindu culture" (135). In his dossier on Third Cinema, Tim Allen dismisses Indian cinema as Third Cinema owing to its light-hearted song and dance number. He notes, "In India serious films are not generally very popular at all. Most cinemas show jolly musicals" (399). The category artivist film therefore helps to distinguish indigenous-centered art films from song-less, dialogue based art films as well as the "song-dance" masala cinema, and prove that serious films can be popular and vice-versa.

I borrow the term artivist film from The Artivist Film Festival & Awards, an international film festival and awards ceremony, which ran for six years between 2006 and 2012. It wasn't a very successful project and they have since been blacklisted on the Filmfestival.com website and their facebook page has a meager 5500 followers. Even

though the award ceremony was unsuccessful, it has given rise to a format of film viewing and engagement where films with activist efforts, specifically in the areas of human rights, child advocacy, environmental preservation, and animal rights, are recognized in film festivals followed by Q&A with the filmmakers. These screenings aim to make film viewing a more active and engaging experience where the audience is encouraged to take action in the end. In this context, artivist films are films that express dissent against controversial gender, sexuality, subaltern and other minority issues with the intention to raise public awareness and mobilize the audience towards political action.

I.3 Art/ivist Films as Decolonizing Cinema

Focusing on artivist films also helps shift the focus away from Hindi mainstream cinema to the regional industries, which remain underrepresented in film scholarship. Indian popular mainstream and indigene-centered musical life includes a several national and regional genres beyond Bollywood. *Filmi* music and regional-film-music have long been ignored by international music industry and popular music studies, a gap that this dissertation tries to fix.

Furthermore, this tendency to locate Parallel cinema within an explanatory frame of western cultural knowledge and with little or no reference to the larger cultural, social, political and economic conditions of its production has led to a limited understanding of the scope and range of art films and its history in India, and has reinforced a hegemonic, imported model of cinema. Shifting the focus away from a European definition of an elitist class-based form of cinema to a more substantial inquiry of the form, content, intent,

context, situation, distribution and reception of art films can challenge eurocentric theories of representation and foreground a postcolonial poetics of cinema.

Artivist films can help decenter European films as models of a modern aesthetic and as the ultimate goal of film practice. Implicit in the term artivist film is the potential for transforming not just the hierarchical relations that exist between high and low art, urban and rural classes, or elite and subaltern communities, but an expansion of the role of cinema in India. Artivist film is used as a political strategy and conceptual tool throughout this dissertation. How are the interests of historically marginalized people, who are also the largest consumers of Bollywood, represented? Can telling stories about subalterns disrupt dominant notions of bourgeois entertainment and cultural aesthetics? These are some of the vital questions that this dissertation seeks to answer.

Artivist cinema, through its rejection of elitist historiography and colonialist narrative techniques, becomes decolonial recovery work, which seeks to expose colonial systems of power while indigenizing the ways we perform. Indian artivist films, therefore, simulate and mimic the absence that is indigenous voices, and reclaim material ground for Marxist historiography. In other words, in this dissertation I examine the role that artivist films play as resurgence and insurgence, as political knowledge production among minorities, and as disrupting Eurocentric colonial norms of 'objectivity' and knowledge.

I.4 **Film Song and the Non-mainstream/Regional Cinema**

Several scholars of Indian cinema before now have theorized film music beyond the initial dismissal and have written about the academic value of film music. Significant contributions have been made to the field by scholars such as Alison Arnold who

wrote *Hindi Filmi Git: On the History of Indian Popular Music* (1991), Gregory Booth who highlighted the interconnections of the film industry, labor and technology in the production of film music in *Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios* (2008) and Peter Manuel who wrote the first detailed treatise on the circulation of Hindi film music in *Cassette Culture* (1993), to name just a few. Published in 2007, Anna Morcom's book, *Hindi Film Song and The Cinema*, is a cross disciplinary study on film music. It involves studies on Hindi film music, its 'eclecticism,' musical styles, the narrative function of music in melodrama, the circulation and 'life' of Hindi songs when separated from the film, its reception, etc. The colonial and postcolonial contexts that give rise to film songs and in which film songs weave a powerful pastiche, however, remain relatively unaddressed in her book. Rajinder Kumar Dudrah's *Sociology Goes to the Movies* (2006) is a cross-disciplinary study of sociology, film and media studies and cultural studies. It discusses the relations between film and diaspora, the performance of social identity in Bollywood cinema, Bollywood cinema as a cinematic assemblage, and Bollywood's potential in the future of international cinema.

Several edited volumes dedicated to popular film music have also been published in the last decade, including Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti's *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (2008), which constructs a rich, layered history of the Hindi film song. Gopal and Moorti have called film songs, "the single most enduring feature of popular Hindi cinema". *Global Bollywood* analyzes the ways in which Hindi film music becomes a global form, and not just a 'national' cinematic quirk, as they travel through global Diasporas. Gregory Booth and Bradley Shope's *More than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music* (2013), provides in-depth studies of national and regional popular

music developments far beyond Bollywood. It includes historical perspectives and comparative studies of film and non-film music, and of international influences and contemporary remixes, that connect India to the west and mark their presence in the global music industry. It shows how globalization has nurtured a more nuanced knowledge of the variety of Indian music, and Indian middle classes and their musical tastes represent a great potential global market for the music industry and the Internet.

A more recent book titled *Music in Contemporary Indian Film: Memory, Voice, Identity* (2016), edited by Jayson Beaster-Jones and Natalie Sarrazin, is divided into two broad sections, 'Hindi Hegemony' and 'Regions and Identities'. The anthology incorporates theories of film and media studies, ethnomusicology and anthropology, to analyze Hindi film music.

Two themes run common throughout these works. Firstly, they are all concerned, with one or two exceptions, with the study of "popular", Hindi, or Bollywood film music, which inadvertently repeats the fetishization and stigmatization of film songs as pure entertainment, because film song is seen as a peculiar and unnecessary element only suited for commercial popular mainstream films. Film song, however effective in the film's narrative, is ultimately considered a distinct entity, which offers mass escapist entertainment, and is potentially independent of the film. Focusing only on "popular" or mainstream cinema also presupposes that film song is exclusive to the big budget Bollywood melodrama. Secondly, all these scholars seem preoccupied with the liberalization of the Indian economy and the resultant inclusion of India in the global cultural field, facilitated by the global reach or international travels of Hindi film songs.

These studies also trace the effect of western music on Indian popular film songs, and tend to describe Hindi film song as a hybrid form influenced by western sources.

The discussions surrounding Indian cinema and music scholarship are thus overwhelmingly concerned with cinema of the nation state and the bourgeoisie. This dissertation diverges by eschewing those hegemonic narratives, hegemonic Eurocentric models of realism, and the hegemony of image and voice in film grammar, by deconstructing artivist film songs to see how they contribute to postcolonial political indigene-and-minority-centered discourses. By focusing on the intersection of film songs with their visual texts and political contexts, this dissertation hopes to facilitate broader discussions of the depth and richness of the artivism of song-dance elements that draws so many audiences to these films.

I.5 Song-Dance as Counter Art and Political Resistance

Inclusion of song and dance has resulted in the restrictive, simplistic and arbitrary classification of Indian cinema into art or commerce, elite or non-elite. Indeed, song-dance has been excoriated in Indian cinema from the very beginning, even before the distinction between art and commercial came about. In fact, the government of India was so repulsed by the "debased and commercial" Hindi films, "particularly the song and dance sequences", that they "established foundations such as the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) in the late 1960s to foster and finance the production of an alternate cinema" (Gopal & Moorti 13). Thus, the alternative/parallel cinema movement was essentially a deliberate push against the song and dance films, or so was the intention and popular perception, because many "art films" did in fact incorporate film songs.

However, the fact is that while song and dance are by no means the only noteworthy feature of Indian cinema, they give Indian cinema — not only mainstream popular Indian cinema but also this other parallel cinema — its exclusive, regional, and indigenous appeal and set it apart from western cinema: "Indeed, until recently, song and dance became the essentialized elements paradoxically used by critics to peremptorily dismiss this cinema" (Gehlawat and Dudrah). While several Indian film theorists have analyzed cinematic sound and music, they have mostly focused on popular commercial mainstream Bollywood film songs. Cinema is still overwhelmingly treated as a visual medium and not an audiovisual one, which continues to marginalize non-western cinematic traditions in western academic conversations. By focusing on songs as a crucial feature of Indian cinema, therefore, this dissertation tries to challenge the over-reliance on narrative and visual hegemony.

Focusing on film song as a tool of artivism in India will provide serious justifications of Indian cinema's indigenous practice of including songs that even insiders have tended to be apologetic about, actually upbraiding audiences for the 'low standards' in film artistry. Film song is the only component that is not listed/considered as a narrative element in western discussions about film. Since songs form a major site of difference with western films, reading songs as deliberate narrative strategies for even serious artivist films can provide justification for song use as a deliberate postcolonial and indigene-centered trope even in commercial Indian cinema.

Secondly, given the importance of film songs in India's cultural background, songs outlive films. So, the political efficacy of film songs can go way beyond their filmic renditions. Film songs are frequently used as protest anthems in India, even when the films

themselves may have been forgotten. For example, a song from the 1969 film *Aadmi Aur Insaan*, sung by Mohammed Rafi has been widely used on social media since the election of Modi in 2014, and has been dubbed the current anthem of India by liberals:

> Vatan ka kya hoga anjam
> (What will happen to the nation?)
> bacha le ae maula ae ra
> (Save us O Allah, O Ram)

Mani Ratnam's *Yuva* (2004) arrested the collective imagination of a youth restless to change the political scenario of India. The title track "Dhakka Laga Buka" (Push them and punch them), became a protest anthem for the youth to bring about political engagement and effect change for themselves. The late 80's folk song 'Ma Rewa', which was synonymous with the Narmada Bachao Andolan, against the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, was made popular by the band Indian Ocean at the turn of the century. And the song became the Narmada agitation anthem, bringing issues of displacement and rehabilitation into focus, backed over the years by celebs like Aamir Khan and Arundhati Roy.

Yet another Indian Ocean masterpiece, 'Bandeh' was depicted heart-renderingly over images of the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts in the movie *Black Friday* (2004). The sheer brutality of the blasts was poignantly captured by the raw lyrics of the song. Lines such as "Arre mandir yeh chup hai, arre masjid yeh gumsum… ibaadat thak padegi"
(The temples are quiet, and the mosques hushed too, because all the prayers have exhausted) stand out and are relevant even today. *Rang de Basanti* (2006) created more than one revolution when it was released. The candle light march in the movie with "kuch kar guzarne ko Khoon Chala khoon chala" (To do something, this blood has started to flow) in the background, reignited a sense of rage among audiences across the country.

That single scene was believed to be instrumental in getting people on the streets to protest the injustice in the Jessica Lal murder. The song had soft, passive-aggressive lyrics — “badan se tapak kar, zameen se lipatkar, galiyon se raston se ubharkar, umarkar” (Dripping from the body, holding the ground/Rising from the streets and roads, it emerges) –and also gave rise to the now viral phenomenon of using candle light vigils as a form of protest in India.

Thirdly, songs have been historically used as a genre of dissent by artivist filmmakers because songs have escaped the critical eye and censorship in India unlike other visual and narrative structures. Thus, “following the tightening of censorship rules in the Cinematograph Act of 1918, songs became extremely important because they ‘could be passed off by word of mouth and were harder to censor than written material” (Gopal & Moorti 20). Looking at film songs to discern voices of protest therefore becomes particularly important at a time when the nation is undergoing a tumultuous constitutional restructuring induced by the BJP/RSS led right-wing Hindu religious and nationalist ideology. Currently, about 400,000 Muslims are about to get stripped of their citizenship, Kashmir remains under lockdown, religious minorities, Dalits, and women are being lynched, freedom of expression and religion are getting stripped, and dissenting journalists and political adversaries are getting arrested or killed. In this environment, film songs can offer a glimpse into the lives of the oppressed people in an otherwise sanitized portrayal of political issues in mainstream Bollywood films. For example, even though the film *Article 15* (2019) is intended as a critique of the systemic violence against Dalits, not a single scene in the film shows the living conditions of the Dalit characters. The film is either shot outdoors or in the rich quarters of the Brahmin *savarna* savior IPS protagonist, Ayan

Ranjan. The only description of the atrocious living conditions of the Dalits in the film comes in the form of an opening song:

> You'll get offended if I tell the truth.
> Rich people live in palaces,
> With a shining chandelier hanging from their roof.
> We live in a hut, it's just a small hut,
> Just a storm is enough to blow it away.
> Rich people enjoy delicious food,
> They even buy mineral water.
> We make do on chutney and bread,
> We drink unfiltered water.
> Rich people's kids go to big schools and colleges,
> They also take extra classes.
> While our kids toil hard.
> They say studies won't help them.
> You'll get offended if I tell the truth.

Fourthly, songs are perceived as the "quintessential 'commercial' element in a film" (Ganti 79). So much so that even "filmmakers working outside the mainstream treat songs as a way of reaching larger audiences". Since the "omission of songs is interpreted as…circumscribing one's audience" (Ganti 79), artivist films, both old and new, have consistently used songs to reach a wider audience. Satyajit Ray was of the opinion that so "strong and widespread is the hold of the ineluctable conventions of commercial cinema on the public that any film-maker who ignores them has also to abandon hope of quick success….A director who discards the popular elements and stops telling a story in comprehensible terms digs his own grave" (Ray, *On* Cinema, 87). Therefore, not only Ray, but also several art film directors before and after him relied on the use of songs if that meant the film could reach a larger audience.

I.6 Decolonizing the Film Song

Parallel or art cinema has been traditionally understood to be films that are "made in proximity to Bollywood's Mumbai production center but which do not contain song sequences" (Garwood 169). Anna Morcom has said that songs have "become the focus of what makes a film 'commercial'— appealing to largely uneducated masses — as opposed to 'art', which appeals to urban elite and intelligentsia" (2). Even though scholars and filmmakers have taken issue with this elitist definition of art and commercial cinema, saying they create arbitrary "binary distinctions between high and popular culture" (Majumdar 580), art films are largely understood to avoid the most conventional trope of commercial Bollywood films: song and dance.

Even a recent study by Ashvin Devasundaram attributes the "emergence of a new wave of urban independent films since 2010" to the trend that "new Indies combine a universal aesthetic with locally specific stories, circumventing ubiquitous Bollywood 'song and dance' sequences and storytelling stereotypes" (n.p.). Speaking of the advent of the Parallel cinema movement in India, Devasundaram says, the "cinematic Parallel New Wave dispensed with song and dance routines and engaged with 'progressive leftist' perspective of social issues through realist representations" (29). Rahul Verma, an Indian film editor, writer and director, says that a "new wave of Indian independent film is breaking the all-singing, all-dancing stereotype of Bollywood via low cost off-beat movies and edgier subject matter" (Devasundaram 26).

In this regard, "Rahul Verma cites the film *Love Sex aur Dhoka*'s (2010) titular allusion to both sex and drugs as confronting quotidian notions of Indian cinema as 'tear-jerking' Bollywood song and dance routines". (31) *Love Sex aur Dhoka (LSD),* however,

has eight songs with three song and dance routines. Both Devasundaram and Verma also cite *Peepli live* (2010) and *Gangs Of Wasseypur* (2012) as proof of Indian cinema breaking from this song and dance prototype. Interestingly, however, all these movies do use diegetic songs. *LSD* even has two 'item numbers[3]'. An item number titled "I Can't Hold It" was integrated in the film narrative by purposely using jerky camera movements to show that an amateur film director was shooting the song. And the title song of *LSD*, which was used in the film as an ending theme song, was launched prior to the release and was aggressively used in promotion.

Figure 1: A frame from *LSD* title song.

As the frame from the title song included here shows, the song featured stylized choreography and cinematography that was not congruous with the otherwise shaky, realistic, handheld camera movement that the rest of the film uses. In other words, *LSD*, an "art film", relied heavily on this very fashionable song and dance sequence to promote the film. *Gangs Of Wasseypur I* (*GOW*), another "Parallel film", which depicted the conflicts

[3] In Indian cinema, an item number or item song is a catchy, upbeat, often sexually provocative diegetic song and dance sequence that does not necessarily have any relevance to the plot.

involving the coal mafia of Dhanbad, Jharkhand, and the ensuing power struggles, politics and revenge between three crime families, had several diegetic songs, including romantic songs. Sneha Khanwalker, who is the music director for both *LSD* and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (*GOW*), talks about the making of "*bhoos ke dher*" in *GOW*. She used untrained and unprofessional singers, including three rickshaw-*walas* from Mumbai and a group of teenage "theater kids" from Patna, to achieve realistic everyday song quality that was suited for the film.

Varun Grover, the lyricist, says that because the film has a very political setting covering a large period of time, they wanted to include one song with strong political statement in each part of the film (*GOW* was released in two parts), in addition to several other song sequences. In *GOW I*, the song *"bhoos ke dher"* comes at a time when the emergency rule in India has ended, and a new government has come to power. The people are however equally disillusioned with the new government, and they realize that "the grand dream that Nehru talked about, which was also featured in the beginning of the film, has been thwarted and this song talks about the end of that grand dream". (Making of Bhoos Ke Dher). Grover adds that the song is also meant as a satire, being sung by prisoners in a jail (as the frame from the *GOW* "bhoos ke dher" song indicates), suggesting that even prisoners are frustrated with the politics of the nation. Therefore, *GOW* and *LSD* not only had songs, they were also important narrative elements that were integrated into the plot. This tendency to ignore the narrative importance of songs in "serious films" or art films or to dismiss them as mere digressions can be attributed to the belief that song and dance subvert the conventional western idea of "good cinema".

Figure 2: A frame from *GOW* song *Bhoos Ke Dher.*

Same can be said about other landmark art films like *Neecha Nagar* (1946), *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), *Pyaasa* (1957)*, Jalsaghar* (1958), *Kagaz Ke Phool* (1959), *The Cloud Capped Star* (1960), *Charulata* (1964), *Garm Hawa* (1974)*, Manthan* (1976), *Gaman* (1978)*, Chakra* (1981)*,* to name a few, all of which had popular songs, which have never been the focus of any scholarship. Thus, it can be argued that the majority of conventional "art films" not only include songs, they are also crucial to the narrative and political in nature. In other words, the inclusion/exclusion of song and dance has (erroneously) played a central role in the classification of Indian art and commercial films. However, if it is widely acknowledged that "song is a popular mode of storytelling" in Indian culture, and if "the centrality of music, song, and dance in preexisting popular and folk traditions in India must partly account for the persistence of song-dance in Indie films" (Gopal and Moorti 17-8), then the art/commerce dichotomy of Indian films negate the importance of the Indian cultural tradition based on the use of songs, and the scholarly

studies that depend on them are insufficient to fathom this complex cinematic corpus. In other words, the oral storytelling method of Indian films, rather than narrative and visual storytelling, means that the identifiable features of standard European art films should not be used as the basis for defining Indian cinema.

I.7 Reframing film song

Both western and Indian film scholars alike have largely critiqued Bollywood's use of song and dance as primitive or pre-modern. While some scholars have shown how songs enrich and advance Indian film narratives (Dudrah 2006), or provide a space for transgressing normative social roles (Gopinath 2005), or have extra-narrative purposes for linking the plot and characters to wider South Asian mythic, religious, and political worldviews (Rajadhyaksha 2009), songs are still regarded as a secondary schema to the film. Several scholars have also critiqued the dismissive attitude of film scholars (both Indian and western) towards the popularity of Hindi film music. For example, in her book, *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema*, Anna Morcom argues that, contrary to popular belief, Hindi film songs are not para-narrative units that are unrelated to the filmic narratives. She contests Prasad's claims in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* that the different components of Hindi films, like songs, dialogue, story, fights etc., are shaped by their own traditions rather than the varying demands of a given film narrative (Prasad 36-51). By looking closely at the production process of Hindi film songs, Morcom shows that songs are composed and recorded in close collaboration between director, producer, music director and lyricist, where the music director has to keep in mind the director's vision, the requirement of the narrative, the

period of the story, the song situation, the demands of the character, the location of the song, etc. For example, a modern urban song would use western influences, while a song set in older times would use traditional Indian instruments. However, even though she quotes Rajkumar Barjatiya, Vishal Bharadwaj and Prakash Jha to stress that songs are necessary building blocks in films where removing a song would dismantle the whole narrative, she doesn't quite explain how. There are no examples of movies where songs serve as indispensable narrative elements driving the plot. The problem is that she looks at these songs as aesthetic elements that enrich a particular mood of the film, or looks at their performative aspects to stress that songs are created as part of the film, but that doesn't explain why these songs are necessary. The main reason for that drawback is that she does not consider the lyrics of the songs, or possibly because song lyrics are generally considered to be a less important hierarchy in the film.

Gregory Booth too acknowledges that Hindi film songs have narrative purpose. He observes that the music scenes of Hindi films visually and verbally express feelings that may be otherwise inexpressible without transgressing the Indian social norms. Booth says, "the expressive qualities of Hindi popular film music culture are embedded within a complex of conventional cinematic and cultural code systems. Within those systems, creative Hindi film makers may produce music scenes with a wide range of densely layered and sophisticated meanings" (128). Booth examines the cultural significance of Hindi film songs, but largely ignores the issues of lyrics and meaning.

The motivation of this study is however to look at Hindi film songs not as an idiosyncratic device that only works to enhance certain moods in films but a clever narrative strategy. In Morcom's view, the presence of songs in Hindi films has something

to do with the “tradition of orality of most Indian drama”. She adds, “in such an oral culture music has an equivalence to speech, and the artificial break which is felt in the west when an actor bursts into song is thus less apparent in the Indian viewer” (4). Morcom observes that the use of songs is merely in keeping with the two thousand years old Sanskrit theater tradition, or a natural continuity in the Indian art world. Booth says “It is often difficult, not to say unproductive, to attempt to completely separate out the sacred from the secular components of a given Indian cultural performance or artifact. (129)” In these analyses, film songs are treated as merely incidental and not as deliberate strategies with little or no narrative implications.

By dismissing the possibility that essential aspects of Indian cinema — like song and dance sequences — are important narrative elements, or by looking at them as extra-narrative devices that have cultural significance but do not necessarily affect the narrative outcome of the film, Indian film theory/criticism undermines the strategies that have the potential to overturn the dominance or over-reliance on implicitly Eurocentric theories of representation (race, class, gender and sexuality).

Instead of focusing on the cultural codes and history of the Hindi film song, which leads to the conclusion that film song is a natural extension of the theatrical form and devotional form, which legitimizes the othering of Indian cinema as intrinsically different and inferiorly indigenous, I want to show that songs are deliberate storytelling strategies that do not just highlight the mood or theme of the narrative but make important and meaningful contributions to the story that are otherwise inaccessible, and can have political and activist implications.

I.8 Film Song as Artistic Choice

By now it has been established that even though the presence or absence of film songs is generally used to classify commercial and art films, there is no direct relation between the two. So what is, in fact, the real difference between art/ivist and commercial cinema? And, how did the inclusion or exclusion of song and dance become the determining factor?

As Ray says, "as long as films call for big budgets and the resources of a large industry, as long as film makers feel responsible to the individual or the corporation that provides them with the means to be creative, the need to reach a large audience will be there" (Ray 87-88), and the need to rely on conventional strategies will also exist. One way to get rid of that industry dependence is to reduce the budget of the film by using reasonable resources. Therefore, art/ivist filmmakers, with the intention of experimenting with new narrative techniques and cinematic styles to tell unconventional stories, often tried whatever available resources they could use to keep the cost low. This often meant no music in films. In other words, the exclusion of songs was often a budgetary and not stylistic choice.

However, not all movies that do not have songs are art films, as not all movies that have songs are commercial films. In fact, approximately about the same time that parallel cinema was making a come back in Bollywood in 2010, a crop of movies that excluded music also started appearing. *Bhoot* (2003) was the first of such movies, where Ram Gopal Verma experimented with a song-less form. These movies were however made with the same commercial intent as other commercial Bollywood films. On the other hand, the progressive "blurring of the art vs. commercial distinction" also resulted in films on

serious topics with a "musical format by directors with an 'art' film background in order to reach a wider audience. *Aastha* (1997), *Mrityundand* (1997), *Satya* (1998), *Earth* (2000), and *Zubeida* (2000) are all examples of this" (Morcom 3). So it can be argued that film song, even for Bollywood, cannot be used to classify art or commercial films. The use of songs only suggests a stylistic choice that can fulfill a large variety of purposes.

The year 2005 was the breakthrough year for the song-less films. *Black*, *Sarkar*, and *Page 3* experimented with the song-less commercial film and achieved significant commercial success. These commercial films also challenged the Bollywood distinction between high art and low art, since none of these films, except *Black* to some extent, received critical acclaim or achieved the status of a timeless good film**.** Assuming a position of "sneering superiority" (Garwood 178) movies like *Page 3* argue that India's media culture, at least, has already achieved a level of sophistication that matches international standards, and, therefore, no longer needs old-fashioned song sequences (Garwood 177). This relegates the use of songs as an inferior form of art that is used to address an uneducated audience. But as will be shown by my analysis of several films throughout the dissertation — such a categorization is not only inaccurate, but also stems from a eurocentric notion of how the cinema should work. Therefore, the inclusion or exclusion of songs do not determine the sophistication or high art quality of a film, and has nothing to do with the categorization of films as either artivist or commercial.

I.9 Difference Between Artivist Films and Art Films

While all art films can be subsumed under the artivist film category, because they are movies that carry important social messages and speak of the downtrodden minority

(cinema from below), there remain significant differences between the social reach and political impact of these categories. The primary reason for this difference is that art films were predominantly funded by the state. The early art films, including the biggest successes of Satyajit Ray received government funding. The 1951 Film Enquiry Committee Report focused on developing the public taste in favor of good cinema, because cinema was a channel for artistic expression as well as a medium of public information and education. With this intention the governments, both state and local, got involved in the production of these kinds of good films. They believed that films could progressively boost the depraved classes to the height of bourgeois culture. Films, as the one proposed by Ritwik Ghatak, with “low budgets, no stars, no good equipment, no fancy names in technicians, no massive sets, no legendary music director, and no colour—just ideas” (Mazumdar 590) started getting funding from FFC.

The problem with State sponsored films, however, was that they were inevitably interlocked with the agenda of the state, which means representing the state as just even though they do not necessarily represent the interest of its entire people. In fact, the call to sanitize the image of India did not just come from the state, but has been a rallying cry within the industry too. Ray was criticized by members of Parliament and former actor Nargis Dutt, for *Pather Panchali* (1955), who accused him of “exporting poverty”. While *Pather Panchali* was internationally hailed as a eulogy of developing world culture, many within the nation criticized it for romanticizating poverty. Art films could not be visibly too critical of the state. Therefore, state sponsored art films represented a primary contradiction between the interest of the state and minority communities.

Additionally, the art films couldn't reach a large audience because of low funding, which naturally meant that the films were not profitable. Through out the 1960s, FFC changed its loaning policy to fund only those films that showed some promise of commercial success. By the 1980s, with the withdrawal of FCC support, the esoteric avant-garde cinema had completely withered, because that category of films did not make any money and could not attract audiences outside of film festivals. Even though the FFC had for long talked about establishing alternative distribution channels and infrastructure for broad-based screening of these films, it never happened. According to Seton almost all of the films made by the FFC have never been released in any formal commercial basis. The reason is of course that they did not conform to the commercial formula of the Bombay film industry in that they did not use song and dance.

So, the argument that these avant-garde films had no takers outside of the elite urban high-class audience is shaky, because these films could never reach the larger audiences, and not for the lack of trying on part of the filmmakers. This class-based argument becomes especially dubious because there are art films that incorporate conventional cinema tropes, like *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) and *Pyaasa* (1957) as early examples, both of which were critical and commercial successes. Also, since 2010 or so, after a period of prolonged disillusionment and complete decline, Bollywood "Parallel cinema" or art House Cinema has experienced a sudden but steady revival. The visible change in the quality of receptivity among a large section of the viewership and the

commercial successes of these parallel films, unlike their predecessors[4], reinforces the argument that the success of these artivist films have more to do with funding, distribution, and other external factors than a difference in the stylistic and narrative trends[5] between art and artivist films.

The commercial success of artivist films can be attributed to a new crop of corporate sponsors who are willing to invest in unconventional but entertaining and informative films. In the early 21st century, Aamir Khan, with his production studio, introduced his own brand of social cinema that blurred the distinction between commercial films and realistic parallel films combining the entertainment and production values of the former with the believable narrative and strong sociopolitical message of the latter. He brought parallel cinema to mainstream audience, as his films earned both commercial success and critical acclaim. Devasundaram, while marking the difference of "Indian Indies" from the parallel cinema tradition of the past, has argued that "some Indies assiduously solicit the gravitas of Bollywood oriented production companies or sometimes enlist a Bollywood star to accentuate a film's visibility. In most cases, the disequilibrium in India's cinematic structure, skewed towards Bollywood, has rendered associations with mainstream industry almost imperative for some Indie filmmakers to fund and distribute their work" (70). But even in this assertion, what Devasundaram ignores is that the association with these large corporate houses is made possible *because* of how these films

[4] I am not suggesting that no art film ever saw any commercial success, but it can be safely concluded that this category of films was largely commercially unsuccessful. This dissertation will argue that the art films that did achieve commercial success have consistently relied on conventional Bollywood strategies.

[5] I explain later how Artivist and Art films follow similar narrative styles.

incorporate conventional entertainment strategies in the narrative to show the promise of commercial success. It is this promise that attracts corporate sponsors. So, this relationship is circuitous. It is for this reason that artivist films with commercial ambitions use songs. It is for this reason that directors have historically tried to come up with ways to include box office demands, however, being careful enough to not use them as obvious interruptions.

Thus, even though there is difference in how art or artivist films are funded, leading to a difference in the social reach and political impact, all art films can still be classified under artivist films. Because, even as contemporary artivist films try to create a new idiom of filmmaking, they keep returning to an earlier, more artistic form of filmmaking. In order to understand these tropes that are discernible in contemporary artivist films, we must look at Parallel cinema as a collective, composite and historically developing entity.

Satyajit Ray says:

> What is the first thing a Western viewer tries to perceive in a film? For that matter, what does anyone try to perceive in any film? The story, of course. Everyone, everywhere understands a story. It is a trait common to all cultures—from the Eskimos to the Hottentot. What in its bare bone is the story of *Pather Panchali*? A poor family fights a losing battle aginst adversity, leaves hearth and home to set off against an uncertain future. A simple, universal situation holding in its implication of conflict the promise of screenplay" (78-79).

It is this barebones story of human struggle, relatable by people from all over, that offers the basis for an art film story. And it is the timeless, universal appeal of these films that make sense to audiences across time and space that is the main characteristic of artivist cinema. *Pather Panchali's* conditions may not be immediately relatable to even a Bengali urban audience seventy years later. But the human appeal persists. And this is why all

artivist films either consciously repeat old themes, or all universal human struggle themes appear to be joined.

For example, Anand's *Chetan Neecha Nagar* (1946) that portrayed complex social realities in India was the first-ever Indian film to receive praise in the West. Anand's film also became the first film for which sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar composed music. *Neecha Nagar*, despite a win at Palme d'Or at Cannes, simply sank into obscurity. The film tells the story of a rich man trying to trick poor villagers out of their land, a story that is as relevant today as it was seven decades ago. K.A. Abbas' *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), like *Neecha Nagar*, were amongst the first few films that received the tag of realistic Hindi films. And, again none of them set any box office records; even though *Darrti ke lal* and *Do Bigha Zamin* have somehow managed to create a place for themselves in the annals of discussions and debates. In the book *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, author Sumita S. Chakravarty mentions that the themes that these three films explore — the struggle between the bourgeois and proletariat classes (*Neecha Nagar*), the urban and the rural people (*Dharti Ke Lal*), and the landed and landless (*Do Bigha Zamin*) — can all be found in Bimal Roy's Bengali hit *Udayer Pathe* (1944), which was remade in Hindi as *Humrahi* (1945). The socially and politically conscious and nationalist *Udayer Pathe* followed the formats that had already been set in Indian film narrative of the period. But what brought it to fame was the manner in which it used a tried and tested trope (poor boy meets rich girl) to convey a realist concept.

Figure 3: Shambhu Mahato in *Do Bigha Zameen* and Natha in *Peepli Live* are seen resting during their menial jobs after losing their lands and espaing to the city.

My selection of films in this dissertation reworks these themes of struggles and differences between country and city, rich and poor, the tenant and peasants, into new articulations. *Monsoon Wedding*, *Peepli Live*, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, *Hirak rajar Deshe, Bhooter Bhabisyat*, *Court*, *Talaash*, *Masaan*, are all stories dealing with this constant threat of displacement for a certain class of people in Indian society. As can be seen in the film frames included above, Shambhu Mahato in *Do Bigha Zameen* and Natha in *Peepli Live* are seen resting during their menial jobs after losing their lands and espaing to the city.

Parallel films of the past were recognizable by a single aesthetic unity produced by a complex montage of rural shots, realistic storylines, familiar faces of parallel film actors, and references to contemporary political situations and popular literary works. Therefore, when contemporary artivist cinema uses continuous references to the old films, old songs, old literature, and old cinematic processes, it does not merely evoke old memories or highlight the self-referiantiality of the medium; it also becomes a critique of and response

to modernism. However, it is through the processes of reconstructing the aesthetic elements of old art cinema, by creating an amalgamation of past and present through discursive intertexts and textual commentaries, and by telling and retelling stories about the past, that contemporary artivist films have reconfigured themselves as a part of the Parallel cinema heritage, thereby generating new interest among the Indian audience. This transition, this nostalgic looking back, also indicates the end of one era and the beginning of another — a shift away from the post-partition art film, and toward an activist turn in Indian cinema.

I.10 Cinema for and about the Minority

Cinema is a powerful tool in Indian politics. In a country with only 74 percent literacy, movies are an important means of spreading information as well as entertainment. The industry is valued at $1 billion, and sells 36 billion tickets annually. "Bollywood's 'soft power' within India — its ability to influence opinion and even decisions" (Raghavendra 35) is, therefore, taken into account by artivist filmmakers. In fact, cinema often shapes national political discourse in India. For example, since its release in 2011, *No One Killed Jessica*[6] has greatly influenced the national discourse on corruption in Indian politics, as reflected by its reviews. According to *Times of India*: "Raj Kumar Gupta shows absolute

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[6]My arguments here are supported by an article titled "Justice for Jessica: A Human Rights Case Study on Media Influence, Rule of Law, and Civic Action in India", which focuses on a number of specific aspects of the trial and assess their significance for human rights issues: journalism in India, social media and public participation in civic action, Indian film and its direct influence on the trial, structural issues in the police and judicial system, purpose and actions of local and international human rights organizations, and the ongoing 2011 anti-corruption movement in India.

conviction in bringing to life one of the most significant murder-case convictions in the history of India. No one miss this cinema!" *The Hindu* proclaimed: "Seven years after Jessica was shot dead, a nation wakes up to fight for justice." The film was taken to be a direct intervention in the fight for Jessica Lal and grew popular at an opportune time for India's anti-corruption movement. Although corruption had become an important issue since the disastrous 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, a more organized *end corruption movement* gained traction in April 2011, influenced by the activist Anna Hazare's hunger strike "unto death," that demanded the passage of an anti-corruption bill in the Indian Congress. In this sense, *No One Killed Jessica* brought attention to the anti-corruption movement as powerful figures in entertainment and politics endorsed the movement. And it delivered. Politics and entertainment merged together to influence public opinion. Other contemporary artivist films like *Matrubhoomi* (2003), *Phir Milenge* (2004), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Udaan* (2010), to name only a few, have had a huge impact in shaping public discourse surrounding issues like female infanticide, HIV, political corruption, learning disability, and domestic abuse respectively.

Unlike mainstream commercial Bollywood films that detail the lives of middle-class people, with middle class problems, restricting their romance plots/subplots to upper-caste Hindu romances that steer clear of issues relating to class, caste, religion, gender, and sexuality, artivist films always deal with socially and politically relevant issues. They tell stories about protagonists who are fighting against the system based on discrimination, atrocities and deprivation. These voices from below take charge of the action and do not wait for any prophet or harbinger from so-called upper castes to liberate them from their miseries. These films negate the traditional dominant discourse created and imposed by

dominant classes/castes. They experiment with language and style of expression. They tell modern urban tales fused with rural elements.

I.11 Chapter Themes

Analyzing artivist film-song that at present is peripheral and indigene-centered in Bollywood and represents alternative socio-political micronarratives requires the adoption of compatiblr philosophical and theoretical frames of reference. To that end, this dissertation relies on postcolonial theory, reception theory and cultural studies methodologies. In addition, this dissertation focuses on a diversity of voices and movies from different regional film industries and relies on existing literature on Indian film song and art cinema and interviews by song composers and film directors.

Using such scholarly discussions as a theoretical framework, this dissertation (1) investigates to what extent Satyajit Ray, who stands as a shorthand for parallel and art films in India, engaged in artivist language through the use of film songs to appeal to a larger audience, (2) to analyze how the use of songs can not only increase the commercial appeal of a film but how they can become important vehicles for voicing minority issues, and thereby increasing the political efficacy of artivist films and film songs, (3) whether film music, contrary to being the divider of audience based on class, can offer a way to transcend class conflict. Ultimately, the dissertation argues that in contrast to the long established class based definitions of cinema, artivist films can be better understood as a set of cultural artifacts responsive to their audiences and to technological changes.

Instead of doing a chronological study of films, I have divided the book thematically. Each chapter identifies a different and specific theoretical problem that

filmmakers have engaged with over the years. I have done close readings of films that I considered to be a paradigmatic attempt to engage the chapter. I am less interested in the breadth of film scholarship than in bringing to critical light the history of art/ivist film practice in India and its contribution to postcolonial theories of cinema.

Select artivist films that have proved "popular" beyond their initial box office release amongst Indian and diasporic audiences over the years have been used throughout the dissertation. Films have been deliberately chosen based on their availability on Amazon Prime, Netflix and Youtube, with English subtitles, so the readers of this dissertation can cross reference them. Other data has to be gathered regarding the films' accessibility and popularity, and for fully addressing the Reception theory and Cultural Studies foci of this dissertation.

I have left out many other extremely important films and filmmakers, either because they do not fit within the specific contexts that I have created, or have been written about extensively by other scholars. But most importantly, my choices reflect my own scholarly interests, cultural interests, and ideological positions.

In chapter 2, instead of positioning Ray within the internationalist avant-garde tradition, I focus on the historical specificity and political implications of Ray's work, which yields two findings. Firstly, it argues that even though Ray relies on the rich tradition of an earlier film avant-garde, his work is located in the very specific Bengali historical, cultural, and political contexts, and reveals suppressed or lost histories of oppression and resistance. Secondly, this chapter postulates that Ray's films avoid strict adherence to both the traditional linear narrative film genre and the strictly European and esoteric art house genre by focusing on aesthetic aspects and 'attractions'. Instead, by

focusing on the regional, vernacular and indigenous style of filmmaking, this chapter sees how Ray's films challenge the narrative hegemony of European/American films by deploying diegetic/playback music.

Using *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* (1969) and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), two of Ray's most political films, this chapter shows how Ray used children's fantasies, allegories and musicals to hide important political messages so as to avoid censorship. Therefore, Ray foregrounds music as an alternative to dominant European visual aesthetic to challenge the limiting assumptions about the role of "film *geet*" in the production of political consciousness in Indian society. The chapter analyses how Ray uses songs as functional elements in the film — rather than formulaic embellishment — that work almost like dialogue.

Thus, by reimagining Ray as an artivist filmmaker, this chapter looks at the enunciative and activist possibilities of film song when it is not subordinated to the image, and in so doing, reevaluates the classification of both Ray as a non-political filmmaker and art film as a song-less (European) genre of cinema. The following chapters examine how Indian filmmakers from different periods and regions have used Ray's format of artivist film to challenge western narrative hegemony, voice dissent, avoid censorship, and create an unique Indian idiom of cinema.

Chapter 3 concerns how in postcolonial India not many Hindi language films have treated peasant protests or caste oppressions. The films that have—except *Lagaan* (2001) and *Mother India* (1957)—namely *Neecha Nagar* (1946), *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), *Manthan* (1976), *Kissan* (2009), *Kadwi Hawa* (2017), *Manjhi* (2015), *Newton* (2017), and more recently *Article 15* (2019), are categorized as the more serious art film genre with

limited audience reach. This is counterintuitive, because films that intend to address social justice issues that affect millions should reach wider audiences, and historically this has not been the case. The movies that I analyze in this chapter are important for two reasons. Firstly, they are unique in that they present difficult contemporary issues following the format of activist serious films, but package them in a way to appeal to larger audiences across the urban/rural and elite/non-elite divides. These new artivist films have created a an idiom and style of cinema, which is uniquely and distinctly Indian, and which, following Satyajit Ray's prescription of good cinema, "tries to turn an ostensible business enterprise into a stimulating creative pursuit and make the best of both art and commerce" (Ray 38). Secondly, in the films about subaltern struggles, including the ones listed above, subaltern historiography is most effectively reiterated through songs or song performances.

Therefore, this chapter argues that a lyric or narrative study of Hindi film songs can not only offer important insights into characters, events and plots, fill lapses in narratives, predict plot turns and twists, provide social and political commentaries and express views that may be difficult to convey in dialogues, but can also offer voice to marginalized subjects who otherwise remain confined to the fringes of the narrative texts with little to no dialogue.

For the purposes of this study I analyze five artivist films: *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Peepli [LIVE]* (2010) *Talaash* (2012), *Court* (2014) and *Masaan* (2015). The films use multilingual and heterogeneous musical styles. These five films show that irrespective of their genre, movies incorporate music and lyrics as narrative devices to voice subaltern concerns.

The unique contribution of these films lies in the fact that they foreground peasants and Dalit, whom commercial Bollywood cinema for the most part has evicted from the domain of the story, providing spaces for them only as servants of the rich or comic reliefs. The subaltern characters in the above mentioned films belong to disparate socio-economic backgrounds and diverse spatial and temporal dimensions and are subjected to differing and multivalent categories of subordination. This non-essentialist view of subaltern subject based on a relational concept of social agency also proposes a mode of listening to subaltern voices that challenges rather than confirms the silencing effect of domination.

In addressing head on issues of discrimination, exclusion, and violence based on caste and class identities, while using the Bollywood format of song and dance, the films put forth the idea of free speech and equal citizenship through music. For example, by featuring inter-caste or inter-community lovers in romantic songs on screen, these films help the marginalized reclaim the cinema song space that so far has been preserved for upper-caste audiences. By communicating subaltern issues forcefully and clearly through film songs, conditions of subalternity become visible/audible to large audiences. These film songs disrupt the Hindi/Indian film song-space as the artistic and representational domain of upper-caste Hindus.

In Chapter 4, I analyze Anik Dutta's *Bhooter Bhabisyat* (2012), a political horror satire, as an artivist film to consider the potential of Marxist thought for historical musicology. Drawing on Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and Homi Bhabha's theory of "performativity" and "time lag", this chapter focuses on the ways in which music has a spectral presence in this film and yields two findings. Firstly, by using ghostly renditions of music, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* questions the linear and homogeneous account of time and

history, and disrupts and unsettles its temporality to reveal a time that is 'out of joint' with its past, present, and future. Spectral sounds in this film challenge how historical memories are narrativized while casting doubt on the accuracy and certainty of memory/history. Secondly, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* uses the production history of Bengali music to establish the class position of each ghost character in the film. Using the mode of Marxian production theory to analyze its music not only helps to uncover the unequal power relations that existed between different classes of people in different historical periods, but also demonstrates that the intersections of music have the potential to transcend class boundaries. Music in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* becomes a historical artifact and an important site of dialogue concerning economic, political and social issues.

Thus, the audience reach of artivist films can be attributed to several factors, including the use of a more commercial idiom in keeping with the brand of Bollywood. Furthermore, the sudden spurt in the financing of art/ivist films in addition to astounding strides made in the field of cybernetics and social media advertising may have contributed to this success. By analyzing these techniques, this dissertation will show that the other Parallel cinema recaptures the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of commercial Bollywood films, even while maintaining its narrative purity, realism, and uniqueness. This dissertation will show that film songs, as they are employed in artivist films, are not just a strategy to affect a mood, or feeling, but a trope that is carefully employed to elicit particular responses from the audience and to make particular meanings. In other words, though film songs still offer a familiar trope to engage the audience, thereby making the films more entertaining, it is through the use of songs that contemporary parallel cinema engages with the discourse of commercial cinema and challenges the definition or

categorization of art films, thereby making possible new critical investigations of this genre as well as the film song.

CHAPTER II

SATYAJIT RAY'S MUSIC AS ARTIVISM

"I certainly like to follow a simple, classical structure. My films are stories first and foremost, because India has a great tradition in that respect. Of course a certain amount of commitment is unavoidable. But I never want to be a propagandist. I don't think anybody is in a position to give answers to social problems — definitive answers at any rate. Besides no propaganda really works". (Conversation with Derek Malcolm, Sight and Sound).

"For me, in those days, the term 'commercial' held no overtones of stigma. It only helped to define an economic axiom: since a film cost a good deal of money to make, it had to be seen by a great number of people for the money to be recovered"
--Satyajit Ray

Indian cinema has been broken down into a Ray/Bollywood binary model in film studies scholarship and criticism. This classificatory dualism credits Satyajit Ray as the pioneer of parallel, art house, middle, regional and vernacular cinema and puts him in opposition to everything that is considered commercial entertainment. Yet, even as Ray is credited for standing as shorthand for Indian parallel cinema, which by definition deals with socio-political subjects, critics also charge that Satyajit Ray did not address the difficult contemporary political issues in his films, unlike his contemporaries Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. This conflicting assessment can be attributed to the tendency to consider Satyajit Ray as a filmmaker in the realist, humanist, and nationalist traditions. This limiting and traditional categorization of Ray, who is considered the pioneer of Parallel Cinema in India, inevitably leads to its definition as a cinema of *difference*, accentuated by its difference with European art House cinema, or its post-colonial alterity.

In her book, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray*, Keya Ganguly addresses some of the criticisms directed against Ray by offering a modernist elaboration of Ray's works and by situating Ray in the European avant-garde tradition. By focusing on "shared experiences of modernity" as the basis of presenting a critique of the notion of "alternative modernities", Ganguly suggests that Ray's cinema should be "read less as representative examples of Third World cinema than as definitive meditations on the ways that film transmits historical perception of being modern" (17). Ganguly positions Ray's films within the internationalist avant-garde and its larger investment in art as a means of questioning the social conditions that govern its production.

Satyajit Ray was indeed greatly influenced by the avant-garde and Italian neorealist movement, which emphasized realistic story lines, a documentary style of filmmaking, frequent use of children as protagonists, on-location shooting, important social themes, and faith in humanity. The success of Vittorio De Sica's low budget film *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) with its location shooting with nonprofessional actors and simple realistic story convinced Ray to film *Pather Panchali* in the fashion of neorealist films. The French director, Jean Renoir, who had come to Bengal to shoot his film *The River* (1951) had also encouraged Ray. Dissatisfied with how the Indian film industry was making melodramas to cater to a particular taste of Indian public, Renoir had warned Ray against Hollywood influence in Indian films. Renoir had said, "you don't have to have too many elements in a film, but whatever you use must be the right elements, the expressive elements." Following Renoir's advice, Ray had focused on the emotional integrity of human relationships as the most important element in films. However, by exclusively focusing on the aesthetic

categories of modernity and the avant-garde for understanding Ray's visual experiments, Keya Ganguly ignores the historical specificity and political implications of Ray's work.

Thus, by expanding on the theoretical framework already proposed by Ganguly, this chapter puts forth two propositions. Firstly, it argues that Ray foregrounds music as an alternative to dominant European narrative styles to challenge the assumptions about the role of "film *geet*" and highlight its significance in the production of political consciousness in Indian society, which simultaneously helps to politically engage what Ray considers an untrained audience. Secondly, this chapter postulates that Ray's use of diegetic music/playback songs challenge the narrative hegemony of western films to create a more indigenous style. Ray's ingenious use of music to mask important political messages also helps him escape censorship and uncover suppressed or ignored histories of oppression and resistance, thereby situating his films in the same genre of political activism as Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. In other words, this chapter looks at the enunciative and activist possibilities of film song when it is not subordinated to the image, and in so doing, reevaluates the classification of Ray as a non-political filmmaker and art film as a song-less (European) genre of cinema.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of great political turmoil in India and Ray was accused of not showing a greater concern for the "Calcutta of the burning trains, communal riots, refugees, unemployment, rising prices and food shortages" (Chidananda Dasgupta). Ray's films, according to those critics, did not portray the real Bengal, the revolutionary Bengal. As Cardullo cites "In comparison with the overtly Marxist anger of the filmmaker Mrinal Sen or the splintering political intensity of the director Ritwik Ghatak (both of them fellow Bengalis), Ray had come to seem a remote, Olympian figure, fastidiously

withdrawing from present day turmoil into the safe enclave of Tagorian past—or even into juvenile fantasy with a picture like The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha" (xii). In addition to the Goopy Bagha films, *Sonar Kella* or *The Golden Fortress* (1974) and *Joi Baba Felunath* or *The Elephant God* (1979) have also been extremely popular and are some of the finest films ever made for children. To many, however, these films only confirm what they have maintained all along: that "Ray is happier in a world of unreality and children's fantasy, away from the complexities of modern India" (Gupta 24)

Ray has countered these charges by saying that he did not like overt "morals or messages" in his films. He echoed Theodor Adorno's views that critique is itself determined by the very conditions of reality it seeks to expose. In fact, "Adorno argues that to hold out for the possibility of making radical aesthetic statements that can escape their own conditions of existence is to fall prey to reactionary thinking" (Ganguly 159). The impossibility of aesthetic forms to separate themselves from social conditions can be seen as the cause Ray distances himself from 'propaganda' and reactionary activism. Ray believed that art could not solve society's problems; however, he strived to fuse conceptual and representational ideas together "without romanticizing storytelling or brandishing epistemological lessons about the necessary critical role of cinema, and so forth" (Ganguly 155). Ray believed that aesthetic means could also lead to effective persuasion. It is for this reason that Ray is almost unanimously hailed as the greatest artist or filmmaker in Indian cinema, but seldom as a political or activist filmmaker. However, critics who argue that Ray's films lack the political urgency of his contemporaries have missed Ray's highly reflexive critique of the political powers and forces that remain coded in his aesthetics: songs, dance, set, dialogue, etc.

Satyajit Ray was interested in “not just single aspects of our lives today, like contemporary politics, but a broader view of Indian history, which has not been explored properly in the cinema” (“The Artist in Politics” 310). In fact, Ray did deliberately take up several politically challenging and historical scripts, one of the most controversial being the documentary *Sikkim* (1971). The Indian government feared that movies like *Sikkim* depicted monarchy[1] in a way that undermined democracy, which can only be described as a misreading of Ray’s films. Other films that showcased the feudal or predemocratic life in Bengal were *Jalsaghar* or *The Music Room* (1958), *Devi* (1960), *Monihara* or *The Lost Jewels* (1961), *Charulata* (1964), and *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* or *The Chess Player* (1977). What Ray showcases in these films is a pre-democratic society, one which has the full potential to turn into a successful democracy, but only if the masses educate themselves and break free from social prejudices to achieve equality for all. Ray understood that there was an intrinsic relation between memory and emancipation on the one hand, and forgetting and victimhood on the other. Just like in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where the struggle to retain memories becomes an act of transgression against the totalitarian government’s ruthless and forceful attempts to erase memories of individuals, Ray’s attempt to capture specific historical memories of pre- and post-independence India through references to literature, songs, and art becomes an act of rebellion.

Ray was also aware that the political atmosphere he was working from made outright criticism of the government difficult and dangerous. When confronted on the lack of political fervor in his films, Ray said, “in a fantasy like *The Kingdom of Diamonds*, you can be forthright, but, if you're dealing with contemporary characters, you can be articulate only up to a point because of censorship. You simply cannot attack the party in power. It

was tried in *The Story of a Chair* and the entire film was destroyed. What can you do? You are aware of the problems and you deal with them, but you also know the limit, the constraints beyond which you just cannot go" (Gupta 27). Under these circumstances, filmmakers had to hide important political messages in films, and that's precisely what Ray did — using the strategy of deploying music to voice dissent.

As I have stated earlier, the use of songs to effect social change has been under-theorized in Ray's works. This chapter is specifically concerned with songs in Ray's films that address politically challenging moments and movements. I will focus particularly on *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* (1969) and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), perhaps the only two Ray 'musicals'[7], as the most important films about political resistance and criticism of totalitarian government. The two films are not only far from "juvenile" fantasies, as is the common charge levied against them, but also extremely political. These films are misunderstood or undertheorized because the songs are not taken into account. By looking at songs in Ray's films as deliberate narrative integration rather than formulaic embellishments, we can expose the political Ray, especially since Ray was himself the songwriter, composer, and musician who controlled every aspect of the song-making process in these films. Even though Ray had worked with classical music stalwarts like Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan, and Ali Akbar for his earlier films, Ray believed that directors who had little sense of music and had to depend entirely on professional

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[7] Ray did not use a lot of playback songs in his other films, though he did use a lot of music and sound effects. There were the occasional Tagore songs, but the Goopy Bagha films are musicals in the real sense of the term. The third film in the series, *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo* (1991) is directed by Sandip Ray, but Satyajit Ray directs the music, so I will refer to it in my analysis.

composers didn't quite achieve the desired effect. Which is why, starting with *Teen Kanya* or *Three daughters* (1961), Ray wrote his own music so as "to be able to intimate, even more 'quietly' than the professional composers, the subjective experience of his characters" (Cardullo xiv). It was in this film that Ray proved that film music is one of the components of a film, which a director with a musical background is most suited to handle.

Satyajit Ray has been hailed as a pioneer in the use and creation of background music in Indian cinema, with critics going so far as to say, "no other director in India has achieved what Ray has achieved with film music" (*The Music of Satyajit Ray*). Yet, there have been few studies that analyze Ray's original film songs, owing to the reputation of film songs as a commercial element unsuited for high art. However, Ray did think about film songs deliberately. Before Ray, the incorporation of song and dance, which has always been an essential characteristic of Indian cinema, bore no connection to the demand of the scripts. "People were given to singing in their death beds, and it was always associated with love scenes" (Seton 28). Ray revolutionized the concept and presentation of music in films. He used songs at critical moments in the films to supplement their narrative content. In *Jalshaghar* (1958), the two classical songs and the Katthak dance, which form the focal point of the film challenge the very convention of song and dance in the context of Indian cinema. Never before had classical singing and dancing been presented as "integral focal points of realistic sequences integral to the development of the story" (Seton 149). The *Goopy Bagha* series is unique in that all the important developments and commentaries in the film happen in song sequences. But the songs do not seem melodramatic, misplaced or decorative, but imaginative and functional.

In fact, in *Goopy Gayne Bagha Byne* Ray devoted one whole song to his justification of using this medium for greater political purpose. The song representing the first public performance of Goopy and Bagha goes:

Greetings Maharaja, greetings to all
Our home is in far-away Bengal
We are simple village boys who roam about the land
We are strangers here,
We speak a tongue you will not understand
We sing in that language, pay attention Raja
It's the language of rhythm, language of rhyme
The language of singing, while the drum beats time
This language so uttered discerns everyone
Young and old, rich and poor take it to their heart
We hope the Maharaja will like our simple art.

Despite such declarations, ironically, people miss the political point of *Goopy Gayne Bagha Byne* because of its elaborate musical sequences. In *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* Ray relies heavily on musical motifs for political expressions, though it is the song and dance and the apparent lack of political texture that might make the film seem juvenile.

Ray's first original film song was for *Chiriakhana or The Zoo* (1967), and he was quite satisfied with what he had achieved. It was his growing interest in writing songs that led him to create the *Goopy Bagha* series. Ray started by writing some of the songs for the Goopy Bagha series even before he had written the sequences or scenarios in which the songs would have taken place, because he wanted to know if he'd be able to compose the songs for the film before starting to shoot. So, the *Goopy Bagha* series was entirely imagined from a musical standpoint. He took up the project seriously when it became clear that he could.

The story of *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* revolves around Gopinath Kyne (Tapen Chatterjee), the son of a poor grocer Kanu Kyne from a village called Amloki. Goopy wants to become a singer but is not particularly gifted. He is persuaded by derisive village elders to sing for the king uninvited at the break of dawn, a defiant action, which leads to his banishment from Amloki on a donkey. Exiled into a forest of Notun Gan (New Village), he meets Bagha (Rabi Ghosh), an exile from the village Hortuki on account of having no talent with the drum. They start singing and drumming, initially to scare off a roaming tiger but end up attracting a group of ghosts who are fascinated by their music. The king of ghosts, mesmerized by their performance, grants them three boons: they will always have enough to eat and decent clothes to wear whenever needed just by clapping their hands; they will always be able to go anywhere by putting on a pair of magic shoes and clapping their hands; they will be able to fascinate people so much with their music that their listeners will be transfixed while they perform. The morning after the encounter with the ghosts, still displaced and homeless, they travel to Shundi to impress its benevolent king into appointing them as court musicians so they can have a permanent shelter, and they succeed. However, they soon learn that the king of Halla (the long lost brother of the king of Shundi) is planning to attack Shundi after being brainwashed by Halla's evil prime minister and court magician. The rest of the story details how Goopy and Bagha prevent the attack, reunite the separated royal brothers, and marry their daughters.

Even though the plot of *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* was based on Satyajit Ray's grandfather Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury's short story, Ray had made significant changes to the story. The film, in fact, was a lot more political than the original story, and

most of the political commentary was added in the form of songs. As a result the film's metalanguage establishes a point of view that is substantially different from the source story, by deemphasizing the story/narrative and incorporating "attractions".

Hirak Rajar Deshe, a political satire written by Satyajit Ray, is a sequel to *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen.* Bored with their lives as the crown princes of Shundi and Halla, Goopy Bagha are looking for some adventure when the king asks them to visit the kingdom of Hirak on his behalf. The king of Hirak turns out to be a tyrant who decries freedom of speech and education and punishes all forms of dissent. The film details how Goppy and Bagha use their magic powders to free Hirak from the despotic rule of its king.

II.1 Decolonizing Narrative History through Activist Music

Songs have been historically read off from the surface of the film as extra-filmic or formulaic or unnecessary, especially in films about historical events. Therefore, they are passed by unnoticed or unheard in our habits of seeing the film. This is why musicals like *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* (1969) and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), which are in fact two of Ray's most political films covering some of twentieth century's most devastating catastrophes, are ignored as fantasies. What Ray does in these films and others is deemphasize narration as the only effective way of persuasion and refocus the audience's attention on the aesthetic details.

The very act of deemphasizing narrative can be read as political activism because the act of narrativization itself can blur the distinction between realistic and imaginary discourses, since they can both produce close meanings, creating what Roland Barthes calls a "reality effect". Barthes writes, in "The Discourse of History", "In objective history,

the ‘real’ is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent. The situation defines what we might call the *reality effect*” (139). Here Barthes explains how the function of narrative is not to represent the real but rather to constitute a spectacle of language that stands in as an authority for the real. History, then, is no longer a simple narrativization of events but is also a metanarrative, which is controlled by the conditions from which it arose, and where the narrative is inseparably intertwined with the ideology from which it was constituted.

Since ideology forms the frames of values that inform narrative, the act of narrativization therefore can be equated with propaganda, because it represents the hegemonic version of the real, something that Ray tried to resist. Both fiction and history are genres that project the narrative structures of events as natural and objective, producing a self-contained plausibility. The true ideological nature of these narratives, therefore, becomes less visible as the narrative becomes more reflective of present-day perceptions of the past than the actuality of past events (Skoller xxii). Reactionary films that focus on retelling histories in “realistic” or “melodramatic” fashions, therefore only present another subjective version of the real. Ray strived to present the objective truth that did not change meaning with the passage of time, or that did not deliver absolutist versions of the real. In “The Question of Reality”, Ray said:

> The sharpest revelations of the truth in cinema come from the details perceived through the eyes of artists. It is the sensitive artist’s subjective approach to reality that ultimately matters, and this is true as much of documentaries as of fiction films. Details can make both of them real, in the same way and to the same degree, while lack of details can turn both into dead matter in spite of all the verisimilitude that camera and microphone can impart. I like Sukhdev’s *India’67*, but not for the broad percussive contrast between poverty and affluence, beauty and squalor, modernity and primitivity—however well shot and cut they may be. I like it for its details—for the black beetle that crawls along the hot sand, for the street dog that pees on the parked

> cycle, for the bead of perspiration that dangles on the nosetip of the begrimed musician. (Ray 38)

The avant-garde cinema that prioritizes aesthetics over conventional linear narrative structures is in opposition with the traditional dominant cinema about historical events that uses the camera to recreate indexical signs of the past, thus placing the transmission of historical knowledge in the domain of what can be seen, re-created, and represented. Such a liberalization of the past through the re-creation of historical events with image and sound making technologies separates the past from the present, creating a safe distance between then and now.

In contrast, Satyajit Ray's films, by focusing on aesthetic details, take up the opposite strategy. Ray's films work to undermine the perceived gaps between past and present by using a range of cinematic techniques, like allegory, to evoke memories of the past that are unseen, unspeakable, fleeting, and unverifiable through normal representational means. The timeless nature of the songs in Ray's films, with their lyrics that are still relevant in the present political contexts, heightens the futility of looking at historical events as past incidents with no connection with the present. Thus, aesthetic details can give rise to new ways of seeing the past—not as an overarching and fixed narrative of something at a distance but as part of a memory that is being continuously transformed by the present. The allegorical premise of both *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak rajar Deshe*, then creates the possibility for viewers to actively produce links between past, present, and future, between what can be seen on screen or evoked through songs and what can be explained or only signaled.

Ray's films also produce links between movies to strengthen the connection between historical incidents and their impact on present day political experiences. Satyajit Ray's 1973 film, *Asani Sanket* or *Distant Thunder*, set during the Second World War and fictionalizing the true story of the "man-made famine" that hit Bengal in 1943 as a direct result of the then British government prioritizing military and defense needs over the basic needs of the rural poor, is considered to be perhaps the most directly political of Ray's films. In this film, Ray does not shy away from recording the crisis that unfolded during 1942-1945 in terrifying detail. However, even though the Goopy Bagha series is considered to be children's fantasy, the political undertones in the films anticipate those of *Distant Thunder.* For example, both *Distant Thunder* and *Goopy Gyen Bagha Bayen* are concerned with war and hunger; both show how people from upper class and caste exploit the poor farmers, and how artificial and social hierarchies can be quickly overturned in the face of large-scale political and economic crisis. Moreover, the village where Goopy and Bagha meet and the village that *Distant Thunder* is set in have the same name—"Notun Gan" or New Village.

In addition to addressing the deep-rooted social evils of casteism and colonialism, the Goopy Bagha series is set against the backdrop of three important historical and political events in Bengal and India: the 1943 famine, the Marxist uprising of the late sixties and early seventies, and the Emergency Rule of 1975. Calcutta was struggling to accommodate an ever-increasing influx of people resulting from the famine of 1943 and the subsequent partitions of 1947. The conflict of class interests and the accompanying urban industrial problems overburdened Calcutta. Tensions climaxed during the armed

uprising of the Naxalites from 1967 to 1975[8]. Although it is not obviously stated, *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* is concerned with the Bengal famine of 1943 amidst food rationing by the British Army, and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* subtly chronicles the rural uprising of the late 1960s as well as the Emergency rule of 1975 that threatened civil liberties. There are strong social, political and ideological messages hidden within the fantastic imageries and songs in these films.

Satyajit Ray had himself witnessed the Bengal famine, and even though he was criticized for being "indifferent" to the famine, he was, in fact, deeply concerned with the trauma of the 1943 famine, which is reflected in several of his films, including *Goopy Gayen bagha Bayen*, until finally finding the most detailed expression in *Distant Thunder*, a movie he made only four years after *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*. The major reasons for the Bengal famine, such as the brutal government suppression of rebellion accompanied by mass killing, mass imprisonment, looting and burning of houses and villages, and seizure and hoarding of food are played out through *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The Goopy Bagha series paints a picture of everyday life during the socio-political turmoil following the Bengal famine that remains at the forefront through post-independence Bengali history, the Naxalite protests and the biopolitics that provoke such turmoil. The movies highlight the social upheaval that comes in the wake of a catastrophe.

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[8] The Naxalite movement had lasted several years had different phases: The first phase was the Naxalbari revolt itself. The second began in April 1969, the same year that the first film, *Goopy Gyen Bagha Byen,* was released, when the third Communist Party (in Bengal), was formed. The third phase covered the period of a series of Naxalite rural uprisings. An important feature of Naxalite policy in this period was the adoption of the annihilation of class enemies as the only tactic of armed struggle.

Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe,* a sequel to *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, was a children's film with a political subject. It was about a village rising against feudal oppression, which reflected the ongoing struggle of Indians against the oppressive emergency rule of the 1970s. The story of Hirak Raja was an allegory about the absolutely powerful, and absolutely corrupt ruler/leader. Viewers can also relate to the movie because it speaks of the suppression of a rebellion, a Naxalite rebellion under the guidance of Siddharthasankar Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal from 1972 till 1977. The movie was a scathing satire that spoke truth to power and ruffled many feathers. Soumitra Chatterjee, the leading actor in the film, has called it Ray's "only political film" (176 Nyce).

Hirak Rajar Deshe cast Utpal Dutt in the role of the tyrant Hirak, who forces brainwashing on his oppressed subjects and opponents to turn them into yes-men. Mainak Biswas, a professor of film studies at Kolkata's Jadavpur University has said:

> Ray had been under attack by the Left for his silence, which also embarrassed his fans. But few speak of his one act of defiance during the Emergency…When Mrs Gandhi was visiting Calcutta in 1976, she asked the then-governor Siddhartha Shankar Ray — a key architect of the Emergency and the chief minister who oversaw the Naxal killings of Bengal in the early 1970s — that she'd like to meet the city's intellectuals. Everyone showed up but Ray. In his typical style, he told them there was a Mozart concert at the American Centre that he could not miss.

This shows why Ray cannot be limited to the political atmosphere of the present. Ray's rebellion was subtle and not ostentatious. This is why he chose to critique Indira Gandhi's emergency rule in India through a historical lens, not liming it to the contemporary political scene, but through a critique of the more universal effects of absolute power when held in the hands of a limited few. As Ramchandra Guha elaborates, the Emergency curbed

intellectuals' freedom of expression and individual democratic rights, and promoted a magisterial image of Indira Gandhi as way of advancing the cause of the nation. Therefore, Ray comments on the constricting conditions through a historical analysis of the cult figure in politics, which Ashish Rajadhaksya calls his "indirect response" to a situation he has no sympathy for.

The tyrant Hirak is based on the image of Indira Gandhi, who, like Hirak, was of authoritarian nature and could not tolerate criticism against her government. Mrs. Gandhi sought to chain the Press, which had been largely against her leadership and consistently questioned her dictatorial impulses. Hirak too tries to silence anyone who speaks unfavorably of him. In the film, Hirok Raja says that he doesn't exercise violence:

Hirok Raja prane marena (Diamond King doesn't kill)
garoder dhar dharena (he doesn't need prisons)
shule choray na (doesn't put you on a spear)
jaynto poray na (doesn't burn you alive)

Hirok rajje sashti sudhu ektai (in the Diamond Kingdom there is only one punishment)

He keeps his kingdom in order by using only non-violent punishment—"*mogoj dholai*" (brain washing), or silencing. When his *gobeshok* (scientist-wizard) announces that he has just discovered *Jantarmantar*—the machine capable of brain washing, the Raja is thrilled:

Raja: Mogoj dholai? (brain washing?)
Gobeshok: Thik tai (indeed)
E emon kol (this machine)
Jate raj karjo hoye jai jol (will make governance a no brainer)
Raja: Eto obishassho! (It's unbelievable!)

When Hirok Raja ordered his education minister to shut down the only local school and burn all books, he gave the following justification:

era joto besi pore (more they read)
toto besi jane (more they learn)
toto kom mane (less they obey)

In the scene preceding the closure of the school, the poet laureate recites the brain-washing chant specific to educators:

lekha pora kore je (he who studies)
onahara more se (dies of starvation)
janar kono sesh nai (there is no end to knowing)
janar chesta britha tai (desire to acquire knowledge is hence futile)

The scene has "as much bite in it as anything in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four," Andrew Robinson wrote in his biography. There were two sources of resistance against the Raja's tyranny however, and it came a musician and a teacher. The folk singer Charan Das who fulfills the role of a journalist was silenced by being chained and left in the jungle by the palace guards after he sang the following song in front of the Raja:

dekho bhalo jone (a good person)
roilo bhanga ghore (has to live in a shattered home)
mondo je se (while the cruel one)
singhasone chore (occupies the throne)

Such is the state in the Hirak kingdom. The peasants and miners live in abject poverty while the ruler reaps the profit and lavishes it on unnecessary feats and celebrations. All voices of protests are forcefully silenced through "brainwashing".

Udayan, the teacher tells his students, "When the king becomes the enemy of the people then it becomes a serious problem." Unlike Charan Das, Udayan escapes

punishment through silencing by fleeing the kingdom and taking refuge in the mountains after the school is shut down and Raja's army raids his house. With the help of Goopy and Bagha who have magical powers, Udayan plots to dethrone the king.

Figure 4: Udayan leads his pupils to the fair ground to topple the statue of Hirak.

With his unfettered thinking and with the help of Goopy and Bagha, Udayan leads his pupils to the fair ground to topple the statue of Hirak (as shown in the figure). In the end of the film the students rejoice after successfully dethroning the king.

The first scene of the film opens with a close-up image of an hourglass. *Hirak Rajar deshe* was released ten years after *Goopy Gyen Bagha* Byne, and this image was a reference to the ten years in between that Goppy Bagha spent in inactivity by living a life of luxury in the palace. Goopy and Bagha feel like they have wasted their youth, their boons, and their acute awareness of history by not engaging in the outside world. The opening song is a call to action, a call to the youth to mobilize against the government.

No no no no
No more delay!
Blood still runs in out veins
Warm blood, full of desires
All our bones are strong still
We can still take a beating.

There's still time
There's still time
No more delay.

When accused of staying silent in the face of oppressive political regimes, Ray replied,

> "I have made political statements more clearly than anyone else, including Mrinal Sen. In The Middleman I included a long conversation in which a Naxalite discusses the tasks ahead. He talks nonsense, he tells lies, but his very presence is significant. If any other director had made that film, that scene would not have been allowed. But there are definitely restrictions on what a director can say. You know that certain statements and portrayals will never get past the censors**....**Have you seen *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (The Kingdom of Diamonds)? There is a scene of the great clean-up where all the poor people are driven away. That is a direct reflection of what happened in Delhi and other cities during Indira Gandhi's Emergency".

It is true that in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* Ray was openly critical of the dictatorial head. In one song, Goopy and Bagha openly rebuke Hirak:

Not machine
I am a life
I know, I know, I know, I know
Hirak Raja is devilish
Raja is bad, evil, clever, hypocrite
Raja is vile, spiteful, cruel.
Raja's malpractice tortures the downtrodden
And brings misfortune upon the nation.
Raja silenced those who expressed displeasure

It is obvious; therefore, that Ray included the important political commentary in songs because songs are not censored. Stories circulated about how the entire Indian film industry was held to ransom by those who held power, and how leading stars and producers were coerced into participation and endorsement of governmental propaganda (happening even today with the pre-election release of the Narendra Modi biopic), and attacked for tax-dodging (and even used, it was rumored, to cover up the sexual excesses

of corrupt power-brokers), how popular films were used to dissipate oppositional rallies, and how films seen to be critical of the new power regime were vandalized[9].

To understand the political implications of Ray's films, one must therefore pay close attention to the song lyrics, aesthetic details, situations, subtle historical references, breaks in narratives, and genre conventions, which is a transparent vehicle of discourses and ideologies. Ray's films make meaning through the simplicity of forms, devoid of sentimental expectations or overt narrativizations. Thus, by refocusing the audience's attention on the aesthetic details and songs, by entrusting two simpleton protagonists for the cultural production of nationalism, and by committing to the folk, ordinary and popular, Satyajit Ray creates a genre of art films that is essentially indigenous.

Furthermore, by rejecting an elite nationalist discourse and making the historical films in the genre of popular and folkloric style that favor an ahistorical form with uncertain dates and indeterminate geographical location, Ray demonstrates that it is possible to recount the history of British rule in India without following the western conventions of dates, documents, colonial historical accounts, and famous events.

Ray's films exemplify the protagonizing role that music plays in the formation of identity. Music does not merely signify a given identity, but rather functions as part of the process of identity formation. In the beginning, Goopy is portrayed as innocent, naïve and too trusting. When the village-Brahmins make fun of his singing and encourage Goopy to sing near the palace at the crack of dawn to impress the King, he believes them. His father,

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[9] *Bhabisyater Bhoot* (2019), by the director of *Bhooter Bhabisyat*, experienced the same fate until the Supreme court intervened and the film was allowed to release all across the country.

aware of his son's trusting nature, exclaims, "had God given you a brain, I could have explained to you that they were making fun of you…. But you wouldn't take the advice of a poor man, oh no—you had to go to the banyan tree to seek the advice of the Brahmins!"

In this short sequence, Ray packs the history of caste struggle in India, something that was not included in Upendra Kishore's original story in which Goopy was actually driven out by his own father because he was scaring away customers with his discordant singing. The unfair exploitation of poor farmers by Brahmins and royalty expose the history of casteism. However, Goopy's failure to grasp the real motive of the Brahmins' encouragement highlights his lack of understanding of basic class/caste histories in India. His ignorance of history makes him misjudge the king and the Brahmins, ultimately leading to his banishment from the village.

In the jungle of "Notun Gan", when Goopy and Bagha encounter the King of ghosts, what they really encounter is the ghost of the past, or king of the past, as past and ghost are homonyms in Bengali. Before granting them their wishes, the King of Ghosts presents a dance sequence for Goopy Bagha. In this dance, the haunting repetition of Bengal's traumatic past is reiterated with the intention of inspiring a sense of solidarity and responsibility toward injustices endured by those long dead. And Goopy and Bagha do seem to establish an immediate camaraderie with or even reverence for the King of ghosts. Perhaps, Ray is playing here with Walter Benjamin's notion of being accountable to the oppressive past by disputing the history of the victors. The six and a half minute ghost dance sequence (can also be read as the dance of the past) in the film is very

Figure 5: Ghost dance scene.

significant. To a casual observer, it may seem like a distraction, but Ray conceives the ghosts as representative from Bengal's past" (Nyce 115). Ray scholar Andrew Robinson has pointed out the extraordinary and experimental style of the ghost dance Ray used in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* in relation to the four caste systems in India. The caste system in India is based on hierarchical ranking of the work that individuals do in a society like priests, warriors, farmers, and laborers. Robinson points out that the "six and a half minute of the exotic dances of the ghost are definitely the four caste systems we have in India" (Robinson 2004, 73). Satyajit Ray effectively used the four castes, but he imagined the caste system to be upside down, as shown in the ghost dance scene figure above. Therefore, he reversed the hierarchy by positioning the priests in the lowest level and the farmers or the common people on top in the dance sequence. This is congruent with Chakraborty priest's conclusions in *Distant Thunder* that "the problem is that the peasants do all the work and we (Brahmins) live off them".

Towards the end of the sequence, as the tympanic rhythm speeds up, the ghosts start fighting suggesting the downfall of all these groups. However, we never see one group/caste attack another. The final layered images of the dancers, where each group dances in line above another, seems to suggest no internal conflict among these groups. Ray says, "since ghosts would not have an internal conflict….the amity would come easily and it would come through a song" (Nyce 115). The ghosts are not limited by the linear, homogeneous sense of time; therefore, class, caste and other differences do not easily sway them. It is only after encountering the King of Ghosts/past and acquiring a nonsynchronic sense of time that Goopy and Bagha are able to banish the darkness of ignorance and gain knowledge of the oppressive caste and class histories. It is after the encounter with the ghost of the past that they are able to assume their new identities through the redemptive power of memory/history.

The haunting resonated by the ghost dance is not merely a reiteration of the past, but the ghostly dance reenactment of traumatic events from the past troubles the neat boundaries between past, present and future. When Ray speaks of these fantastic stories, it may seem like they are divorced from reality and irreverent to contemporary political situations. But, since Ray invokes an alternative historical time unhindered by the limitations of modern time, it can be argued that Ray's criticism has eternal reality. In other words, the ghost dance, or the film by extension, works as an "allegorical frame in which an almost forgotten history becomes newly meaningful as a kind of haunting or ghostly return" (Cua Lim 149). In other words, by disturbing the presumed boundaries between past, present and future, Ray is able to render his film a contemporaneity. The political Ray is not limited by contemporary politics.

All the outdoor scenes in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* are shot in typical, nondescript Bengali villages. The camera captures the description of what could be any Bengali village, suggesting a familiarity and inflected with a strange foreboding. As shown in the image below, Goopy and Bagha ask for directions to the palace in Shundi in what looks like a typical Bengali village.

Figure 6: Goopy and Bagha ask for directions to the Palace in Shundi.

As the camera pans over the faces of disheveled soldiers, malnourished children, voiceless farmers the viewers can experience the sensation of a memory, of something similar that had occurred in these villages. In the slow and mundane movements around the villages of Shundi, the past begins to shake out of ordinary images. These bear memory of two of the twentieth century's most catastrophic events, namely The Second World War and the Bengal famine of 1943. The shots are not composed to recreate historical memories that privilege a specific point of view but are created to guide the viewers to make their own meaning through the images.

Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen, through a refusal to represent or recreate images of the past, evokes a past that only exists in our collective memory. "As I watch, I am aware of

the real time of the film moving through the gate of the projector, which also places me in the present, heightening my awareness of the act of seeing and thinking. Out of this form of extreme attention, the film becomes an experience of history, not as re-creation but as a force that acts on my body and mind" (Skoller xiv). This opens up new possibilities of how cinema might be used to enlarge our culture or individual's conception of what it is to think historically. *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*, despite its juvenile fantasy appearance, is an avant-garde cinema confronting the most challenging questions about history and the ways our culture uses visual images to make sense of events from our past in the present.

Ray's films signal the aspects of historical knowledge that are blocked, incomplete, and perceived, like the famine or emergency rule. Invisible aesthetic details that surround visual images supplement the actual image with a surplus of meanings that deepen and give a poetic dimension to history. These spectral presences, "which are often sensed but remain un-apprehendable, are nevertheless part of the energy of the past and exert themselves as a force on the present. The recognition of such unforeseen forces creates an awareness of other temporalities in which linear chronologies are called into question in favor of other temporal structures such as simultaneity and virtuality". (Skoller xvi)

For Ray, the film song space thus functions as a historical repository; its lyrical content supplementing simulated history, reflecting whatever social challenges people were facing at the time. The songs in both *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* not only critique the authoritarian government, they also advise people on how to participate, potentially building the pre-democratic movement that the films describe. Music and socio political relationship thus go hand in hand. By singing about what is wrong, they undercut the dictators' official discourse that all was in order. In conclusion, in

Ray's films, and elsewhere, music offers a tangible thread through which one can read recent history.

Ray regarded the past not as an ideal and complete account but as a starting point to discover our history. History to him was not something to be idealized, but something to be learned from. For example, caste was not a thing of the past in West Bengal. Ray knew that there are hidden, even insidious, ways in which a modern caste society has flourished since colonial times and shaped academic, journalistic, and popular understandings of Bengali society, culture, history, and politics. There is also the obvious issue of upper-caste dominance in the domain of formal politics despite the sway of communism for more than three decades (something that happens in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* too).

Figure7: Goopy and Bagha eat from silver serve ware in their simple, ragged clothes.

Even though the king of ghosts blessed Goopy and Bagha, they haven't quite risen through class hierarchies. The three boons Goopy and Bagha ask for are really the most basic life necessities. They ask for enough food and clothing, the power to wander, and the power to perform music (can be read as freedom of speech). As is evident in the image above, Goopy and Bagha eat from silver serve ware in their simple, ragged clothes.

It is interesting that Goopy and Bagha are able to sing only because of the ghostly boon. They now have an insight into the world that transcends the limited understanding of time. Time doesn't bind them. They are able to travel thousands of miles with just one clap and magic shoes. But their stories become important only insofar as they are political activists trying the save the people from the yoke of oppression. The dawn after the encounter with the ghosts when Goopy sings he is able to render the only song he knows, the *raag bhairabi*, with artistry. The lyrics of the song remain the same, what have changed are only his voice and the possible knowledge to actually understand the meaning of the song:

Dakho re, noyon mele.
Jogoter Bahar,
(Open your eyes and look at the wonders of the world,)
Diner aaloy kate ondhokar..!
Aha mori ki bahar..!
(the light of day banishes the darkness of the night)

The darkness here signifies ignorance, which can be eliminated only with light, or awareness. It is also significant that Goopy knows "only one song", which is a "raag Bhairavi" or a morning raga. The symbolic meaning of light and darkness play an important role in the film. It is implicitly stated in the film that the simpletons, subaltern, Goopy and Bagha, who are the so-called uneducated uncivilized lot, actually possess real knowledge, while the Brahmins, the king of Amloki and the prime minister of Halla possess darkness. The inhuman, deceptive and selfish prime minister is the main source of darkness in the land. He has degraded the lives of his citizens by the interruption of wars.

In one song in the final film Goopy and Bagha sing:

Onek chole onek dekhe
(after walking and seeing a lot)
Onek shune onek sikhe
(after hearing and learning a lot)

Kete geche moner andhokar
Moder kete geche moner andhokar
(we have banished the darkness of our hearts)
Mora ekhan jabar samajdar
(We are very well-informed now)

It is only after they actually have the power to sing that they can see the difference between good and evil. Music strengthens them. Once they are so equipped and educated, they are easily able to see through the masks of men. And it is by deliberate design that Ray decided to impart the most telling or important lessons of the film in the form of songs.

On their spying visit to Halla, Goopy and Bagha quickly learn that the people there are starving and militarized to overtake the unsuspecting Shundi under a zealous prime minister. The parallels between Halla and Bengal under British rule are unmistakable. There are numerous references in the film to the 1943 famine. In one particular scene, the the plump prime minister is seen talking to his skinny spy to Shundi, image below, while eating roasted meat. The spy longingly looks at the Prime minister's plate and says, "It's been a long time since I had a good meal, Sir." And the prime minister replies, "Why do you people always think of eating? We've got a war on our hands, and on top of that a couple of rogues messing everything up and you talk of eating!"

Figure 8: The plump prime minister talks to his skinny spy.

This conversation evokes Churchill's infamous comments about the Indian famine[10]. Much like Bengal then, people in Halla are forced to pay taxes when they can barely find a decent meal. When Goopy and Bagha reach Halla, they see a couple of palace guards imprisoning farmers for defaulting on taxes. A passerby says, "Those who can't even eat, how can they pay taxes?"

It becomes evident that the Halla army are so malnourished, so underfed, that they are unfit for combat. When the king witnesses the condition of the army, he exclaims, "Are you going to make war with that lot? What if they trip each other up and fall flat on their faces in Shundi? Where will my honor be? I will have their heads chopped off."

Later, when Goopy and Bagha reject the food offered to them by the prison guard, the prime-minister forces them to eat the meal saying "The entire kingdom is eating this gruel,

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10 "If food is so scarce, why hasn't Gandhi died yet"? and it's all their fault anyway for breeding like rabbits. He said 'I hate the Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion'."

who are you to reject? Kings and princes?”. Perhaps the most biting critique appears in the final song of the film:

> Look at those soldiers marching off to war.
> All those cutting slashing things for making blood and gore.
> You can take a beating if your stomach’s full, they say
> This lot looks like they will die of empty stomach on the way.

Figure 9: Emaciated Halla soldiers look up at the sky as Goopy and Bagha make pots of sweets rain.

The procession of the starving army with the song[11] playing in the background anticipates the procession of starving villagers in *Distant Thunder* walking from village to city and growing constantly larger in size. In fact, the war is suspended when Goopy and Bagha drop hundreds of pots of sweets on the field, distracting the underfed army, who abandon their posts to eat the magical sweets. As shown in the image above, the emaciated Halla soldiers look up at the sky as Goopy and Bagha make pots of sweets rain.

[11] This may be the only song that has immortalized/archived the gruesome effects of the famine. The lost status of the brahmin in Asani Sanket echoes the Bhooter dance.

Figure 10: Malnourished Halla soldiers ignore orders and abandon marching to war to eat sweets.

In the above image malnourished Halla soldiers ignore orders and abandon marching to war to eat sweets. Finally, Goopy and Bagha abduct the King from Halla and reunite him with his brother in Shundi, before burning the magic powder that the Halla magician had crafted to restore the speech of Shundi citizens. This film emphasizes the restoration of voice or political agency to a community struggling to fight political injustice and oppression. Many political movements have used music as a way of inviting and maintaining broad-based participation in their cause. Goopy and Bagha too bring about the social transformation through their music or the so-called Peace through Art.

In the closing song of the film Goopy and Bagha declare that they can admonish and eliminate evil people with the help of Bhooter raja's boons, and that's all they do.

Mora Bhooter rajar bor er jore porer bhoot charai
R kono kaj nai

Therefore, if Bhooter Raja's boon could transform Goopy and Bagha from talentless musicians to artists bringing political change through art, then Satyajit Ray too is

an activist director whose art has transformative social goals. "What we can do—and do profitably—is to explore new themes, new aspects of society, new facets of human relationships. But if you want to do that, and be serious and artistic about it, you cannot afford to sugar your pill for the masses who are used to tasty morsels of make-believe" (Ganguly 5). By highlighting aesthetic details instead of narrativizations, Ray disrupts the melodramatic narratives, challenges oppressive powers, and becomes directly political. His films and songs remain timeless and relevant even in the current atmosphere of regressive politics in India.

In *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* Ray offers a political examination of Indian history. The lines, "You can take a beating if your stomach's full, they say. This lot looks like they will die of empty stomach on the way—marching off to war" sums up the political struggle of Bengal/India under the British rule. And even though *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* is based on a children's fantasy, it is still political and activist because historicism is not a recreation of "real events" of the past but construction in the present, through aesthetic means, an image of a past that functions in relation to specific contemporary social and political needs.

II.2 Film Songs as Aternative Narrative/political discourse

Ray's use of music (and dance) in *Goopy Gyen Bagha Byen* offers a mode of perception that hints at the real while also undercutting the primacy of the visual. Ray's song picturizations tend to avoid big dramatic scenes in which the director manipulates the feelings or reaction of the audience. This deliberate strategy helps the audience to engage with the songs and lyrics, rather than be distracted by them. The songs can lead to a

cultural reformation that inform the audience about their neocolonized position. These film songs may not qualify as narrative strategies directly aiming to achieve consensus, or as producing any lasting policy consequences, but they create a medium for civic engagement and offer both political criticism and cultural bonding for all viewers across the ages.

Figure 11: A meme with Hirak Raja's famous line, "the more they read, the more they know, the less they obey"

Recently, snippets of songs from the Goopy Bagha films have been uploaded to YouTube and shared across all social media platforms as indirect critique of Modi led BJP government's affront on free speech, and its tendency to term anyone who upholds ideas contrary to the BJP state's Hindu Rashtra worldview as separatist, anti-national and undemocratic. Ray's songs therefore form popular political expressions, which can be used by oppressed people to advance their agendas. And new technologies make it possible for anyone to engage in political activism. For example, as shown in the image above, a meme with Hirak Raja's famous line, "the more they read, the more they know, the less they obey" has been virally shared since Modi government started its repeated and sustained attacks on liberal academic institutes in India, like JNU, and higher education in general.

The Goopy Bagha series can be called exhibitionist cinema. As with the early Cinema of Attractions, the musical interludes in these films are devices to entertain the

audience, but they are also artificial stimulus borrowed from the popular arts and injected into cinema with the intention of organizing popular energy for radical purpose (Gunning 68). Ray's song "not machine" from Hirak Rajar Deshe was not only relevant for its time, but transcended its era to become timeless political expression, because it pointed out the problem with poverty and inequality, suppression of speech, and the cruelty of a despotic king. But the song has transcended the very specific subject matter to become a modern day Bengali anthem to protest both federal and central government's attack on freedom of speech:

Raja suppressed those,
Who, if energized, would dethrone the king
Tell me Raja if I am wrong
If all is planned well,
Raja can be taught a strict lesson.
Listen raja, there is no escape.

Ray knew that he was making films for an untrained audience, and, therefore, he needed to not overtly narrate things, but present things. The ability of cinema of attractions to *show* something, contrasted to the voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema, established a very special relationship to its spectator. "Far from denying its presence, cinema of attractions seeks confrontation with the spectator. By pointing at us, attraction tries to unsettle, surprise, provoke, and even assault us" (Jaques 282). As an artivist filmmaker, Ray strived to appeal to large audiences in order to impact political action, which is why he used proven filmic strategies and stylistic elements like song and dance for mass appeal and education. Thus, the class-based and narrow definition of art films that historically meant that only a certain "elite" class of the public conversant in European cinema styles and

theory had access to such films, even when they covered larger social and political issues and voiced the concerns of the minorities, does not necessarily apply to Ray's films.

Furthermore, Ray's films establish a renewed understanding of the primacy of indigenous narrative traditions in decolonizing. In India "cinema has actually overlapped with these traditions and displaced them. Unlike in the West, no long intervening literary culture separated the oral traditions of peasant society from the advent of cinema. Indeed that the cinema actively set out to displace folk entertainments is suggested by the fact that the cinema appropriated its forms, transporting its ingredients and often its subjects, into the standard fare of Indian screen" (Kothari 31). However, any study connecting indigenous oral traditions and cinematic language focuses only on popular cinema. Which leads to declaring the good cinema as a direct descendant of Europe, devoid of traditional storytelling elements, and Bollywood as the language of the "people of dust". By reworking indigenous narrative elements—folklores, myths, indigenous histories—Ray's films, therefore, challenge the fundamental question about what art films mean, when working within/against the colonizing discourses and practices of cinema, establishing that parallel/artivist cinema is perfectly suited as a medium of subaltern/minority politics.

Being aware of the social reach and political impact of cinema in India, Satyajit Ray had espoused for a more hybrid form of filmmaking and was very much driven by audience interest and profit. Ray understood that "to the vast conglomerate that makes up the Indian public the cinema is the only form of available inexpensive entertainment. They have not the choice that the western public has of music halls, revues, plays, concerts, and even, sometimes, of a permanent circus. Yet the craving for spectacle, for romance, for a funny turn or two, for singing and dancing, remains and has somehow to be met. If the film

does not meet it, nothing will" (*Our Films, Their Films* 72-3). Ray was aware that this excessive pressure on Indian cinema as the sole entertainer for the masses was bound to create tasteless, uninspiring, and bad cinema. Nonetheless, despite the perceived standardization and formulaic quality of music in mainstream cinema, Ray has strategically used music to touch a cord of experience or emotion with his Bengali audience**.**

Ray was aware that generating public interest in his films was crucial for sustainability. He believed, the "idea, you see, is to get the public into the theater. The rest is up to the film" (49). In order to make films appeal to the masses, they had to be entertaining, because films that are "marked by an overt preoccupation with idiom and form rather than with content may have problems of communication, and therefore, of survival" (Ray 59). For Ray, using strategies to effectively appeal to a larger audience was a strength and not weakness of a good filmmaker. He said, the "history of cinema is full of instances of artistes realizing the need to communicate with a large audience, and not losing in the process. It can be done only if you temper your creative urge with a little caution and a bit of shrewdness…In fact, my own choice of *Pather Panchali* was made in the hope that the public interest in the film of a famous classic would outweigh its distrust of a new director" (49). Satyajit Ray made films for his audience, and not for critics and festivals. He believed that the public was the ultimate judge and their acceptance is what filmmakers should thrive for. He said,

> The practice of blaming the public for failing to rise to the level of the film was not in vogue those days, because the filmmaker was supposed to have taken the public into account. One can draw an analogy with cooking here. When a large number of people having a meal find a certain dish unpalatable, the cook is in no position to blame them for failing to rise to the level of his concoction. Like a meal, a film, the

> vast majority of films, the kind of film that will be the concern of most of you, is made with the sole purpose of being consumed. As long as it stays in the cans, a film is dead matter. It comes to life and serves its purpose only in the theatre, in the presence of the public. The public then has to be taken into account – even by you with your diplomas and your dreams of a personal cinema, a radical cinema, a political cinema, or what have you (48).

Ray uses deliberate, restrained shot-making with other attractions to put together a puzzle, much like a classic ratiocinative novel, that is unraveled by critical deduction of audience as opposed to mere observation. Ray invites the viewer to engage in the text and make meaning by evoking the larger historical and political contexts. What is solicited in Ray's films is an awareness of historical transformation unavailable to the characters themselves, like some sort of dramatic irony. In traditional historiography, these very narrative elements are considered to be distractions that limit access to an 'objective truth' in the retelling of an event. In Ray's films, however, these formal and aesthetic elements are highlighted to become the generative details that showcase history as force acting on the present.

Ray uses much restraint while using music for his films; specially the ones created by him, and tries to keep them as spare and imperceptible as possible. Ray tries to reduce his music to the minimum, drawing them as much as possible from known sources. In *Pather Panchali* Ray has old Indir sing a folk melody, and later uses instrumental variations of the song in the film. He uses several Tagore songs, well known to the Bengali audience in many of his films. Tagore melodies in instrumental are also used in several movies; the melodies have a life of their own, and echo feelings, which, for Bengali audiences, cannot be totally divorced from the meaning of the words, associated with them. But no matter what the source of the music, whether it is celebrated or ambiguous,

Ray's achievement lies in merging it into the narrative and evoking memories from the audience. Human beings bereft of the capacity of remembrance are helpless in the face of domination, and Ray's films preserve these memories for future generations. Therefore, Ray's films challenge the general consensus that the use of song and dance is what marks the difference between parallel cinema of the past or new age independent films, and commercial cinema.

Satyajit Ray was a regional filmmaker whose work was deeply rooted in the cultural and political context from which it arose, targeting a very specific audience. He said, "(a)ll my films are made with my own Bengali audience in view" (Ray 86). Ray's definition of art cinema was far from Seton's restricting, strictly European definition. While Seton "privileged images over the linguistic diversity of India" (Mazumdar 576) and espoused a "normative aesthetic of neorealism and universal humanism" (Mazumdar 604), Ray stressed more the regional tone as the most necessary characteristic of art films. In addressing a class of students at the Film and television Institute of India in Pune, Ray said that even though the film institute likely wouldn't change the difficult conditions of filmmaking in India, he thought, the institute holds "the promise of a parallel cinema—signs of which are already in evidence. This will be the cinema of young film-makers who know their jobs, who love the medium for its own sake, who are able to resist the temptations of big money and quick success, who have something to say about their own country and their own generation - something that arises out of a feeling of being rooted here, and who - however much they may have absorbed the Bressons and Godards and Antonionis - are yet aware that they have to communicate not with Frenchmen and Italians, but with their own countrymen" (Satyajit Ray on Cinema 46). Ray said that "the main

incentive for me was provided by the insipid, hidebound, hybrid nature of Bengali films, which had discovered early on what the audience wanted, and stayed resolutely on the safe path" (Ray on Cinema 62). Building on the existing hybrid models, Ray tried to create a more "wholesome", "truly indigenous", and intensely political films.

Ray was disappointed with how the new art of cinema was being used or being talked about, including the criticisms of his own films, particularly its enslavement to traditional art forms like literature and theater. He lamented, "what was passed for criticism in India usually consisted of a tortuous recounting of a film's plot, followed by a random dispersal of praise or blame on the people concerned in its making….What was also regrettable was the insidious notion, probably concocted by the same critics, that cinema being a product of the technological west, our own efforts should not be judged in too harsh a light. After all, ran the argument, the West had all the money and all the resources; we didn't" (Ray 70). He was however frustrated with the approach to the new art in Europe, too. He wrote, "One would have thought that in Europe, where so many intellectuals were engaged in such diverse creative pursuits, the potentialities of the new art form would be recognized quickly enough. But such was not to be passing interest in the new medium—or the new toy, as some preferred to call it…" (Ray 93). Therefore, Ray believed that Indian cinema had to come of age, and "out of its self-imposed seclusion to be measured by the standards of the west" (Ray 70-71).

After the formation of the Film Society and before the making of the Calcutta trilogies was a period that was marked by the struggles to acquire adequate means and modes for expressing the problems of a postcolonial and post-partition society on celluloid. Ray, among others, was making films to develop and explore individual cinematic idioms.

Calcutta, as a city, was struggling to accommodate an ever-increasing population, interests of the different classes of this population, and accompanying urban industrial problems. Simmering tensions came to a head with the mobilization of rural and urban populations of Bengal in the armed uprising of the Naxalites from 1967 to 1975. Both Ray and Sen located and directed their Calcutta trilogies in the period when Calcutta had become the epicenter of the Naxalite revolt. As inhabitants in the city faced continual threats of death, violence, and destruction, the contradictions and anxieties that had been latent in Calcutta ever since independence were exposed during the Naxal period. Thus, the Goopy Bagha films encapsulate a fragmented and amorphous society erupting with the violent energy of the masses. The nascent societal scenario also posited challenges to Ray's crafts, which is why Ray relied on music to deliver the most scathing political comments to avoid censorship. In this way, Ray's films sidestep both the traditional narrative film genre and the strictly European and esoteric art film genre by focusing on aesthetic aspects and 'attractions'.

In hailing cinema as a new language, "an enormously potent and flexible language, a language that can be used in just as many different ways as you can use the language of words" (Ray 95), Ray echoed the avant-garde thinkers and practitioners (Eisenstein, Benjamin, Kracauer) who saw revolutionary possibilities (both political and aesthetic) in the novel way cinema took hold of its spectators (Gunning 32). However, even though Satyajit Ray himself was influenced by the European thinkers and drew inspiration from the works of neorealist European directors such as Vittorio De Sica and Jean Luc Goddard, he distilled these influences "into realist hermeneutics of postcolonial rural India in films such as *Pather Panchali*" (Devasundaram 28). Ray strived to create films that didn't

privilege the European over the regional.

CHAPTER III

FILM SONGS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZED SUBJECTS IN INDIAN FILMS

The mainstream Indian cinema, with few exceptions, has maintained a dominant Hindu Brahmanical caste and class hierarchy. Indian cinema, as a cultural product, form of mass entertainment and expression, has historically excluded the minorities from both its mimetic and diegetic worlds, producing blatant casteist and classist sensibilities. Furthermore, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which began under the Cinematograph Act of 1952 and was modeled on the English Cinematograph Act of 1909, has a large role to play in keeping caste assertion in cinema elusive. CBFC considers caste, religion, gender and sexuality issues 'sensitive' and therefore rejects or heavily cuts[12] films that depict strong minority roles and views that are not congruous with the hegemonic

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[12] To name only a few examples, in 2004, the documentary *Final Solution*, which looks at religious rioting between Hindus and Muslims, was banned due to "highly provocative content and possible trigger for unrest and communal violence". In 2017, the film *Lipstick Under My Burkha* directed by Alankrita Shrivastava and produced by Prakash Jha, also ran into trouble when the Central Board of Film Certification refused to certify the film, stating that the "story is lady oriented...and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society." In 2018, the film *No Fathers in Kashmir* directed by Ashvin Kumar hit a roadblock with the Central Board of Film Certification. His two previous documentaries, *Inshallah, Football* and *Inshallah, Kashmir* were also initially banned. In 2017 *Padmaavat* faced similar issues following controversies and threats of violence made by Rajput caste organization In1987, *Ore Oru Gramathiley* was banned for criticizing caste based reservations. 2007 *Aaja Nachle* was banned because the "lyrics of the title song was allegedly humiliating the Dalits". The lyrics were later changed. The ban was lifted later after the producers apologized. In 2011 *Aarakshan*, which was based on the topic of caste reservations in jobs and education had been banned due to "objectionable dialogues". Later, Supreme Court lifted the ban.

narrative of the dominant castes, because it considers counter voices from below dangerous to the peaceful functioning of the democracy. However, because songs are not subject to censorship in India, this chapter offers a critical reading of film songs, even when they are not outwardly about minority issues, as having the potential to transcend boundaries and blatantly express Subaltern concerns. This chapter extends the 'Subaltern studies project' to the medium of film songs in a country that produces the largest number of films and film songs, and where films are the dominant medium of available entertainment. Identifying that film songs can and do speak of sacrifices, martyrdom, hardships and trials faced by minority classes can destabilize the history of Bollywood cinema that reserves films as the de facto space of dominant class and castes. Reading film songs as voices from below is especially important at a time when the Hindutva movement has strengthened its efforts to transform Hinduism into an ethnic political identity, and to establish itself as the true locus of national identity, the Hindutva movement led by BJP/RSS has ideologically and physically targeted Muslims, Christians, Dalits and women. Such reading can create a greater understanding of the complex history of India, can complicate the homogeneous history and can contribute to the writing of heterogeneous history in the future.

A lyric or narrative study of Hindi films finds voice in marginalized subjects concretized in the form "men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (Spivak 78), who have otherwise remained confined to the fringes of the narrative texts with little to no dialogue. In these films about subaltern struggles, subaltern historiography is most effectively reiterated through songs or song performances. The films I analyze in this chapter covering serious topics concerning class, caste, religion, and gender, challenge the blatant elitist and casteist sensibilities of

the Indian audience and interpellate the Subaltern audience into its fold. The stylistic choices of the song sequences re-inscribe or challenge aesthetic sensibilities associated with normative gender, caste and class roles, relations, and behaviors. Therefore, artivist films and film songs become central in extending the conversation concerning minorities into the realms of contemporary socio-political situations. Oral histories and accounts of worker and peasant resistance to feudal and imperialist authorities of daily life and struggles may be narrated in songs and song performances. Stories that otherwise would have never been spoken find expression in songs, and what is usually inaudible becomes audible. Stories of subalternity narrated through songs disrupt the dominant ideological constructions that portray the subaltern as passive and without agency. In this sense, song becomes an **epistemological tool** for the subaltern politics of social change.

III.1 Subaltern History and Film Song

I begin with a brief overview of Subaltern Studies in order to illustrate how this chapter can contribute to the project. Historically, dominant classes have obtained the recorded history of Indian society, creating a "Brahmanic-hegemonic India". In order to keep "Hindu society intact", and distinct from that of the colonizers, Brahmans "had to reduce everything to writing and make them more and more rigid" (qtd in Spivak 77). The history of India is therefore the effect of a false and coercive narrative that imposes cohesion among a number of groups that do not share a common political identity, while pushing to the margins narratives that do not fit the dominant nationalist history. The Subaltern Studies project began as an attempt to transform the embattled nationalist South Asian historiography that developed in the wake of the growing crisis of the Indian state in the

1970s. Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of Subaltern Studies, published the first volume of the series in 1982. The project critiqued conventional colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist historiography. Colonialist historiography aided and abetted the more overt brutalities of colonization by creating categories of the "barbaric natives", which were used for the subjection and objectification of native societies to justify imperial processes of discrimination, subordination and oppression. The nationalist history represented India's colonial history as a "chronicle of competition between its elites" (Prakash 1476). And Marxist historiography, while accounting for the emancipation of the oppressed classes prioritized European mode-of-production narratives that could not explain the "backward" ideologies of caste and religion and their intersection with "modernity" and progress. The Subaltern Studies project identified how Indian history celebrated homogeneity among heterogeneous ideological interests and groups, and treated the subalterns of south Asian society as devoid of consciousness and agency. The Subaltern Studies group thus announced a new approach to restore history to the oppressed and bring to the forefront an interstitial space of existence that hegemonic historical discourses have failed to acknowledge or illustrate.

Cinema as a mass medium became a potential instrument for extending the image of the unified "fictional nation" (Virdi 32). In films, a coherent national identity comes about by repressing the differences among different groups divided by gender, ethnicity, religion, language and class. This erasure of multiple and differing subject positions can be seen as a form of epistemic violence against minority communities. If the visionary nature of Hindi cinema sustains a sense of national unity, then the Hindi Film song, I contend, disrupts that unity. Not only because Hindi films song is an essentially hybrid form that

challenges the purity and homogeneity of national culture, thereby disrupting the tradition of song performances and listening practices as ways to enact shared imagined histories and perform social class positions. But also because songs as oral performative texts elude simple textual categorizations, because song is multivocal, multidimensional, multiform, nonlinear, richly layered, and an elusive moment in time that does not conform to the single-author standard of “modern” literature. If film histories are produced by repressing differences between social groups and constructing universal identification, then film songs can disrupt the narratives of homogeneity by highlighting moments of resistance.

Furthermore, while the subaltern native can be heard only by *speaking* the language of the West, singing offers them an alternative way to make their native voice be heard. In other words, while intellectual and cultural filters of conformity, through the voice of the investigating academic or intellectual, muddle the true voice of the subaltern native, songs need not be refined by the intellectuals or “enriched with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, or to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (qtd Spivak 77). Songs provide a special medium by which the subaltern is allowed a voice that even the powerful in society can hear. While the subaltern cannot voice dissent in speech, they can voice dissent in songs. Songs offer an alternate history to that of the official history: vernacular history articulating discourses that counterbalance the narrative of the establishment. Such critical reading against the grain can destabilize Hindi cinema’s hegemonic value, and can explain how Hindi cinema attained mass popularity even while it privileged only the urban elite classes.

With the help of songs, Hindi cinema was able to extend the historical discourse

beyond the confines shaped and dominated by elite cultural and political discourse and practice, access to which depended on certain kinds of literacy and cultural capital available only to a small minority of the Indian population. However, even as it expanded the space of the nation beyond the public spheres of the colonial elites, cinema introduced a new set of powerful cultural distinctions that were not conducive to imagining this space as egalitarian. This anxiety about elite historiography in cinema is framed within the binary of high art and low art or commercial and art films. While commercial films are received with much enthusiasm by the lower class film audience, the upper class/caste elites have reserved the space of high art cinema as a distinct category for educated Indians, distinguishable from the Indian masses. In colonial India, spectatorship became a site where class difference and social hierarchies could be affirmed. The social topography of cinema was therefore specialized according to class and caste. In identifying film songs as a medium capable of upsetting the boundaries between high and low culture (as discussed throughout the dissertation), this chapter recognizes the song space as an interstitial site of subaltern intervention. Thus, by listening to film songs in alternative/art/parallel films as voicing subaltern concerns, this chapter fills the gap in the representation of subaltern in elitist film historiography. This chapter shows that songs expose efforts at indigenization and investigation of arbitrary discourses of modernity and history and create a space for public discourse in a country where a good percentage of the population is non-literate, and therefore unable to partake in elite discussions of modernity and culture. This chapter hopes to add to the work of subaltern studies collective by situating the deprived and dispossessed post-colonial subjects into the history of Indian popular culture.

III.2 Artivist Film and Subaltern Representation

For the purposes of this study I analyze five artivist films: *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Peepli [LIVE]* (2010), *Talaash*[13] (2012), *Court* (2014) and *Masaan* (2015). *Monsoon Wedding*, even though set entirely in New Delhi, is an international co-production aimed at diasporic Indian audiences. The film has a skillful mix of traditional love songs, jazz, Punjabi wedding music, folk music and Indian pop. *Peepli [LIVE]* is a film with a heterogeneous musical style where Hindi rock band and rural folk music are fused together. *Talaash* is a Mumbai noir with big star power and an eclectic mix of Bollywood musical styles. *Court* is a multilingual legal drama that uses a folksong style to create its protest voice, and *Masaan* (dealing with caste) combines traditional folk elements with urban tunes in its music to highlight the dichotomy of life in Benares, one of India's most traditional sacred cities. Choosing films from five distinct genres to extend this conversation shows that Hindi language films consistently follow the song-dance format as narrative devices to voice subaltern concerns or to convey disruptive messages and establish them in the auditor's memory. In other words, in Indian cinema, songs offer a discursive space that may be used to articulate and defend subaltern interests.

For the ease of organization and analysis, instead of analyzing the films in chronological order, I have grouped the films into three thematic categories — farmer protests, Dalit revolt, and migrant female subaltern.

In exploring the representation of voices from below — which is the cornerstone of my engagement with and intervention in postcolonial scholarship — I will conduct a

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[13] Talaash actually belongs more in the category of Mumbai Noir, but I will talk more about that in the actual chapter.

"symptomatic reading" of texts, which can expose gaps and silences. Historically, subaltern lives and their contributions have been excluded from the official state narratives. Thus by looking at what the songs say we can identify what the film or dialogue refuses to say or cannot say. By measuring silences of the filmic text, epistemic violence of ellipsis can be pointed to and contested. Spivak says that by measuring silences, we are "investigating, identifying, and measuring…the deviation from an ideal that is irreducibly differential" (81).

I will look at artivist films and their narrativizations of ideas through songs. I argue that artivist films use song and dance to re-articulate the narrative of the problems, issues and everyday struggles of the Subaltern, which the film text omits, with the intention of disseminating an ideology and educating, informing, and mobilizing those who are most affected by these societal injustices, as well as to start a national dialogue about subaltern plight. Film songs can embody an act of defiance leading to sustained political activism through cinema.

Artivist films can represent Subaltern bodies on screen with familiar stories taken from newspapers, literature, songs, and past films, for the indigenous and subaltern audience's possible identification. Additionally, these films mobilize a somewhat culturally influential but besieged and increasingly disempowered middle class audience that is — perhaps disingenuously — committed to holding the conversation about the plight of the subaltern in the public sphere, thereby affecting political discourse.

However, trying to hear subaltern voices through cinematically constructed perspective is limiting in many ways. To argue that the representation of the protagonists' attitudes toward the structures of power that oppress them as ambivalent, or to suggest that

the songs and voices they use are authentic is problematic in the context of the limitations of historical narration and subject construction even in the most radical works. Because even the most radical films use tools of the dominant structure and attempt to mediate subaltern experiences with popular appeal, which inevitably leads to ambivalence in narrative and subject. It would be naïve, therefore, not to acknowledge possible problems of representation. However, rather than seeing Bollywood/Hindi films as speaking *for* the subaltern and presenting authentic or real representation, this chapter sees Bollywood as offering impersonations that become forms of subaltern identification and self-questioning. In other words, Indian artivist films may be seen as what Gayatri Spivak calls a "'supplementation', one which 'speaks in the language of the subaltern', not so that his/her 'representation can be …assured', but 'identity'/'identification'— can be reconfigured" (Gehlawat 57). Such an approach can reconfigure the previously limiting/limited positioning of the subaltern, and can bring to the fore the orality of film song as possible sites of political engagement and intervention. (Gehlawat 62)

III.3 Artivist Films and Subaltern Audience

One of the biggest challenges in claiming that these films mediate subaltern experiences to a subaltern audience is that these are presumed to be elite films with exclusively metropolitan audience. Therefore, to establish that these artivist films are indeed political projects, I would have to first prove that these films effectively engage the marginalized. It would have been extremely helpful if accurate information on center-wise box office collections of these films was available, but the data is scanty. In order to ascertain the audience that a particular film addresses, therefore, I will have to make certain broad

assumptions. It can, for instance, be assumed that multiplex audiences are largely from the metropolitan and larger cities and that single screen theatres are in rural centers. Even in the metropoles, since multiplexes are usually located in up-market shopping malls and are more expensive than single screen cinemas, one can make some broad assumptions about the audiences that frequent each kind of theater. Since *Peepli Live*, *Masaan, Court* were largely multiplex hits, it would appear that their success was skewed towards the metropolitan and larger cities. However, *Peepli Live* was able to famously recover cost of production through selling of satellite rights even before the film was released. There was a time when a film was telecast on the GEC or a movie channel only a year or more after its release. But it's no longer the case. These days, movies are premiered on TV within three to four months of release, and GECs hope to recover the investment through re-runs. Indian cinema's widespread dispersal means even the remotest parts of India have access to these films (Gehlawat 53). And since 80 percent of the population of India lives in rural areas, and more than half of all Indian households have television, it can be assumed that the telecast of *Peepli Live* engaged the marginalized.

Thus, *Peepli Live* was premiered on Zee TV on 5th December 2010 at 8 pm (3 months after its release), and there were several more subsequent screenings over the years. Although, the television rating point (TRP) data for *Peepli Live* re-runs are not available, it is safe to assume that the subsequent screenings of *Peepli Live* on GECs or movie channels fetched more views than its box office release. So assuming TV viewership is high compared to multiplexes, the impact of GEC screenings will be higher for these films than a theater release. In other words, even though the true Indian Subaltern may only spend money to watch blockbuster movies like *Dabangg* (2010) in theaters,

movies like *Masaan* and *Peepli Live* are not entirely lost.

Additionally, since the urban, Anglophone Indian class has the greatest spending power, and social media presence, and since it also represents public opinion and influences public policies, artivist films consistently target this group to shape public opinion surrounding minority issues. For example, while it cannot be assuredly said that *Peepli Live* brought about any meaningful policy changes, it can be argued that it was one of the first Hindi language films since the 1960s that effectively brought public attention to farmer issues in India. While it cannot be said that *Peepli Live* had any direct influences on the recent farmer protests that are consciously designed to draw media attention and representation (farmers protesting with skulls of farmers who committed suicide, or marching naked, or holding live mice between their teeth), it can be argued that the song "Mehngai Daiyan" has become a popular farmer/inflation protest song[14]. The song also harks back to 'Mehengayi Maar Gayi' (inflation killed us) from Manoj Kumar's 1974 hit film, *Roti, Kapda aur Makaan*.

The unique contribution of the above mentioned films lies in the fact that they foreground peasants and the Dalit whom commercial Bollywood cinema for the most part has evicted from the domain of the story, providing spaces for them only as the rural poor or comic relief. The subaltern characters in these films belong to disparate socio-economic backgrounds and diverse spatial and temporal dimensions and are subjected to differing

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[14] The Delhi Congress held a protest outside Shastri Bhawan demanding a rollback of the hike in non-subsidised LPG prices, while crooning "Mehngai dayain khaye jaat hai". A crowd in Sangam, Allahabad protested inflation with the same song. News Nation created a "Budget playlist" for the day when acting Finance Minister Piyush Goyal presents the Budget of the Narendra Modi government, which included "Mehngai dayain khaye jaat hai".

and multivalent categories of subordination. In addressing issues of discrimination, exclusion, and violence based on caste and class identities, while using the Bollywood format of song and dance, the films put forth the idea of free speech and equal citizenship through music. For example, by featuring inter-caste or inter-community lovers in romantic songs on screen (more on this is the section on *Masaan*), these films help the marginalized reclaim the cinema song space that so far has been preserved for upper-caste audiences. It is important to note that Bollywood films have a long-standing tradition of "village" groups singing and dancing in the crassest commercial Hindi films. There are numerous songs where rural men and women are seen singing and dancing behind the protagonists. However, in these songs, the rural folks are only there to support or embellish the song sequences. The film songs discussed in this chapter disrupt the Hindi/Indian film song-space as the artistic and representational domain of upper-caste Hindus.

III.4 Film Song and Peasant Protests

I now turn to *Peepli [Live]*, which tells the story of two brothers, Nathadas Manikpuri (Omkar Das Manikpuri) and Budhia Manikpuri[15] (Raghuvir Yadav), who are about to lose their land over an unpaid bank loan. Desperate to keep their grandfather's land, they seek help from a corrupt and apathetic local politician, who condescendingly suggests that they commit suicide to take advantage of a government program that aids the families of farmers who commit suicide because of debt. The brothers agree because, faced with dire

[15] Manikpuris belong to Pankha tribal community, found in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh that have now been incorporated into the Hindu caste system. The film, however, elides all caste references.

crisis, they find no way for resistance other than death. Rakesh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a local journalist from *Jan Morcha,* overhears the bothers planning Natha's suicide and publishes the story leading to national media frenzy around the possibility of Natha's death. Political parties under the pressure of local by-elections try to exploit the issue to garner favorability among voters. The possibility of Natha's death becomes a national spectacle.

The roles of working-class rural characters have increasingly dwindled over the years as movies have focused more and more on nuclear urban families, having identified with and seeking approval from the elite segments of Indian society. Tejaswini Ganti characterizes this desire for elite approval as the Hindi film industry's drive to gentrify itself, its audiences, and its film culture (4). These films not only showcase an active erasure of the subaltern classes from the narratives and depict a "bourgeois anxiety over the possible contamination of middle-class culture" from contact with the "lowbrow, but also illustrate the conceptual intricacies of what constitutes the 'popular' in an intensely stratified and linguistically divided postcolonial society such as India's" **(**Nandy). *Peepli [Live]*, too, captures this dichotomy between rural and urban spaces, characters, and modes of living. On one side there are the powerful politicians and media people who mostly come from upper-class, upper-caste groups and whose main channels for ideological discourse are print media and national news channels. On the other side are the disenfranchised peasants of Peepli who are the subaltern class, singing about subaltern experience in a language and form distinct from the mainstream.

In the beginning, Peepli figures as a passive village far removed from the urban power centers, and seemingly unable to assert its presence on the postcolonial map owing

to its detachment from mainstream media. However, Peepli is reinscribed, redefined and remapped, when its peasants refuse to engage with the hegemonic discourse and start protesting in their own folk songs and their idioms of expression. The protest of peasants, therefore, forces both the state and central governments to pay attention to Peepli and to find ways to invest governmental resources in the village. *Peepli [Live]* effectively uses music as resistance against entrenched power structures.

Peepli [Live] can be broadly divided into two parts — pre and post discovery of Natha's suicide plot. Pre-discovery, farmers come together in the Peepli public sphere to freely discuss societal problems, identify matters of mutual interest, and verbally critique the government. In short, pre-discovery Peepli is a site for the production and circulation of public opinion critical of the State.

However, post-discovery, when the media hordes come to Peepli, the farmers are suddenly silenced. The farmers' silence in front of the media signifies their lack of agency. A symbolic scene where Rakesh, the *Jan Morcha* reporter, and his photographer pass Budhia and Natha while riding Rakesh's motorbike seems to mark a significant juncture in the narrative. In the very next frame Rakesh asks a farmer for directions to the village medical center. The farmer, who seems to be digging a very deep hole in the ground, does not answer Rakesh's question despite his repeated asking. This scene marks the transition in the narrative where the subalterns lose their ability to speak critically of the government or speak at all. Later, when the ITVN reporter, Nandita Malik (Malaika Shenoy), interviews Natha, he remains awkwardly silent. Budhia tries to fill in for Natha, but when Nandita Malik shoos him away Budhia says to Natha, "You have to speak. They won't let me talk".

The first time Natha and Budhia are seen again after the publication of the suicide story they are being beaten up by cops under the direction of Bhai Thakur (Sitaram Panchal), the local politician, for "talking back" to him. Bhai Thakur, furious at Budhia and Natha for potentially damaging the chances of his reelection by announcing a suicide so close to the by-elections is heard saying, "If after today, anyone even thinks of dying, I will skin them alive". In an attempt to mitigate the political repercussions against the ruling party due to the Natha story, the district collector sanctions a hand pump for the brothers in the name of "Lal Bahadur Shastri Provision for farmers" and declares, "now you cannot die…Shastri *ji* just saved you". State institutions try to enforce and exploit Budhia and Natha into abandoning the suicide plot, or at least to stop talking about it.

Natha's willing and Budhia's forced silences do not just represent the farmers' lack of agency, but also become an expression of disbelief at the media's tone deafness. When Nandita has to ask Natha why an impoverished farmer has decided to commit suicide, it exposes the media's detachment from the farmers' economic reality, as well as the diametrically opposed realities of the rural/indigenous and the urban/modern spaces/people. In several instances in *Peepli [Live]* we see the reporters finish the farmers' sentences while interviewing them, or over-complicate their utterances, or incorrectly guess the meanings of their gestures, or simply put words in their mouths. As soon as the national corporate news channels come to Peepli, Rakesh as well as the villagers are hardly seen speaking. In such a state of non-representability in which the ultimate position for the subaltern is misrepresentation or nonrepresentation, the question is if willful death could be the only way through which there can be a possibility of subaltern resistance?

In the absence of open dialogue where the peasants can freely speak and be heard, the threat of death startles an otherwise indifferent government, forcing the government officials to acknowledge the farmers' crisis and pressuring them to engage in a dialogue with the farmers. Having erroneously assumed the passivity of the peasants, the government initially reacts to the farmers' activism with strategic repression, but as soon as they realize the force of the resistance they go scrambling for damage control. In Peepli, the declaration of suicide becomes a declaration of resistance. In trying to end his life, Natha voices the plights of thousands of Indian farmers and exposes the incompetence of the government.

The farmers' reluctance to talk to the reporters indicates that the farmers have no access to traditional channels of communication and foregrounds the problematic with which any attempt of the reporters to represent their stories is inherently fraught, because any research on part of the reporters is merely based in logocentric assumptions and therefore incomplete. The media and political leaders fail to recognize the consciousness of the subaltern masses and reiterate the colonialist and nationalist assumption that the peasants are simpleminded, ignorant, and unaware of the fact that their poverty was due to bad government policies and therefore in need of leadership and guidance to carry out effective political action. The farmers' collective silence in *Peepli Live* stands for their rejection of the media's attempt to speak for them or represent them and an assertion that they are intelligent enough to recognize their oppressor. Instead, they try to establish their own cultural identity and carve out a space for themselves through the village song community. Songs are multidimensional, multivocal and involve many people in its composition and performance. Therefore, songs embody not just the ideas of the writer,

but also the engagement of the singer/s, supporting musicians, and the engagement of the community giving us a sense of lived history through performance. What seems to bother the brothers above all is that the media want them to be native informants, but the village chorus is instead functioning in the narrative as Gramsci's organic intellectuals, as peasants who emerge from the political energies, pressures and experiences of marginalized or oppressed groups of people, concerned with producing a text of local history. Songs are sung by the peasants, and not transformed, translated, represented or interpreted by the intellectuals who support and are supported by imperial powers and dominant capitalists. Traditional intellectuals, personified in the figure of national news media, are tacitly partisan, serving as functionaries within the dominant social order and trying to silence dissenting voices.

The silencing appears on various levels. Rakesh, the *Jan Morcha* reporter breaks the Natha suicide story, but since his story jeopardizes the preordained win of the ruling party, the newspaper, already on the brink of extinction has its license revoked by the district collector. *Jan Morcha's* lack of autonomy and its arbitrary closure at the hands of state agencies emphasizes the relatively limited agency that indigenous forms of media have compared to mainstream national corporate media. Their suicide plan temporarily thwarted, the uninstalled hand pump unnecessarily stationed in the middle of their already crowded room, their verbal criticism of the government rebuffed, the brothers turn to folk music as the only remaining and enduring medium of resistance and critique of the state. Spivak says, in the "semiosis of social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of 'the utterance'. The sender — the peasant — is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness. The historian then transforms 'insurgency' into text for knowledge"

(Spivak 82). However, peasant songs are effective counterhegemonic narratives because they do not require intellectual mediators to be transformed into palatable histories or knowledge. It is through the use of songs as a deliberate agential mode that the brothers are able to transgress social and physical restrictions imposed upon them by the state and threaten the stability of the status quo.

By combining or "contaminating" Hindi rock music with folk tunes, *Peepli [Live]* complicates the easy divide between highbrow and lowbrow, urban and rural, or national and regional, or subaltern and dominant. The hybrid songs in *Peepli [Live]* with their heavy folk tunes make their way to urban theaters and pubs, and effectively mainstream the stories of the hitherto ignored and impoverished farmers. Even though the film does not star any frontline actors or actresses and is set entirely in a rural background, the film garnered hype and praise. Costing only $2.2 million to make, the film broke even with the sale of satellite television rights even before it opened in theaters. "Low budget political satire *Peepli Live* — the first ever Indian film to be screened at the Sundance Film Festival (Times of India, 2012) — received both commercial and critical acclaim, being screened at 600 cinemas in India and 200 abroad, with a worldwide box office of around £ 9 million" (Devasundaram 32). *Peepli Live* was one of India's most profitable films in 2010. It was also given tax exception.

The song, "Mehngai Daiyan", which dealt with the harrowing reality of farmer suicides, was played on all radio stations, is listed on Saavn and Gaana (the largest Indian commercial music streaming services), and even won several awards including the 3rd Mirchi Music Awards, presented by Radio Mirchi. These songs/films, at the least are

committed to holding the conversations surrounding the plight of India's minorities and oppressed alive in the mainstream. These films/songs show/vocalize how subjugated people fight — or wish to — against the system, mock the vanities and hypocrisies of national elites, and expose the calcified cultural practices and government policies that retarded progress in the post-colony.

The release of *Peepli Live* made politicians and bureaucrats respond to the farming crisis. Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the film "a moral lesson both for politicians and for the gentlemen and ladies of the media" (Magnier). The movie serves as a reminder that in the heavily regulated political and cinema space of India, songs can serve as the most effective medium to address pressing social and political concerns.

In the scene after the brothers get beaten up, Budhia joins the community music session of Bhadwai Village, where the film was shot, along with actual representatives of the marginal peasant society of Bhadwai who participated in the film as supporting cast members, to voice the most biting critique against the ruling government in the form of a folk song. The song, "Mehngai Dayain Khaye Jaat Hai" (Inflation is a witch that's eating us) is a scathing critique of the ruling government:

> O friend, my husband earns a lot,
> But this witch called inflation keeps eating all.
> Petrol and diesel prices take a jump every month
> What can I say about sugar?
> Price of rice is killing me.

The song works not just in the diegesis of the film, but also beyond the diegetic space. While it plays an important role in shaping the narrative, it also facilitates multiple readings of the film and reactions from the audience. In fact, the song was so critical of the

government that the then opposition party at the center wanted to buy its rights from Aamir Khan to use the song as propaganda against the chairman (Sonia Gandhi) of the ruling party. The Indian National Congress party had also filed a lawsuit against it claiming that the song unjustly taints the image of Sonia Gandhi by wrongfully accusing her of causing inflation and calling her "witch".

The song is sung in chorus. Group singing or chorus as the voice of protest is something that has been picked up by contemporary political movements or cult groups. Boatmen, minstrels or city migrants singing in chorus have been a common theme in Indian theater and cinema. Through chorus singing, the farmers in Peepli forcefully assert their presence in the narrative. The choruses narrate contemporary reality in an attempt to bring their issues/situation to the attention of the mass audience to which they would normally have no access due to the very condition of their subalternity. The songs have the voice of the speakers and they speak to the reader in the form of a "we" that demands the viewers' attention and yearns to be recognized.

This presence of the chorus, which the reader is meant to experience as the real voice of the farmers rather than a fictional characters, marks the desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power and privilege from the position of the excluded, the marginal, the subaltern. *Peepli [Live]* uses songs to boldly reiterate subaltern narratives and historiographies of farmers who remain forgotten in the postcolonial mapping of a new nation. And it does that by exposing dangerous collusion between the state and media that prioritizes sensational Bollywood stories — Saif Ali khan had kissed a girl when he was in high school or if Shilpa Shetthy was having an affair with Prince William — over farmer suicides.

The metonymic character of the chorus — the sense that the voices that are addressing us is part that sands for a larger whole — is an important narrative aspect that establishes a connection with the viewer. The chorus hopes and expects that this will advance the interests of the community that the songs represent. The universal politics of neoliberalism is resisted through the articulation of local narratives woven through songs that are culturally reproduced and distributed across subaltern communities. Songs narrate stories of oppression and exploitation, and in the midst of these narratives of marginalization of the poor, create openings for change by narrating resistance and stories of subaltern participation in the process of change.

The investigation and creative application of chorus as a folk convention has added significant new dimension to *Peepli Live*. The chorus here is different than other Bollywood films in that they are the main focus in the film song-space, rather than supporting a popular singer or star text as is common in Bollywood films. Choruses, like the one used in *Peepli [Live]*, have the potential of bringing to public attention the collective subaltern voices that have been historically erased from discursive spaces. Through choruses, the peasants connect with and support one another creating political solidarity. Therefore, the chorus functions as the collective manifestations of the perspectives held by different religions, classes and castes. These song performances can disrupt the status quo through access to otherwise inaccessible communication channels like TV and newspaper that render the subaltern visible/audible. Chorus as an instrument of didacticism through satirical commentary is used at dramatic moments to relate contemporary reality. Through songs, local collectives resist the homogenizing narratives of development and modernization by highlighting the hypocrisies and ambiguities in

development policies.

The media's reporting of the Natha story appears to be done with such sensationalism that impoverished villagers capitalize on the opportunity of the live suicide story and try to hawk their commodities to the media hordes by setting up country fairs. Ironically, it is the threat of death by a fellow farmer that brings economic opportunity to *Peepli.* The reporting of Natha's suicide story appears with such ironic splendor that the images seem jarring. The images seem so incongruous with the grim situation that it is easy to forget or lose track of what the film is really about. But the song "Des mera" (My country) keeps playing in the background to keep reminding the audience about the movie's central theme:

> Dear Sir, my country is a dyer.
> At every corner there is magic happening.
> A mustard seed becomes mountain here and a stone can be made god.
> Small issues are made big (for no reason)
> Sir, this India is expert in these things.

In one scene a reporter talks about the "excitement" and renewed hope of farmers at the possibility of Natha's suicide because of the new opportunities that brings to the farmers in Peepli who can now turn to other modes of sustenance. The bright image, listed below, of a farmer selling cotton candy while a reporter and camera man lurk near him is undercut by the song "des mera" playing in the background which reminds the viewer that:

> "No one knows where we are headed
> The wheels keep turning, move on
> No food, no water
> Find an excuse to carry on living"

Figure 12: A farmer selling cotton candy while a reporter and cameraman lurk near him.

All songs in the film are interwoven into the narrative and offer satirical self-reflexive social critiques. The opening credit by the band Indian Ocean, "*Des mera*" or "My country", weaves Hindi rock and folk to appeal to both the urban and rural audiences, and to engage them in the political struggle by foregrounding peasant discourse, which identifies the government as hostile. In this way, the song manages to engage the urban spectators in a critique of the nation through the perspective of the farmers. The opening credit is also predictive in that it becomes clear that the film is a satirical take on India's political corruption, exploitation of farmers, and bonhomie between media and political powers. In trying to showcase the 'other' India that lives beyond the apparent splendor of urban India to an urban audience, *Peepli [Live]* deftly handles the issues of class and linguistic division through the effective use of songs.

Peepli [Live] specifically invokes the historical narratives of colonial subaltern peasants operating under the chain of feudal practices. The exposition of such subaltern narratives and historiographies of forgotten farmers from below is made possible through the telling of known stories. We learn that the name Hori Mahato is a reference to Munshi

Premchad's protagonist by the same name from his famous novel *Godaan.* Much like *Peepli Live, Godaan* too explores the sad plight of debt-ridden farmers as well as the great divide between urban and rural India. Like his namesake, Hori in the novel fights a losing battle against debts throughout his life, and ultimately, deprived of his land, succumbs to the challenges and abandons agriculture to work at a road construction. Hori in *Peepli [Live]* too continues to exhaust himself by digging away in a pit that later becomes the very grave he dies in, while Natha escapes Peepli and to work as a laborer in the city, like Shambhu Mahato in *Do Bigha Zameen* (1952). The character Hori Mahato in *Peepli [Live]* is an iteration of the universal plight of Indian farmers. It reminds the audience that what happens in Peepli is not an isolated or imaginary incident, and that even almost a century later the Horis of the world are continuing to suffer. According to the census, nearly two thousand farmers across India are giving up agriculture daily and opting for other menial jobs. These facts are reinforced by the song picturizations that are also interspersed with the disheveled figure of Hori Mahato slowly passing the scene or looking at the splendor with apparent disbelief. The frail body of Hori Mahato, which becomes the universal representation of the plight of Indian farmers, cannot be separated from the songs.

III.5 Film Songs and Dalit Resistance

"Bollywood has successfully elided caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of 'the poor', 'the common man', the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan…in which caste might be extrapolated — although it is rarely overt — as one of the variables producing subalternity" (Yengde 505). *Masaan* (2015) and *Court* (2014) are two of the few Hindi language movies that assert Dalit caste identities in protagonist roles. These

protagonists are not one-dimensional characters who are waiting for a *savarna* savior to liberate them from their miseries. Instead, they take matters into their own hands and disrupt the traditional dominant discourse imposed by the Hindu social order. Having thus reclaimed their voice and agency, these subaltern characters restore their place in the historiographical traditions of writing Brahman-centric histories and in mainstream culture, by narrating their stories and asserting their resistance through the film song space that has been the de facto *savarna* hegemony.

The significance of *Masaan* is that it highlights Dalit narrative in the fashion of mainstream Bollywood film. *Masaan*, through the lens of a Dalit protagonist, tackles issues of class and caste discrimination and provokes a much-needed discussion surrounding the oppression of the Dalit communities. Set in present day Varanasi, *Masaan* tells two seemingly separate stories that eventually converge. One follows the journey of a Brahmin girl, Devi (Richa Chadda), who thwarts tradition by checking into a motel room with her lover, Piyush. A corrupt cop breaks into their room and threatens to arrest them for indecent behavior, leading Piyush to lock himself up in the bathroom and commit suicide from fear of exposure and embarrassment. The rest of Devi's story details how she and her father (Sanjay Mishra) put money together to pay off the exploitative cop who has threatened to release a video of Devi and Piyush's encounter and book Devi for aiding and abetting his suicide. The second story, the one more pertinent for this discussion, concerns Deepak Kumar (Vicky Kaushal), a Dalit boy from the "Dom" community whose family cremates bodies on Harishchandra Ghat, considered the most unholy and polluting labor in the Hindu caste system. Deepak studies civil engineering by the day and burns pyres on nights when "there are lots of bodies to burn". He falls in love with an upper-caste Hindu

girl, Shaalu (Shweta Tripathi), who promises to run away with him and marry him even if her family objects. However, when Deepak sees Shaalu's body on Harishchandra Ghat, as a result of a ghastly bus accident, Deepak breaks down and for the longest time it seems like he would not be able to get out of the oppressive cycle of caste and poverty. But when Deepak's brother runs away with family money leaving them desolate, Deepak regains his consciousness and finishes his course to get a job in Allahabad, where he meets Devi who has also left the parochial Varanasi to find a life of freedom in Allahabad.

Masaan won a number of awards including national and popular awards. The film was also featured in the first ever Dalit film festival in New York. Therefore, the film achieved the reputation of a serious activist film and also a commercial success, which can be, at least partially, attributed to its songs. *Masaan* features three diegetic songs, "Tu kisi Rail si", "Mann Kasturi re" and "Bhor", all composed by the band Indian Ocean. The band fuses modern and traditional tunes to create a hybrid style of music representative of Varanasi suspended between modernity and tradition, old and new.

The album opens with the song "*Tu kisi rail si guzarti hai, main kisi pull sa thartharaata hoon*" (You pass like a train, I reverberate like a bridge), which is a couplet from Dushyant Kumar's poem, "Main jise oadhta, bichhata hoon" (The one that I use all the time) that has been used as the foundation of the song with new lines added to it. Throughout the film, Shaalu, who is a lover of Urdu and Hindi poetry, recites verses from the works of activist Urdu/Hindi poets like— Mirza Ghalib, Bashir Badr, Nida Fazli, Dushyant Kumar and Akbar Allahabadi, among others. These poets had frequently used their art to voice protest against the establishment, especially in the 1970s as the disillusionment with the congress government had set in. In referencing these anti-

establishment poets, *Masaan* follows Bollywood's long tradition of using Urdu poems as both love songs and social critique. In post-independence India, Urdu poetry had experienced an absolute diminishment of institutional patronage, practically eliminating the bridge that Urdu may have used to reach the mainstream in Hindu majority India. The bitter sectarian conflicts that arose over Hindi-Urdu divide reduced the language to one "spoken by Muslims". In this sense, the Urdu language can be read as a language of the subaltern or Muslim minority in India, particularly suited to voice minority concerns that the censor board will not allow in everyday speech. In Bollywood, however, Urdu survived as performed linguistic tradition. Urdu poets who wrote film songs were imposed genre limitations. For example, till the advent of the 33-rpm LPs, songs could not be longer than 3 minutes and 8 seconds. The language had to be modified to reach a wide audience across the country. And the songs were also limited by the narrative situation in the movie. This meant that Urdu poets had to excessively use metaphors that convey romantic love, sexual desire, and friendships. Dissatisfied with the genre limitations, Urdu poets transformed Hindi film song keeping in tune with contemporary cultural and political milieu in India. So, they managed to incorporate commentaries on a variety of social issues into their songs while also keeping them within the cinematic and situational requirements. Similarly, in using these activist Urdu/Hindi poems, *Masaan* pushes a serious social agenda through references to real life social issues. The song "tu rail si guzarti hai" may seem like a typical Bollywood love song using familiar instruments, melody and rhythm with unconventional imagery but a closer look will reveal that the song produces a set of binaries between the modern and the traditional, the purity of love and the constraints of the social world, and the dominant hegemonic and subaltern cultures.

Deepak and Shaalu meet in the religious capital of India against the backdrop of Durga *puja* set to the love song “tu kisi rail si guzarti hai”. The couplet from a 1975 poem opens with an acoustic guitar prelude. The five-day long festival of Durga *puja* offers a space where people from diverse caste, class and religious backgrounds come together and cohabit in a peaceful way. Shaalu and Deepak’s love story develops subtly without either one saying a word or making any obvious contact. It is the background song, “tu rail si guzar ti hai”, that makes clear their intentions. The imagery of a train passing over a bridge suggests a routine-bound but momentary pact. The physical relationship between a train and the bridge, though sensual, is rooted in the imagery of a dichotomous nation that represents both modernity and the menace of the modern nation that has traveled past sections of the population trapped in anachronistic time. Even in this “modern” India, the bridge and the train can only unite momentarily but are never meant to be together. This imagery highlights the complicated relationship between subaltern lover and dominant social order.

The ending lines of the song are deeply suggestive:

> The wooden locks
> That shut the sight
> Open them with the keys of hint

The “Dom” caste not only burns bodies, they also supply wood for the pyres. The wood, therefore, is symbolic of Deepak’s profession and caste identity. The shut sight could suggest the prejudices that make even verbal interactions between a Dalit boy and a girl from upper caste impossible, unless they open their eyes and first indicate that their interactions will not be limited by casteist prejudices. In the absence of the possibility of

open dialogue, the development of inter-caste and inter-community love stories is narrated through songs, through "hints". Thus, this particular time in the narrative set against Durga *puja* could be suggestive of the possibility of equality, secularism that the political leaders of the Nehruvian nation had envisioned.

Outside of the love song, the deep divide between castes is explicit. The film throughout explores notions of sameness and difference. In one scene, Shaalu's family is heard commenting on the unhygienic conditions of a truck stop they are eating at, but add "the food is very good….it better be. The owner is from our caste after all". Soon after, Shaalu calls Deepak and tells him, "My parents won't accept you. They are stuck in the past with their old fashioned ideas. But I am on your side. Start by getting yourself a good job". And when Deepak tells his friends about his relationship with Shaalu, one comments, "Don't get carried away. Does she know you are from a lower caste? Tell her and then you'll see. No everyone is so progressive". While another friend adds, "a good job will sort everything out".

The suggestion that class mobility can erase caste differences or oppression is however contested by other assertions in the film. Deepak is projected as an exceptionally bright student who graduates top of his class despite him coming from a community that has been historically and systematically disenfranchised. Deepak's academic success subverts the casteist argument against caste reservations[16] in India, and with him the film

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[16] The system of reservation in India provides opportunities to historically disadvantaged castes and tribes, as well as economically disadvantaged groups, and reserves seats for the said groups for government jobs, and higher educational institutions.

tries to rupture the conventional stereotypes about Dalit as subservient powerless objects of oppression. Deepak is a dignified, self-reflexive Dalit in the narrative that contested the social hegemony with heroic courage. After landing a government job as a civil engineer (image below) he is able to negotiate power, voice and representation within the framework of the State. Deepak's job as a civil engineer in Indian railways, could also suggest that he has found a place in the modernizing project of the nation.

Figure 13: Deepak starts working as a government civil engineer.

The film, however, does portray that in exercising autonomy to choose his profession instead of being assigned a profession according at birth, Deepak is an exception.

"In the post-1990s era, liberalization and the supposed accompanying transformation of the economy was intended to dismantle rigid caste structures; instead, we see it is being reproduced because in neoliberal India, market influences have begun to favour labour structures that remain based on caste affiliations". (Yengde 509)

This fear of entrapment in the caste category haunts Deepak throughout the film. Deepak's father tells him at one point, "leave this place. The sooner the better. Or you will spend your life among burning bodies". In another scene there is a haunting reminder that one who is born into the Dalit community will remain in it, no matter how worthy they may be.

Deepak's father says to a man from an upper caste, "Look at poor Shambhu….Shambhu gets a bonus day every ten years. That day he gets all the money from the cremation *ghat*. Shambhu's father got his bonus day once a year. But he was blessed with ten kids and the bonus day was split up". Suggesting that for generations people are unable to escape this cycle of oppression. Deepak's brother's anger, frustration and jealousy directed at Deepak represents this complete sense of entrapment in his caste identity.

The second song in the album "Mann kasturi re" reiterates this sense of entrapment, prejudice, and oppression more forcefully. The song loosely translates to:

The mind is precious and elusive,
The world has its own set ways,
So much is left unsaid in the end
Even the purest of things, i.e. sweet river water,
Couldn't bridge the gap of this side and that side.

The song highlights the inescapable nature of destiny dictated by societal divides that keep victimizing certain sections of the population despite their dreams and visions. It exposes the impossibility of being heard when even the holy river Ganges cannot eliminate the socially constructed divides between castes and genders.

The final scene where Devi and Deepak meet is significant because through out the film, Devi and Deepak's caste backgrounds are set in relief. As Piyush's body is being carried to the *ghats* to the "ram naam satya hai" (Lord Rama's name is the only truth) funeral chants marking the end of his journey on earth, the scene cuts to Deepak's house where the music of "Ram naam satya hai" chants are incessant, continuous accompaniment to Deepak's life. While Deepak's family burns bodies, Devi's Brahmin father runs a Hindu ritual supplies shop and indulges in religious book translations and History of Varanasi.

While Devi’s family is not rich, the film makes clear that there is significant class difference between her and Deepak. The contrasts are reflected in figures 14, 15, 16 and 17.

Figure 14: Dining scene at Devi's house   Figure 5: Dining scene at Deepak's house

Figure 6: Devi's father working   Figure 7: Deepak's family working at the ghat.

Thus, the final scene when Deepak offers Devi water not only breaks the casteist stereotypes that dictate who the “untouchables” can or cannot give water to, it is also the site of their meeting, which parallels the site of Deepak’s day out with Shaalu, foreshadowing the possibility of a romantic union between Deepak and Devi. Furthermore, both the meetings result in two boat trips to Triveni Sangam, the confluence site of the holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, which, for Hindus is a place that can wash away sins and free one from the cycle of rebirth, thereby freeing one of caste.

A fourth song in the film, “Gazab ka hai din” from the film *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), is not included in the album or listed on Wikipedia/IMDB. *Qayamat Se*

Qayamat Tak was a very famous Bollywood romance that became a landmark film and provided the template for the typical hetero-normative Hindu romance films of the nineties. The plot is a tragic Romeo Juliet adaptation where family rivalry keeps the lovers from uniting, ultimately leading to their deaths. Not only does the most famous love song from the 1988 film predict the tragic end of the love story between Deepak and Shaalu, it does something more significant. Deepak makes a mixed tape with the song and snippets of his recorded phone conversations with Shaalu. He cuts and rearranges the song and interpolates their voices into it. This catachrestic reworking of the song space changes the positionality of the subaltern character by rearranging the relation between signifiers, by "renewing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value coding" (Spivak 228). This song thus resituates a Dalit protagonist in the song space and imagines possibilities of new signifiers, new concepts and a chance to restructure a discourse that is not fully saturated by Brahmanism. By reusing and reenacting the landmark song for upper-caste Hindu love stories to depict the romance of an inter-caste couple, the film reimagines the romantic Bollywood film song as representative of Dalit voices and narratives. The picturizations of this song also include the archetypal images of the Bollywood love song (shown in the images below) and story formulas like lovers singing on a bike ("*zindegi ek safar hai suhana*"), lovers singing on a boat ("*Do lafzon ki hai dil ki kahani*"), lovers singing under a tree ("*Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein*"), etc. *Masaan* challenges the representation of Dalit characters as voiceless and oppressed victims of caste violence and humanizes the characters through romance. The film songs become a medium of Dalit affirmation.

Figure 8: Archetypal images of the Bollywood love song

Through the use of Bollywood song formula and by politicizing art, *Masaan* subverts the accepted film aesthetic that naturalizes caste dogma. Dalit cinema thus could allegorically strengthen efforts to commemorate the experiences of the minorities by integrating formerly unheard or intentionally excluded identities into mainstream culture. The cinematic experience of these artivist films can become a transformative moment for the audience, whereby they can propel the dialectics of social change.

In portraying the ideal Dalit in highlighting Dalit narratives, however, *Masaan* inadvertently puts forth the argument that transgressing caste boundaries is largely dependent on the oppressed individuals. These narratives still work to expose the glaring absence of common Dalit men and women and their achievements in Indian historical narratives, and deny a common Dalit's history, struggling for democratic rights, ecological conservation, and violence free public sphere. *Court* (2014), I contend, refigures the notion of the common Dalit into an anti-essentialist trope that does not project a positive Dalit subjectivity.

Director Chaitanya Tamhane attempts a risky experimentation on screen by casting not only less experienced actors, but also real rural and urban Bahujans/subalterns in his film. Thus, in addition to making a scathing critique of the exclusionary narrative and

"cinemato(po)graphy" (Yengde 513) of Bollywood films, he makes a commentary on the prevalent tropes of celluloid — of fair-skinned, middle class protagonists who have dominant caste names. The stories he portrays are largely drawn from his own experiences of living in Mumbai. In an interview with *Indiewire*, Tamhane explains how he fused two real life incidents to create the story of *Court*:

> I came across the case of Jiten Marandi, a protest singer from northern India who was wrongly accused (of sedition) and sentenced to death. There were many petitions and activist movements to stop this ridiculous charge against him. I also read an article in Tehelka magazine by S. Anand about the terrible conditions of manhole workers. And after lots of struggling, these two ideas clicked together. I formed a connection between them to form a bizarre case of a manhole worker committing suicide because of a protest singer.

His use of intimately connected script, music and location shooting lends legitimacy to his characters in the drama-scape of the story, a technique that extends the storyline.

His strategy paid off when *Court* won the Best Film in the Horizons category and the Luigi De Laurentiis award for Tamhane, when it premiered at Venice in 2014. The film has since then gathered accolades from festivals in Antalya, Vienna, and Singapore. It was named the Best Feature Film at the 2015 National Film Awards in India — the country's equivalent of France's César Award. Even though it is not the most commercially successful film, *Court* is included in this analysis because of its unique blend of artistic elements — a realistic documentary style cinematography, Dalit folk music, untrained actors, real locations — and its obvious activist intent. It is a serious film that conveys the most serious message in a lighthearted humorous way. It is a multilingual film and therefore difficult to categorize as regional or Bollywood, too. For these reasons *Court* does not fit into a neat art/commerce category. Because of its unique nature *Court* can be

classified as an artivist film that is situated between entertainment and pedagogy, art for pleasure and art that affects culture and society through narrating counter history, organizing community, or influencing social change.

Court makes no explicit mention of caste, unlike *Masaan*. The only time the word Dalit is mentioned in the film is when Narayan Kamble mentions his past association with the Dalit Progressive Party. Other than that, even though the point of view and the narratives are obviously Dalit, there is no direct invocation of caste within the film. *Court* stands out in its subtle yet effective depiction of caste as a difficult problem in society, a depiction handled so meticulously that it escaped the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).

"The CBFC has controlled cinematographic creation, production and distribution since its inception; its influence is palpable throughout Indian cinema. Its rules and decisions are made by a few government-appointed members, many of whom are politically connected with or sympathetic to the governing party, and who do not necessarily have any cinematographic expertise" (Yengde 512).

Since *Court* uses songs to voice protest against the oppressive establishment and society, since its protest against silencing of subaltern voices is coded in songs, and since it does not overtly use the word "Dalit" or caste, it gets a free pass. While *Masaan* uses the existing Bollywood song genre and reclaims it, *Court* is an artivist film that uses activist folk songs to start a completely new and predominantly Dalit film song genre.

The film opens with the folk singer Narayan Kamble (Vira Sathidar) teaching a

Figure 9: Opening scene where Kamble is seen teaching a group of kids in a *chawl*

group of school kids in a *chawl*[17] as shown in the image above, and then taking a bus to perform at the “Nava Jeevan Bidrohi Sanskriti Jalsa” (New Life Protest/Counter Culture Meet) in a shabby courtyard in Mumbai. Kamble is midway through his song performance when the police arrest him on charges of abetting the suicide of a manhole worker Vasudev Powar. The singer is clueless but unperturbed. An upper middle-class Guajarati lawyer, Vinay Vora (Vivek Gomber), takes on his case pro bono and echoes Narayan’s cluelessness. Kamble and Vora go up against the byzantine nature of India’s legal system, as we follow them down the rabbit hole.

On the first day of hearing, the public prosecutor, Nutan (Geetanjali Kulkarni) reads the case against Kamble:

> There was one song performed by the accused, which coaxed and encouraged the manhole worker to commit suicide by deeply inhaling the toxic gases found inside the sewers. It is no coincidence that the song in question suggests exactly the method of suicide that is deliberate negligence of safety norms and regulations, by which the

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[17] *Chawls* are tenement housing built in the early 1900’s primarily to house migrant workers coming to Mumbai.

> deceased took his life. According to this song, giving up your life is the one and only rational solution for certain sections of the society to gain dignity and respect. Here Narayan Kamble is openly endorsing and encouraging an act, which is an offense under section 309.

She adds that Kamble had been previously charged under the Dramatic Performance Act and had been sufficiently warned to not perform any material that is "seditious in nature or harmful to the general society". In this she echoes the apprehensions of the CBFC, which routinely censors films that openly talk about religion, class, sexuality and caste issues. The trial, therefore, becomes not just a depiction of the archaic colonialist rules governing the lives of postcolonial subaltern subjects, silencing them, taking away from them the basic rights of a citizen, but it also becomes a self-reflexive critique of Indian cinema and CBFC, which is a hegemonic extension of the Indian power structures. It becomes a testimony to the various artistic ways that individuals should adapt to not only escape state prosecution but also censorship. The film draws attention to the casteist biases of the modern medium and its limited space where subalterns have little or no access to communication platforms and have no voice. The egalitarian nature of cinema representation is lost in Bollywood. Thus, when the prosecutor says, "I would also like to bring to the attention of the honorable court that the accused, in spite of these warnings, has performed the dramatic piece in question without the approval of concerned censor authorities and with the deliberate intent of causing harm, inciting seditious sentiments and corrupting people present at the performance", it is not just a representation of the conditions limiting subaltern voices, but also a warning against those artists who dare to defy the censor board is taking on socially relevant topics that challenge the established structures. Therefore, Narayan Kamble's call to revolt represents both Dalit voices and

marginalized artists:

> Time to rise and revolt
> Time to know your enemy
> Tough times are here
> We are uprooted from our soil.

"Besides ignoring Dalit creative or autonomous subjectivity, the Indian film industry fails to acknowledge or give expression to Dalit music, art, literature or food. The Dalit counter-public[18] sphere does not have recourse to the same tools of oppression as Brahmins do. Art forms such as Dalit theatre, *tamasha* as folk drama, *pawada* (panegyric poetry), *lawani* (ballads), *jalsa*, or the presentation of Dalit food receive no recognition in Brahmanical culture" (Yengde 510).

The egalitarian nature of these street-level song performances can have a profound and long-term effect upon a broad range of citizens, appealing to everyone from the educated and elite to the illiterate and impoverished. These performances display a colloquial and evocative rhetoric that, by promoting civic engagement, invites audiences to evaluate pressing social, economic, and political problems and to work toward reform. In the film, these performances are held in open courtyards or on street side makeshift stages that are open to everyone.

Activist performers appropriated and reinterpreted folk forms, figures, and practices and then instilled them with new meaning to raise critical consciousness, mobilize communities, and constitute identities. The song performances not only inform

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[18] The subaltern counter public spheres are parallel discursive spaces where subaltern communities create and circulate counter discourses, which become oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

and entertain, but must also have palpable effects for structural change and policy. In doing so, these performances, as an alternative to bourgeois, commercialized cinema, raise consciousness about issues of social relevance, provide social critiques, and involve people at a grassroots level to effect change. Common themes include the caste and class systems, communalism, issues concerning health care and education, political corruption, terrorism, current economic trends, and police brutality. Kamble highlights these divisions when he sings:

> These dense jungles
> These rusty jungles
> Religious jungles
> Casteist jungles
> Racist jungles
> Nationalist jungles
> On this deadly night
> We lose all our senses
> Hands bruised and burnt
> Get a gift of boiling wax
> Time to know your enemy

Kamble informs his audience that it is the divisive government or the ruling classes that divide the nation on the basis of religion, caste, and race, and challenges the nationalist discourse that pitted citizens against each other.

Court becomes an artivist film in that it foregrounds Dalit cultural practices by making the performance at a Dalit folk festival, complete with the image of Ambedkar adorning the stage, central to the narrative, and by focusing on Dalit oral traditions infused with a protest culture, and vernacular and musical activities of Dalit communities for its songs. The songs use unique and sonorous beat of drums, clapping, harmonium, chorus, and a ballad form of singing to create a musical tonality that can be marked as specifically

Dalit and marginal to the mainstream. The cinematic citizenship of Dalits is thus restored through the medium of Dalit songs. The filmic representation of Dalits and other marginalized groups speaks to larger audiences interested in the intersections of power and oppression.

At Kamble's bail hearing, Vora asks the Judge to consider that the Dramatic Performance Act is a colonial era act of 1876 that was meant to control dissenting voices through censorship suggesting that such laws do not apply to the post-colonial democratic society. He adds, "Whether it was a dramatic performance at all is also questionable, because it was not a dramatic depiction of events. In which case, whether it required a censor certificate is a grey area". The Dramatic Performance Act is arbitrarily used to silence all protesting voices from the margins, especially when those voices incriminate the State. And these laws affect marginalized communities most because counter-public sphere or community-based, street-level performance grows out of moments of struggle and documents the needs and suffering of individuals and communities.

Charging individuals for abetting suicides seems to be a strategy used by state to avoid culpability in custodial deaths. Both *Masaan* and *Court* follow this strategy of exploitation to scapegoat individuals for faults of the state. The charges brought against Kamble are ridiculous because Vasudev's wife testifies that he was never given any protective gears, that he would "always throw a rock to see if any insects came out, if they did then it had oxygen", that he lost an eye from continued exposure to toxic gases, and that he had to drink to be able to bear the stench of the sewers. The judge however denies bail saying that Kamble's is a non-bailable offense.

Court highlights how the intersections of class and caste and the resulting

prejudices affect the legal system. For example, Vora goes to an upscale bar with friends where a singer first is heard singing a Portuguese song before moving to an English song,

> So I meet you down at the same café
> And there's a broken guitar you can play
> You can play *any song*

This is ironic, because Kamble is arrested for singing just any song:

> Amidst all this noise about the arts
> Truth has lost its voice
> Art is your hogwash
> A deception in the name of aesthetics
> Screams from the funeral pyre
> Cannot be called a performance
> We will genuinely be obliged
> If you do not label us artists

Kamble's class and caste, his background as a political activist, his associations with political parties like National Youth party, Dalit Progressive Movement, Swaraj Mill's Workers' Association, his political activist bent and his ability to compose folk songs that can mobilize masses are precisely what limit him from singing "any song" and what threaten the government leading to his arrest.

Court highlights that Law and order is practically non-existent in the casteist feudal systems. The police and the other arms of government that are entrusted with promoting the welfare of the entire community are instead appropriated to serve the interests of the land-owning castes and bourgeois classes. The prosecutor's prejudiced and casteist position is revealed when she says to her colleagues, "(judge) should quickly pass judgment now…But things still take their own sweet time. For example, take this Narayan Kamble case. Simply throw him in jail for twenty years and finish the matter. The same faces, the same stories, it's boring". Here Nutan is speaking from a position of caste

hegemony and is influenced by the imperialistic legacies of the country's legal system. When Nutan leaves work, she picks her son up from daycare, then cooks dinner at home, serves her family sitting in front of the TV, and then stays up late to work on her case. If they go out then it's to greasy spoons and not fancy restaurants. In terms of class, she's closer to Narayan than Vora, although the concept of empathy seems remote from her mindset. Her whole family goes to the theater to watch a play that celebrates essentialist Maharashtran identity and vilifies migrants. Nutan is parochial and lacking broad compassion. However, her uncomplicated reading of the legal system and her reluctance or refusal to analyze and question the relevance of imperialist laws in the postcolonial society inevitably incriminates the education system of the country, which creates professionals capable of rote learning yet completely lacking in analytical skills and independent thinking.

Judge Sadavarte (Pradeep Joshi), like Nutan, is unsympathetic, uncritical, and uninterested in upholding the sanctity and impartiality of the legal system. He too is casteist and prejudiced against minorities. In one scene, he rejects the hearing of an Anglo-Indian woman because she wore a sleeveless dress to court, which the judge deemed against the code of conduct, which allows "only modest dressing and sober colors." Kamble, who belongs to one of the largest untouchable communities in Maharashtra, becomes the obvious victim of this prejudice. The director also portrays him as anti-intellectual when in one scene he recommends that a speech-impaired child be taken to an astrologer or numerologist rather than therapists and doctors for cure. Thus, in the last scene when he is seen slapping the mute kid, it becomes his final and most deliberate act of silencing those who cannot speak. It is this silencing, this systemic oppression that

Narayan protests when he sings:

> The rulers are divisive
> Humanity is in its cage
> It burns, it disintegrates

Therefore, in the end when the prosecutor is unable to present sufficient evidence and the judge has to let Kamble go, he cannot believe his luck and he sings:

> How you wield the sword
> That stabs the heart
> That smashes all life
> Oh Lord, our master
> With one shot of your gun
> The best people are drowned
>
> Down in the dumps
> Yet you did not muffle me
> Showed the courtesy to try me in court
> How you rendered a favor onto me.

Court, by critiquing caste, gender and class oppression, provides a front to wage a battle against hegemonic caste supremacy. This artivist Dalit film starts a resistance movement by departing from traditional forms of art, and focusing on Dalit music and culture. Dalit cinema, by transgressing the accepted versions of upper-caste, hetero-normative bourgeois representations of India can present effective critiques of the unscrupulous purveyors of elite cinema, and by appealing to regional circles, can challenge the hegemonic cinematic presentation of *savarna* characters as unassailable.

III.6 Film Song and Invisible/Migrant Female Agency

I now turn to *Monsoon Wedding*, a film dominated by music. In the liner notes of the music CD of *Monsoon Wedding*, director Mira Nair remarks: "Unlike typical Bollywood

films where all music is newly composed and in playback, the characters in our film use music as our own families and friends do — to celebrate, mourn or honor any occasion." She adds that the soundtrack is meant to illustrate "something ineffable and distinctive about India: the essential inclusion of music in our everyday lives." Not only that, the music represents the rare bridging of class divide through romance in a megacity notorious for dehumanizing peripheral figures, and gives voice to people all across the social divide. The greatest appeal of *Monsoon Wedding*'s music is that the score naturally fits in the movie in the same way that music corresponds the Indian existence. Mychael Danna uses a skillful mix of folk songs, wedding songs, jazz, old Bollywood film songs, instrumental ragas, contemporary Bollywood dance numbers and original compositions to achieve its lifelike appeal.

The film revolves around the Verma family of Delhi, and documents the events leading up to the wedding of their daughter Aditi (Vasundhara Das) to Hemant (Parvin Dabas), a computer engineer from Houston, by arrangement. The movie immediately sets up two differential spaces. On the one hand we have the Verma family reunion where family members, with all their idiosyncrasies, return to New Delhi from different parts of the globe, including Australia, Muscat, and USA, to join in the wedding celebrations. The soon to be bride, Aditi's extra marital affair, her unmarried cousin Ria's trauma from being sexually molested as a child by a family member, her younger brother Varun's effeminacy, the carnal relationship between her distant diasporic cousins Rahul and Ayehsa, put these characters on the edge, or outside of the normalized societal expectations. On the other hand, we have the parallel narrative of Dubey and Alice. In the love story of the couple, Dubey and Alice, who otherwise have little to no dialogue in the film, *Monsoon Wedding*

highlights the problem of mainstream Hindi films that systematically ignore the stories of the marginalized groups, and show that these stories can be invoked through alternative narrative strategies. Their love story is unfolded through old Bollywood songs. The songs give the peripheral characters enough agency so they are not reduced to mere comic reliefs.

Monsoon Wedding may seem like an odd choice for analyzing subaltern representation, because on the surface, it is a glossy film about an upper caste Hindu marriage, exulting in *savarna* traditions, and this in no way relates to the Dalit discourse and culture. "By obscuring Dalit-Bahujan narratives, these films evoke an imagined utopia that does not speak to the majority of the population. The ability to participate in the utopia on screen is therefore limited by the project of graded caste hierarchy, and this arrangement further estranges Dalit-Bahujans from mainstream culture" (Yengde 506). However, beneath the veneer of these upper-caste and class narratives emerge the stories of the downtrodden, invisible protagonists, but only if the songs are taken into account.

Monsoon Wedding is set in a 'megacity', existing in a relationship of difference with both the rural India of *Peepli [Live]* as well as the dominant norm of the global city. The megacity, which represents the human condition of the global South, can be understood as the "constitutive outside of contemporary urban studies" (Roy 224), marking the limits of archival and ethnographic recognition. The Verma family with their export business with ties to Macy's is seen to mark the urban nodes that command and control points of the world economy, while characters like Dubey, his workers, and Alice represent the informal labor of the megacity. The manicured lawns, out houses and extravagance of the Verma family is set in sharp contrast with the chaotic, cluttered and modest spaces occupied by Dubey and Alice. The spaces that Dubey and Alice occupy

territorialize the “transition from village to the city…from the popular-as-the folk to the popular-as-the massified” (Roy 226). *Monsoon Wedding*, like all other Nair films, is fascinated with the characters that live on the margins of society.

Alice’s quiet presence throughout the wedding ceremonies gives Nair’s film its most obvious and eloquent expression of class and caste divisions. The “English name” Alice, the flower adorned crucifix that hangs on the wall in her kitchen and the beaded silver crucifix that she wears around her neck, as shown in the image below, suggest that she belongs to the Dalit Christian community[19]. Alice is forever lingering on the fringes of the group of female family members as if almost invisible to them.

Figure 20: Alice in her room/kitchen where a crucifix adorns the wall.

She slips in and out of scenes without anyone noticing. As a woman, she is a part of the women’s circle, but as a housemaid, definitively detached from them. She is aware of markers of modern life, but unlike the other two young women in the film, her lack of resources limits her from being a part of it. Alice is one of the “uprooted rural migrants and

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[19] The Indian Christian community today is predominantly comprised of Dalit communities, which may be attributed to a great extent to the positive influence of the Christian mission on Dalit communities in their struggle to escape the oppressive caste system and find identity and emancipation. Both Dalit communities and Dalit Christians in India are denied access to hegemonic power.

informal workers who have been largely dispossessed of fungible labor-power or reduced to domestic service in the house of the rich" (Roy 228) and thus has little access to the culture of collective labor and large-scale class struggle. As informal proletariat without access to the system of organized labor, Alice has no access to political agency in the beginning.

In perhaps the most colorful and musical sequence in the film, the *mehendi* ceremony, where a group of women gather to merrily sing traditional songs about the pleasures of married life, Alice seems excluded from the group as she serves colorful drinks to the women while everyone else partakes in the merriment. Interestingly, even though the song seems like a happy song, a careful analysis reveals that it is not about the pleasures of married life, but about the retrograde, misogynistic and racist marriage market. The song goes:

Oh women of the house, decorate me with mehendi
Make these fair hands beautiful with henna
Madhorama asks: which one shall I marry?
Madhorama says: the fat one
The fat one needs too large a bed to sleep on.
Let's drop her by the way side.
Right on!
I want another.
Right on!
I am a fancy gentleman
Right on!
Brimming with lust and desire.
Young beauty intoxicates me
Do I lie?
No way!
Madhorama asks: which one shall I marry?
Madhorama says: the fair one
The fair one has the color of butter
She sleeps alone on the roof as her lover pines for her below
This is the one I will have

This is the one I like
I will marry her.

As Alice hurries out of the courtyard with her head lowered and the obvious

Figure 10: Alice leaving the courtyard during the *sangeet* ceremony.

expression of discomfort, as shown in the above figure, it becomes evident that she doesn't belong to this group. But her exclusion may be a testimony of something even larger.

The film opens with a TV talk show where a group of people is discussing the necessity of censorship. They ask, "Just because India has gone global, should we embrace everything? What about our ancient culture? Our tradition? Our values?" and whether censorship can successfully protect Indian culture from Western influence—legitimate questions in the wake of globalization. Mira Nair personifies this debate through the characters in *Monsoon Wedding*. The film contends that artificial means of censoring and controlling people in order to "preserve" culture are futile and that the preservation of culture or tradition isn't directly related to how much Western entertainment one consumes. Interestingly, in the events surrounding the weddings, Alice personifies progressive thinking with her inter-community love marriage with Dubey, while Aditi, the

seemingly modern, rich, educated, English speaking woman embraces tradition and, instead of fighting for her relationship with her affair partner, which could isolate her from her family and society, she gets "married to some guy selected by mummy daddy" based on class and caste lines. The inherent awkwardness of an arranged marriage is highlighted in the *sangeet* ceremony around the family living room where Aditi and Hemant, appear to meet for the first time and seem extremely uncomfortable. Here, Nair seems to highlight Partha Chatterjee's argument that some of Subaltern Studies' "most persuasive demonstrations of the truth that the time of colonial and postcolonial modernity was heterogeneous, that its practices were hybrid, and that the archaic was, in many significant ways, constitutive of the modern (46).

The wedding song thus highlights the clash not just between tradition and modernity and the transactional nature of arranged marriage (This is the one I like/I will marry her) and the passion of love marriage (She sleeps alone on the roof as her lover pines for her below). It also exposes the misogynistic and casteist basis of the Indian marriage market. The Verma family is at once the rich and 'modern' family who also embrace the culture of "arranged marriage". On the other hand, Alice, a simple girl from Bihar without the trappings of modern life, is progressive enough to discard old customs and break societal expectations with her inter-community love marriage with Dubey. When Ria advises Aditi that she may not be ready for marriage and asks, "For all this talk of passion, how about marrying for love?", Aditi ignores her and goes ahead with the wedding, even though she secretly continues to meet with her lover. Alice and Dubey's romantic encounter, on the other hand, starts with Alice accidentally shattering glasses amid showers of marigolds, the traditional flower in a Hindu wedding. The broken glass

anticipates a major breakthrough, a new identity and a new beginning. It is ultimately Alice who answers Ria's question with her love marriage. Alice's exclusion and discomfort at the *mehendi* ceremony, therefore, should also be read as a rejection of the transactional nature of a racist, casteist and classist arranged marriage.

The wedding song also suggests how strongly fairness may be preferred even in upwardly mobile modern India. Her in-laws repeatedly praise Aditi for her fairness while Alice is referred to as the "dark skinned beloved" (*savariya*). The contrast between Alice and Aditi couldn't be any starker. Alice covets her employer's affluent lifestyle, in one scene wistfully dressing up in Pimmi's clothes and jewellery, but she knows she can never be a part of the family's inner circle. In fact, other than Dubey, Alice is never seen having a conversation with anyone else in the film. In the end, the Verma family members invite Alice and Dubey to join them in a scene of ecstatic dancing. Their intercommunity love marriage becomes an act of transgression resisting the divisive social customs.

Traditional Hindi films do not devote scenes to the development of an inter-caste and inter-community love story between characters like Dubey and Alice, but Mira Nair does; and she does that with the use of popular film songs from bygone eras. The first time Dubey and Alice see each other, "Aaj mausam bara bada beimaan hai" (but today, the weather is very unpredictable) starts playing in the background. It is a song from the movie *Loafer* (1973) that showed a downtrodden protagonist who fought against all odds to amass a lot of wealth and ultimately defeat the villainous elites. The use of a very popular and timeless Hindi film song here is significant for two reasons. First, the word "mausam" (weather) here is referring to the title of the film, *monsoon*, which is essentially a reversal of wind patterns. The song therefore foreshadows unexpected and unpredictable outcomes

in the film. Secondly, the playback singer Mohammed Rafi has historically been one of the most celebrated playback voices in India. In using this popular love song to narrate a "subaltern" couple's story, Alice and Dubey are interpellated as citizens in the film. Their love story is no longer hidden in the margins but become mainstream. The Rafi song is also closely related to the title song of the film, kava Kava, which goes:

Today my heart desires
Oh Lord, give us rain and fill our stores with grains
Listen crow, today my heart desires to fly with the wind
Because my fate has bestowed peace upon me
That today my heart says that it wants to fly
Fly with the wind, that's what it wants to do
Wedding songs are being sung in our house
Happiness has come laughing and dancing
These times feel too good to be true
Sing my friends sing
Because our dreams have come true.

It may be argued that the title song is more closely aligned with the subaltern couple than with the protagonist couple in *Monsoon Wedding,* because Alice and Dubey are the ones who seem to have let the monsoon winds carry them to freedom without the protection of an expensive wedding tent, to let them fall in love, to have been set free from societal prejudices and limitations. They are the ones who are really flying and happy.

It is also interesting to note the differences between the two weddings as the final scenes of the film cut between the two wedding locations. The small wedding that Alice and Dubey have as lower class citizens is overshadowed by the extravagance of the Verma family's. The Vermas wait with umbrellas to greet the Groom and his party under a waterproof tent worth two million rupees made by Dubey as Danna's brilliantly crafted "Baraat" track is played by a traditional trombone-laden wedding orchestras creating a exuberant and appropriately discordant effect, which serves as both the title music and the

music of the *baraat* at the movie's eponymous close. Alice and Dubey's simple ceremony with three of their lower caste working class friends over a tiny bridge amidst lush green trees, while getting drenched in monsoon rains under an umbrella made of marigolds, as shown in the figure below, is accompanied by Danna's "feels like rain", which is a simple track played by piccolo. In their total rejection of capitalist marriage markets they prove that they are perhaps more cosmopolitan and progressive than the Vermas.

Figure 11: Alice and Dubey getting married in the Monsoon rains.

There are two other references to popular film songs in the movie. During Alice and Dubey's second encounter, Dubey's employees start teasing him with the very popular Hindi song, "Ankhon hi ankho mein ishara ho gaya"— another Rafi song from the 1956 film *C.I.D*. The song is a literal reference to the limits of speech. It says that even without speaking, just by communicating with their eyes, Alice and Dubey have decided to spend their lives together. The third reference occurs when Dubey and Alice meet for the third time and Dubey murmurs under his breath, "Kaho na pyaar hai" (Say you love me), the title song from a more contemporary movie by the same name. This movie too is a reference to timeless love.

Moreover, because of its reliance on voice, songs challenge the processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy and literature as norms of expression over orality. Because they do not require or establish a hierarchy of narrative authority, songs are a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian narrative form. Songs can be used as both an art and a strategy to voice subaltern concerns.

Finally, I come to *Talaash* (2012), which has earned the reputation of being a feminist film that experiments with new representational practices. The film is a psychological and supernatural thriller, a Bombay noir, and a rare Bollywood genre that's also rarely successful. The film details the city's grittiness, exhaustion, disillusionment, amorality, dim light, faded colors and clipped language. The plot revolves around the mysterious accident and death of a famous movie star, Armaan Kapoor (Vivan Bhatena), when his car implausibly swerves off the road and plunges into the sea. In trying to investigate the death, inspector Suraj Singh Sikhawat (Aamir Khan) learns that there have been two other identical deaths in the same location. Clues lead him to Mumbai's infamous red light area where a call girl named Rosie (Kareena Kapoor), with whom Suraj develops an emotional relationship, seems to be the only one with answers. A complicated series of events reveal that the dead were implicated in the murder of Rosie, who now wanders the streets of Mumbai avenging her death and helping other women like her.

Talaash may be categorized as artivist cinema precisely because of its unusual subject matter, where a ghostly woman is suspended in real life to help a police officer solve crimes. The mystical, supernatural elements disrupt the conventional art film category and make a mark for itself. Talaash does not even comfortably fit the definition of

horror film, because the spectrality of the character is only exposed at the very end. Reema Kagti, when asked if she was making a commercial or art film, refused to answer, saying that these are not disparate categories in her mind. She makes the film however she likes and the end result is whatever it is.

Even though the movie got fairly good reviews from professional movie critics, audience reviews largely expressed disappointment. Viewers felt misled and cheated that what was promised to be a suspense thriller turned out to be a ghost story in the end. Horror movies, which used to be a huge craze in the 50-60s, are now considered to be non-serious films reserved for the B grade category in Bollywood. However, what is interesting is that the opening song, "*Muskane jhooti hai*" (Smiles are fake) gives away the central theme of the film. We hear Rosie singing:

> Yesterday in these very buds, in these crushed buds,
> There was clamor
> The spirit that is thirsty, that which is melancholy,
> She roams around.
> Everyone is looking for her,
> Wish someone understood that.

The song, via Rosie, not only blatantly tells the audience at the very outset that the film is about a "thirsty spirit" that "roams around", it also tries to promote audience engagement by asking the audience to reflect upon the sudden disappearance of a girl in the night. Here Rosie is also directly blaming the audience for not understanding that the "Talaash" (search) is as much for social justice as it is for her body (Everyone is looking for her,/ Wish someone understood that). Unlike other Hindi films, the song video of "*Muskane jhooti hai*" (Smiles are fake), which, according to choreographer Caesar Gonsalves, was

"recorded as a music video and not a typical item song", was released separately ahead of the film as promotional material. The music video was not included in the film because it would be a distraction, particularly since Rosie's visibility in the song is suspicious since she is already dead. In the music video, Rosie introduces each of the characters to the viewers, as she appears to be the only person with a complete understanding of the events. The song establishes a connection with the audience and invites them to demand answers to Rosie's questions: "Why is she lost? Why is she upset?" In other words, the song (as well as other songs in *Talaash*) is an integral part of the narrative. Director Reema Kagti says in an interview that "rather than hanging the narrative and cutting to a song, I've tried to write the songs into my narrative and use them for taking the story or the suspense forward." The song video also evokes the suspense thrillers of the black and white era of Hindi films, specifically *Howrah Bridge*[20] (1958) according to Aamir Khan, and the video is intentionally choreographed to suggest similarities between the two films.

Most Bollywood movies with strong women leads[21] happen to be musicals, where the women have limited dialogues, and most of their intervention in the films happens in the form of songs[22]. *Talaash* appears to be a typical Bollywood film where the women are positioned as passive objects of the gaze because the agency of those women who only have music to assert presence in the narratives is overlooked. However, an analysis of the songs as part of the narrative can show how subaltern women are interpellated as subjects

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[20] Prem's (Ashok Kumar) struggling brother disappears with a family heirloom to sell it for profit. After learning his brother has been killed, Prem teams up with a dancer (Madhubala) to find his brother's killers and retrieve the stolen family heirloom.
[21] *Umrao Jaan* (1981), *Raam teri Ganga Maili* (1985), *Satyam Shivan Sundaram* (1978), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Mera Saaya* (1966), to name only a few.
[22] Women actors in supporting or marginal roles also get little dialogue but many songs.

in the film, and how they assert autonomy, resistance and protest through the songs.

While psychoanalytic feminist theory presumes some connection between gazing, violent aggression, and masculinity, positioning women in passive roles to be gazed at, *Talaash* (or any Indian horror films for that matter) does something quite different. Contrary to mainstream cinema, it is Rosie who possesses 'the gaze' in *Talaash*. In fact, the victim protagonist (ghost) who is a marginalized subject in this horror film is the only person with the power of gaze while she herself remains invisible at will. Rosie is the first to see, inquire about, and know the transgressor, and is the one who drives the narrative. Ghosts in Hindi horror movies are almost exclusively[23] women who have been victimized. *Talaash* subverts the stereotypical construction and representation of women in Indian films through an unconventional construction/representation of Indian women. Ironically, Rosie acquires agency and power only after escaping her body and bonded prostitution, and becoming invisible. It is through the use of invisibility as a deliberate agential mode that Rosie is able to transgress social and physical boundaries and threaten the stability of the symbolic order, and it is through the use of songs that she is able to voice her resistance.

Talaash is not an exception in this regard. Indian horror movies with female leads are always accompanied by great playback music. The female playback[24] songs that accompany most Bollywood films can be seen as a sharp departure from the stereotypical

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[23] Some B grade Hindi movies do have male vampirish ghosts, but my focus on this chapter is on the mainstream popular horror films.
[24] Looking at songs is especially important, because, in India, for the longest time playback singing was the only role available to women in films. It was music that brought women into he public sphere. (cite)

visual representation of women in Indian films. Like all other horror films, *Talaash* uses songs as rhetorical devices that provide women with the means to articulate pressing concerns about identity, oppression and representation to a diverse audience—from the educated and elite to the illiterate and impoverished. *Talaash* (2012) thus has an avenging woman in the center of the narrative, but the film focuses more on class and gender divides, and the ongoing crisis of law and order in the nation. Moving the narrative focus away from personal revenge narratives, the stories of Rosie, and the other oppressed call girls in the film, become the allegory of a beleaguered nation-state. Subalternity does not exist without the oppressor, and *Talaash* demonstrates how institutions systematically enforce and exploit the states of subaltern women. The female subaltern, who in this case is also a prostitute [explain how this is subaltern], is the most vulnerable to the system of oppression. She is simultaneously critical yet trapped within the dominant discourse of her world. It is only after dying that she is able to transgress the oppressive representation and reclaim her body and identity, and it is only by (ghostly) singing that she can be heard. The singing creates a discursive space where subaltern women produce knowledge. Song actually becomes a narrative site of confrontation where discussions surrounding subjectivity is expressed, and where political identities can be established, formed or shaped. In the song "*Jia laage na*" (My heart is sad without you), Suri sings:

> I don't know why,
> I don't know how,
> This invisible string draws me, takes me to you.

And Rosie sings back:

> I'm the unknown story, that won't be completed.

Here Rosie is literally talking about her subalternity. She is the unknown, undocumented woman who has migrated to the city for work and who has now turned into an incomplete story, much like the stories of *Satis* in British records, whose voices were inconspicuously missing from the pages. Rosie continues,

> I smile, hide from everyone,
> I am disturbed day and night.
> There is no sleep in the eyes.
> There is no peace in my heart.

Here the song works on two levels. First, it is alluding to the general condition of subaltern women and secondly it is literally talking about the wandering spirit of Rosie. The movie demonstrates the transformation of an underprivileged woman into a subaltern woman with literally no bodily or social agency. It is through the use of invisibility and songs as deliberate agential modes that Rosie is able to transgress social and physical boundaries. By focusing on songs in *Talaash* it is possible to scrutinize how the film represents gender, sexuality and power relation between the sexes, as well as challenge the theory of visibility as the only mode of agency.

In the scenes leading up to Rosie's death she is never seen or heard speaking. Even Mallika, another call girl whom Shashi had "bought" from the madam, was silenced with a slap when she tried to speak. Shashi says to Mallika, "I have told you before too. Don't speak in front of other people. Understood?" Mallika is imprisoned by the madam's men and forced back into prostitution after Shashi's death. There is this implicit assumption that the police won't come to rescue her. Law officials allow the prostitution ring to flourish under their nose. The film insinuates that the exploitation of Mallika (Aditi Vasudev), Rosie and many other helpless women in the hands of powerful men is perpetuated by the

legal system. It is the complicity of the government that preserves their subaltern status and reaffirms their bodies as sites of exploitation. The women are denied any personal agency because they are treated as commodities that can be owned and exchanged at the owner's will. But that changes after Rosie loses her bodily limitations.

In one scene Rosie tells Suraj about the disappearance of one of her friends (alluding to herself). When Suraj asks Rosie if anyone has reported the crimes against the missing girl, Rosie laughs and says to Suraj, "It seems like I have to teach you the law. Prostitution is illegal. Call girls like us are not counted. And how can those who don't exist disappear?" In this situation, the trope of failed verbal resistance to produce any change is reversed, as Rosie not only is heard by Suraj, the government agent who can directly bring her justice, but she also leads Suraj to solve her case and rescue Mallika. Lalitha Gopalan points out that "the avenging woman's unhindered access to power is always limited by the arrival of the police", but the ending of *Talaash,* like the horror films that Gopalan analyzes, "differs markedly from the more assertive vigilante resolutions of the masculine genre like the gangster or bandit films" (52). In *Talaash*, it is the avenging woman who helps the police to uncover the crimes.

Talaash uses songs to articulate critical issues concerning women as a group whose legitimate rights are being infringed upon by unfair social and political systems. The songs implicitly question the social status quo. Her performance lets a subaltern, who is otherwise not permitted to speak, express herself.

III.7 Conclusion

By resituating songs within the filmic narratives we can find alternate ways in which subaltern agency is configured in Indian films. Since narratives are incomplete until the voices of the subalterns are discovered, in Indian musicals subalterns may remain unheard/unseen until songs are analyzed as crucial narrative devices. By challenging the criticism of Indian film music as superfluous and by looking at songs as continuation of filmic dialogue we can engage in broader discussions of cinematic representation and discover hitherto ignored or unheard subaltern voices.

CHAPTER IV

SINGING-IN-BETWEEN SPACES: *BHOOTER BHABISYAT* AND THE MUSIC TRANSCENDING CLASS CONFLICT

The vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogeneous continuum has…diluted the Marxist concept of history. (Giorgio Agamben)

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (Karl Marx)

Historically, Bengali cinema has been subsumed under the rubric of "All India Cinema", a category that Bengali filmmakers and scholars have resisted claiming the "Bengali filmic imaginary existed over and above the imaginary of the Indian nation" (Gooptu 1). The category of "All India cinema" imposes a kind of uniformity that by default suppresses Bengali or other regional identities with a ubiquitous Indianness. Bengali cinema, led by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1960s and 1970s created formal and stylistic aspects that set them apart from the mainstream commercial cinema of India. Filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Bimal Roy resisted the monochromatic and homogeneous brand of (Gandhian) anti-colonial nationalism, and countered the entertainment-for-profit model of mainstream commercial cinema. This delinked the idea of "popular culture" from its primary associations with commerce and entertainment and redefined it to include those cultural forms that originate from the social

and material conditions of ordinary people, thus allowing a focus not just on mass consumption but on "the people" as producers of art. However, while Bengali art films created distinctive styles and focused on ordinary people, Bengali commercial cinema came to be "marked by an exclusionist ideology—one that was based on the Bengali *Bhadralok*'s worldview—whose essence was "Bengaliness" and a 'Bengali culture'" (Gooptu 4). Even though Calcutta was a multi-ethnic city with a high immigrant population and a cosmopolitan center of economic migration, Bengali commercial cinema became somewhat generic and limited to the representation and construction of the "middle-class *bhodrolok* self". In Bengali films, this coherent and integrated Bengali identity came about by repressing the differences among different groups divided by ethnicity, gender, religion, class and caste.

This article looks at the Bengali film *Bhooter Bhabisyat*/*Future of the Past* (Dutta, 2012), a commercial political horror satire, as a counter-narrative to Bengali cinema's monocultural *bhodrolok* branding. The article argues that it is through the creation of an eclectic music spanning distinct historical periods, musical styles and languages, which ruptures the unifying homogeneous *bhadralok* cinema culture that *Bhooter Bhabisyat* becomes a performative text of political resistance, transcending regional/class/caste/ethnic/religious boundaries. The music in the film showcases how the cultural fabric of India/Bengal has been transformed by the coexistence of several religions, a mosaic of languages, dialects and ethnicities of both colonial and Post-colonial Bengal. Relying on Bhabha's use of the term "performative" to refer to action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses (Bhabha 146-149),

this article shows that *Bhooter Bhabisyat*, through its hybrid music, presents a counter-hegemonic narrative that can resist and exceed linear historical discourse.

IV.1 Hybrid Songs as Radical Music

Focusing on music rather than dialogue and narrative to read *Bhooter Bhabisyat* as counter hegemonic narrative is important for a few reasons. In her book, *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association*, Sumangala Damodaran offers an analysis of protest songs. She argues that protest music has a "typically standardized structure" which she calls "stereotypical" since they sound "agitational and motivational, conveying political messages stridently through lyrics, tune and tempo, and mostly being sung by a collective" (12). Songs that do not conform to this stereotypical structure are not considered protest songs. Perhaps for this reason, film music has not been seriously considered as protest music. Several scholars of Indian cinema before now have theorized film music and have worked hard to articulate the academic value of film music. However, they are all concerned, with one or two exceptions, with the study of "popular", Hindi, or Bollywood film music, which inadvertently repeats the fetishization and stigmatization of film songs because, film song is seen as a peculiar and unnecessary element which, however effective in the film's narrative, is ultimately a distinct entity, which offers mass escapist entertainment, and is potentially independent of the film. The discussions surrounding Indian cinema and music scholarship are thus overwhelmingly concerned with cinema of the nation state and the bourgeoisie. This article diverges by eschewing those unifying homogenous narratives by deconstructing film songs to see how they contribute to postcolonial political indigene-and-minority-centered discourses.

Furthermore, music reflects diverse social and political processes, contexts, and particularities of specific regions in India. Therefore, music plays a primary role in distinguishing regional cinema from the Hindi popular mainstream cinema. Since *Bhooter Bhabisyat* employs a variety of musical styles and genres, it can challenge Bengali cinema's "popular" music traditions in favor of protest music that can be "highly varied and historically evolved music" (Damodaran 12). By focusing on the intersection of film songs with their visual texts and political contexts, this article hopes to facilitate broader discussions of the depth and richness of the artivism of song-dance elements that draws so many audiences to these films.

In the context of the film, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* creates a sense of nostalgic reverie through a nostalgic retelling of Bengal's past two hundred and fifty years or so, via songs, poems, literature, films, history, politics and fashion spanning traditional and modern manifestations. The nostalgia in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* is projected through diverse songs from various periods, which complicates a purely chronological sense of remembering the past. The anachronistic music therefore put the current narrative in conversation with the past while suggesting new possibilities for the future. The markers of historic authenticity in the form of period music, period costumes and differences in dialects that are in fact quite obsolete are ironic reminders of the fabricated nature of real time. And this makes one question the authenticity of colonial history as we see the economic and class relationships between the characters change and transform throughout the film. By refusing to stick to "popular culture", which is the culture of the popular or hegemonic class, the hybrid music using forgotten musical styles establish the idea of the ordinary or marginalized people as the legitimate and forgotten subject of history. In bringing back the

culture of the people and using indigenous traditions, the anxiety between the rural and the urban audiences, or the middle class and working class, or the high and low art is resolved.

This hybrid style also emphasizes the self-referentiality of the film, while at the same time being critical of the workings and representations of historical narratives. Through the strategies of musical pastiche, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* (2012) offers a meta-historic narrative about Bengali cinema, which makes possible a critical investigation of the cultural discourses and historical narratives that are discursively embedded within the history of filmic production, circulation and consumption. Furthermore, by refusing to be limited by the homogenizing imperatives of mass media, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* stages an anti-capitalist protest to transform popular consciousness. In reformulating ghost stories, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* presents an India-centric view of colonial history, and through its hybrid song performances, challenges mass media and its dominant narratives.

IV.2 Interstitial Space of Representation

Bhooter Bhabisyat, which literally means the future of the past (could also be read as the future of the ghosts),[25] is a political horror satire about a group of spirits from different historical periods in Bengal. The characters include Bengal's Nawab Shiraz-Ud-Daula's (1756-57) private cook, a Bengali *Zamindar* (1760), a British *Sahib* (1905), an actress from Bengali silent movies (1940s), an East-Bengali (Bangladeshi) refugee (1947), a Naxalite rebel from 1970s,[26] a soldier from Kargil (1999), a *richshaw* puller, a

[25] Ghost and past are homonyms in Bengali.
[26] A member of an armed revolutionary group advocating Maoist communism.

contemporary Bengali rock band singer and a modern young girl, all in all a motley ensemble of ghosts representing different socio-economic backgrounds and different struggles. The spirits live together with their various idiosyncrasies in the only vacant historic building now left in Kolkata, which is occasionally rented out to "shooting parties" (film crew). But they are faced with a dire crisis when an unscrupulous and profit driven builder named Bhootoria (Mir Afsar Ali) tries to demolish the building to build a monstrous mall. The gang of spirits decides that the only way to save their haunt is to influence the ad film director, Ayan Sengupta (Parambrata Chatterjee) — who has currently rented the building for a shoot — to make a film about the plight of the ghosts in order to raise public awareness. As Ayan waits for his production director in the same building, working on his prospective feature film story, Biplob Dasgupta (Sabyasachi Chakraborty), a spirit from the radical revolutionary Naxalite movement in Calcutta comes to Ayan disguised as a tenant. As Ayan frets over his writer's block and admits to Biplob his inability to resolve the plot of "Badly Bangali" his future feature, Biplob tries to help Ayan by pretending to conjure up a marvelous plot for Ayan's feature film. Biplob narrates the stories of the unfortunate death of each historic spirit in the building, and their living situation in the afterlife. Thus Biplob and Ayan embark on a historical journey in which they seek to reckon with spirits of the past.

The spectral characters, irrespective of their social and economic backgrounds — all victims of the oppressive capitalist imperialism — are now connected by tragic circumstances. Together they are poised to fight capitalism so they are not displaced from their haunt. *Bhooter Bhabisyat* transcends regional/class/caste/ethnic/religious boundaries in two ways. Firstly, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* opens up an agnostic "Third space", a "time lag"

or a "moment of transit" manifested in the form of an old decrepit house inhabited by ghosts representative of different communities and historical periods. The spirits inhabiting the building are all stateless, dislocated characters that have been brought together in this space against all tensions of history and society. The house, therefore, exists not just in the present; it is a microcosm of Bengal, because it has stood witness to several hundred years of Bengali history. The haunted house introduces a hybrid and impossible "enunciative site" through "temporal split of time-lag", for the signification of postcolonial agency. This interstitial space is different from the binary representation of minorities in Bengali films where the marginalized are isolated in the urban periphery or rural areas at a safe distance from the city's *bhodrolok* inhabitant.[27] In this interstitial place of representation, zones of abundance, power and consumption overlap with those of poverty, powerlessness and exclusion. In this time lag "space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha 1). Indeed the location is palimplistic in the sense that minority characters inhabit this urban building in relation to multiple points of identification such as ethnic origin, class and gender. This hybrid third space becomes a self-reflexive critique of the Bengali film narratives that have failed to imagine a polycentric space of representation.

Secondly, by giving all its playback songs to historical ghost characters, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* opens up a hybrid cultural space that challenges the very concept of

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[27] For example, films about economic hardship like *Pather Panchali*/*Song of the Road* (Satyajit Ray, 1955), *Asani Sanket*/*Distant Thunder* (Ray, 1973), are set in villages, while *Meghe Dhaka Tara*/*Cloud-capped Star* (Ghatak, 1960) focuses on a refugee colony.

homogeneous national time, culture and identity, and highlights the complex interweaving of history. The ghostly renditions of music disrupts and unsettles its temporality to reveal a time that is “out of joint” with its past, present and future. Like the sonorous historical memories that echo and pulsate throughout the film, music too is evanescent and constantly changing, shifting and transforming through the historical periods. Thus, the music in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* opens up another time lag, an “in-between” space, which becomes a new site of enunciation where “strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation” (Bhabha 1-2) are played out.

All haunting in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* is based on music and song performance, because the spirits who are embroiled in class struggles narrate the tragic outcomes of their lives through songs. The ghostly songs constitute one way of expressing grief and regret about past violence, and are also tied to many traditional beliefs throughout the subcontinent, such as the belief that those who lose their lives violently are unable to pass on to the next life. And since each spirit represents a significant historical period of Bengal, the very existence of these ghosts is a testimony to the violent history of struggles in Bengal. In the film, these violent events of death are narrated with the accompaniment of period music reminiscent of the musical spirit of the early days of the Bengali/Indian sound films. The music is gripping because it is alluringly eerie and evocative. In other words, the music — ranging from darkly romantic songs with nasal tone evocative of early sound films to the hauntingly provocative contemporary item number — is designed to evoke memories of specific historical periods and their stories of horrors.

IV.3 Film-Song as Decolonial Story-Telling Method

Bhooter Bhabisyat uses heterogeneous region specific, genre specific, historical time specific, even medium specific music to demonstrate how particular genres, styles, and taste in music can signal social class position. Since each ghost character represents a specific historical time and social class, they each sing distinct and different styles of songs. What kind of music the individual ghost characters perform is directly related to their class position. In other words, each ghost has its appropriate and consistent pastiche, but the music when seen altogether ranges across types and periods.

The radical act of *Bhooter Bhabisyat* lies in its refusal to follow hegemonic homogenizing musical styles. Classifications of musical forms into genres such as folk, art, popular, traditional and modern tend to be ethnocentric and based on "socioeconomic and cultural arrogance", with serious value judgments about the superiority of certain musical forms over others (Damodaran 20). Therefore, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* uses a variety of distinct Bengali musical traditions — from classical, folk, devotional, semi-classical, Tagore's songs, and contemporary rock — to problematize the historic role of capitalist media that work to homogenize and popularize the dominant culture of the ruling classes. The hybrid songs of the film disrupt a sense of homogeneous *bhodrolok* class position that Bengali cinema has historically sustained. Not only because film-song is an essentially hybrid form that challenges the purity and homogeneity of national culture, thereby disrupting the tradition of song performances and listening practices as ways to enact shared imagined histories and perform social class positions. But also because songs as oral performative texts elude simple textual categorizations, because song is multivocal, multidimensional, multiform, nonlinear, and an elusive moment in time that does not conform to the single-

author standard of “modern” literature. If film histories are produced by repressing differences between social groups and constructing universal identification, then film songs can disrupt the narratives of homogeneity by highlighting moments of resistance and ruptures. Foregrounding the songs in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* as decolonial storytelling methods that reemphasize local voices and subject matters can lead to an effort to read history from below.

Using heterogeneous music in the movie, therefore, allows *differance* to play an integral role in the very hybridity and iterability of discourse. Foregrounding such cultural pluralism opens up a (Third) space that preserves “the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices — women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities” (Bhabha 5). By bringing different classes of people from different historical periods to sing together, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* thus also demonstrates that the mélange of musical styles and the intersection of musical performances have the potential to resist the categorization of music as either high art or low art, withstand the ruinous homogeneous effects of capitalism, and transcend class boundaries. Music in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* becomes a historical artifact and an important site of dialogue concerning economic, political and social issues as the film tracks the transitions from feudalism to capitalism, and capitalism to socialism.

The film’s narrative stresses music as an important backdrop against which the personal stories are played out. Even though set in modern day Kolkata, the songs in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* help to quickly recap the material conditions of each historic period in Bengal. The film contributes towards the recuperation of historical memory through its

period music. In trying to recuperate the history of Bengal through individual tragedies told through class specific and often anachronistic music,[28] *Bhooter Bhabisyat* seeks to reveal hidden narratives of trauma and memory, of things that remain unsaid or unsayable and outside narrative discourse. *Bhooter Bhabisyat* highlights the repression and violence behind the advent of the modern state and the idea of citizenship in its retelling of Bengali history. By tracing various points of the Bengali history of the last three centuries through spectral songs, the film highlights the absences and ruptures in national history. Therefore, it may be said that music allows retrieval of specific memories/histories but along axes of disjuncture, "out-of-joint" temporalities, ruptures, omissions and ambivalences. In this film, song and dance performance challenges the very concept of "homogeneous national culture and the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities" (Bhabha 5).

However, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* complicates a chronological recall of historical periods by juxtaposing ghostly music from different periods and styles, and overlapping music with distinct temporalities. The persistence of ghostly music therefore complicates the narrative timeline, disturbing the sequence of past, present and future. If the past and present cannot be separated from one another, neither can the music in the film, which just like temporal events "resonate backwards and forward, overlapping and folding into one another". (Whittaker 326) Period music — even satirically presented — can thus articulate a time that is out of joint. This temporal split "throws into relief the temporal, social

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[28] All the songs in the film, even though performed by ghosts from different historical periods, happen in present day Kolkata.

differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity". The present can no longer be seen as a break with the past and the future, "no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities" (Bhabha 4). The sequential time of history, seeking to establish serial, causal connections between events in the homogenous course of history, is disrupted.

The music, which is an eclectic hodgepodge ranging from Hindustani music, English music, Qawali, folk music, and Bengali pop and rock, as well as the old and new music playing devices, suggest a wondrous moment, a state where the past and the present conflate. Musical instruments, old and new, like *tanpura*, guitar and piano are visible throughout the movie, as are the gramophone and tape recorder. Perhaps this is a commentary on music's ability to withstand the effects of time. *Bhooter Bhabisyat* highlights the ways in which music becomes a bearer of memory. Songs as oral tradition reflect both the past and the present. Songs that are performed in the present may have a message from the past. Therefore, songs are not simple uniliniear texts, but historical documents that do not just echo the historical anticolonial struggles, but also the struggles of successive generations.

IV.4 Ghost of Communism

The stories of the ghosts are narrated through the point of view of the communist leader, Biplob Dasgupta, who makes chronological and theoretical distinctions between pre-capitalist and post-capitalist Bengali societies while privileging the pre-capitalist one. Through Biplob, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* invokes the spirit of Marx in trying to address the

layers of heterogeneous histories. What follows is a critique of liberal capitalism, including criticism of the evacuation of real public spaces by the media. Biplob is critical of the current state of Bengali cinema as he dismisses Ayan's feature film story as "old wine in new bottle". Biplob seems to think that spreading the reach of commercial television is a deliberate strategy by the state to establish the hegemony of the decadent art that is produced by the dominant classes and castes that control these media. He is extremely critical of the corporate capitalism that has ravaged the "spirits of the city" by constructing 'monstrous malls' in places of old houses. Biplob blames the degeneration of Calcutta on mass media's "slavery to consumerism", "brazen bourgeoisies", and "commodity fetishism". He adds that even though this shameless capitalism has affected the "spirits of Calcutta" during this dark time of the "ghost society", the government and media do not seem to be concerned about the plight of the ghosts because "viewership does not depend on ghosts, because they are not consumers, not voters". Through Biplob, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* presents a self-reflexive critique of Bengali cinema that has been responsible for maintaining a dominant Hindu middle-class and upper-caste hierarchy.

Thus by declaring, through Biplob, that ghosts are not consumers, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* opens up a radical space where the ghosts can reject bourgeois cultural hegemony and homogeneity and iterate their hybrid identities. In retelling inherently partial and fragmentary personal stories through the perspective of Biplob Dasgupta, rather than coherent and complete accounts of history, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* opens up radical historical narratives that are not part of the grand narrative of Bengali History.

IV.5 The Female Ghosts

Among the dissonant and dissident voices that the ghostly music is able to recover are the tragic histories of female ghosts, who come from three distinct periods in history, and represent disparate socio-cultural positions. Their stories expose how capitalist patriarchy renders women powerless. The three female ghost characters — Kadalibala, Koel, and Lakshmi — are products of crimes committed by men, ranging from forced confinement to murder. They narrate the tragic outcomes of their lives through songs.

Koel committed suicide because her father persuaded her lover, Sam Gonzalez, to abandon her and go to Australia for fifty thousand dollars, where he eventually married a rich "foreign chick". With Koel's story, the film exposes the transactional nature of the heartless classist, casteist, communalist, and sexist Indian marriage market. Kadalibala committed suicide because her lover abandoned her for a girl from an aristocratic family. With Kadalibala's character, Datta makes a jibe at the typical cinematic characterization of the tragic courtesan who croons melodiously and haunts large homes with single-minded dedication as in films like *Mahal* (Amrohi 1949)**,** *Madhumati* (Roy 1958), *Bees Saal Baad* (Nag 1962). Lakshmi, the mellifluous woman who was killed by her husband Bhootoria over dowry demands, bursts into the deliciously haunting melody of "*ang ang mein aag jalai de*" (light my body on fire), which seems like a song filled with romantic innuendos but literally describes how Bhootoria killed her, spooking Bhootoria with effortless skill. The death of Lakshmi highlights the prevalence of the dowry system in a capitalist society that privileges patriarchies and fratriarchies.

IV.6 Musical Production and Class Position

The layered history of music productions from various periods provides insight into the class position of the characters and the contemporaneous socio political events without making any obvious references to them. Close analysis of the playback music or conversations about music shows that the music expresses an economic substructure. The film brings different classes of people together in a way where no one class is meant to be privileged over another, even though the characters start on uneven footing. At first, the class conflict is heightened in the interactions between the characters in the film, and any resolution of these class conflicts seems dubious. In fact, the social and economic class positions are so deeply entrenched in Indian life that even ghosts have hierarchies based on class, caste and religion. In the beginning, the ghosts in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* are unable to overcome these class/caste/social hierarchies. Therefore, Darpo Narayan appears to be a *brahmadaittyo*, or a Brahmin ghost who wears *dhoti* and is marked by high-class taste. The three female ghosts can be classified as *petnis* because they were unmarried with unfulfilled desires when they died. Khaja Khan is a *mamdo bhoot*, or the ghost of a Muslim man. And the character of Bhootnath represents a *mechho bhoot* (fish eating ghost), because he is obsessed with fish, as well as a *gechho bhoot* (tree ghost), because he lived on trees before finding shelter in his present haunt.

The class positions of the characters are expressed through their relationship to music. Darpo Narayan Chowdhury (Paran Bandopadhyay), the feudal lord (zamindar), and the first real as well as the phantom inhabitant of the house, claims to be an exponent of Hindustani music. He brags about his *jalsas* where famous artists had delivered

performances to patrons in a feudally based economy.[29] Darpo even gloats that the sheer splendor of his famous *jalsas* had impressed Booth *sahib* so much that it had earned him the title of Raibahadur over night.[30] As Regula Quereshi points out in "Is Hindustani Music Feudal?", the "art music of India exists only under cultivated patronage, and in its own intimate environment. It is the chamber music of an aristocratic society, where the patron retains musicians for his own entertainment, and for the pleasure of the circle of his friends" (Quereshi 85). It becomes evident that Darpo's prosperity was directly related to his feudal associations and his financial ability to host *jalsas*.

Darpo is projected as the ruthless feudal lord with little consideration for the financial solvency of his subjects and determination to collect revenue irrespective of their hardships. Darpo Narayan's accountant delivers a message from his subjects that they are going to default on the taxes because, "*bulbuli te dhan kheyeche khajna debo kishe*?'" (birds have eaten all the paddy, how do we pay taxes). This sentence, actually a line from a Bengali lullaby named "*Khoka ghumolo para jurono, Borgi elo deshe*" (Kids slept, locality silent, looters came), cleverly refers to the wider historical background of the period. Devastating Borgi invasions,[31] which dated back to 1741-1751, and often left families desolate, marked Darpo Narayan's period in Bengal. And this lullaby is a reference to the

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[29] A musical party or celebration commonly held by *zamindars.*

[30] *Rai Bahadur* was a title of honor bestowed during British rule in India to individuals for their service to the Empire.

[31] Borgis were a group of Maratha soldiers who indulged in large scale plundering of the countryside of western part of Bengal for about ten years (1741–1751) during the Maratha expeditions in Bengal.

horrors of the plundering Borgi army. But Darpo has little sympathy for the victims and is not affected by their requests. Darpo's reply to his accountant, "*Baki rakha khajna, mote bhalo kaj na*" (defaulting on tax is not good), makes an unmistakable reference to Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe*/*In the Kingdom of Diamonds* (1980), and draws a parallel with the despotic diamond king from the 1980 film. Darpo is an exploitative feudal lord who coerces his subjects to pay taxes so he can hold lavish *jalsas*.

It is by the very fact that Darpo was landed gentry that his status as a connoisseur of classical music is established. The fact that he had property meant that he could hold *jalsas* on his own establishment, which won him the respect of the British and his subsequent fame. Hosting a music performance for an influential audience was thus an unmistakable enactment of ownership of both material resources and culture through which Darpo reinforced his class position. Darpo repeatedly refers to *baijis* or courtesans, who were bound by historically exploitative service relations in the feudal economic system that left them in a perpetual state of dependence.

After death however, Darpo is reduced to a landless ghost. Almost two hundred and fifty years after his death, Darpo only survives as a retro icon. His spirit is no longer terrifying. Darpo's ghost is just an embodiment of a nostalgic yearning for a time when not everything had yet been subsumed under the commodity form. Darpo's fall represents the decline of the hegemonic significance of the elite culture of classical art and literature that the upper classes and castes patronized. Darpo, without his *jalsas*, signifies the attempt in cultural field to discard the language/music of the elite in favor of new modes of expression, such as folk, devotional, and *filmi* songs that could represent the struggles of

everyday life of the common people. Thus opening up a hybrid space, the film identifies the voices of others and acknowledges their existence.

The person on the other end of this exploitative feudal practice is Kadalibala, the Bengali heroine from the early days of cinema when "there was no playback". Kadalibala's story is set in the 1940s, when the Calcutta *bhodrolok* babu class was recuperating from the loss of economic, political and cultural centrality brought about by the shifting of colonial capital from Calcutta to Delhi and the end of Bengal Renaissance. Darpo Narayan's nephew, Keshab Chandra, an English educated Bengali elite and a "black sheep of the family", tried to find refuge in the field of culture by investing in the bioscope industry after falling in love with Kadalibala. Even though Kadalibala was famous for her singing, she was dependent on her patron, Keshab, for sponsoring her films. In the first song of the film, shot in black and white, we see Kadalibala in a film set giving a shot in front of a camera. She sings,

I won't give you my heart,
Won't give it, won't give it away
If you want my heart, remember this my friend
You will have to pay for it
You won't get it for free at all
Won't get it for free any way

To this Keshab Chandra replies, I am not asking for free. This bracelet, the ring on your nose, the earrings you are wearing, have I gifted you all of it for nothing? Moreover, I will sign the company papers in your name, Kadu', exposing the transactional relationship between Kadalibala (performer) and Keshab (patron). (Datta, 2012)

Kadalibala calls her patron "Keshab *babu*", implying an obvious class hierarchy in the relationship. Babus of Calcutta were a class of the "noveau riche", which consisted

almost exclusively of the landed gentry or *zamindars* with mansions in Calcutta. These foppish *babus* who were infamous for their affected nature and Anglicized speech, were disparagingly called "flower-delicate fops". They are known to have spent most of their time and wealth on throwing lavish parties and on consorting with women of "ill-repute". Even though Keshab had promised to marry Kadalibala, he had not kept his word, marrying a respectable girl from an aristocratic family instead. Heart-broken, humiliated, and her film career almost over, Kadalibala had committed suicide.

Before death, Kadalibala, a film singer and dancer, which was long characterized as a field of ill repute unsuitable for a *bhadramohila* (gentle-woman), was controlled by keshab, and by extension Darpo. Kadalibala was the static "pedagogical object" who was limited by the hegemonic discourse that attempts to fix minority identity. Kadalibala confirms that she was considered a woman of ill repute when she laments to the gang of spirits that everyone used to taunt her by calling her "a girl for sale". However, after death, while living in the decrepit house of temporal split, she is interpellated as a subject as soon as she becomes an agent of political change.

Kadalibala's after-life music is a hybrid and alternative form of music to the nationalist and classist music that recognized only two forms — folk and classical, high and low. If Darpo's music was classist and elitist, Kadalibala's was inclusive. This disrupted Darpo's role as the vanguard of Bengali culture/music, and his power relationship with Kadalibala and other seemingly lower-class characters in the film. Her after-life interactions with the *bhodroloks* lack the innocence and reverence that her interactions with Keshab were marked with. Ghost Kadalibala criticizes Darpo and Ramsay, dismisses advances from Bhoothnath and Khaja Khan, and forges associations

with the other women in the film, going so far as to train Laxmi how to dance and help her plot revenge against her abuser/murderer.

The other professional musician in the film, Pablo Patranabis, channels Che Guevara by wearing a t-shirt with the Alberto Korda photo of Che. Che remains a powerful icon of Marxist revolutionary resistance and modern pop culture in Bengal. In one particular frame, Pablo's Che Guevara t-shirt is juxtaposed with Darpo Narayan Chowdhury as he denounces violence, and it becomes a declaration that the old structures of power have ended and a new power, which threatens imperialism, capitalism, and neocolonialism, has come at the doorstep of one of the earliest and the most powerful imperialist states in history. So it is that Marx of course still speaks to us and does so with a rousing music of dissent against the fact that violence, inequality, famine, ecological disasters (one of the spirits seeking refuge in the building is an Alaskan native displaced due to global warming), exclusion affect more people on the planet than ever before. The massive disenfranchisement of homeless citizens from any participation in democracy (represented by the character of Atmaram who was run over by an SUV in his sleep) the expulsion or deportation of so many stateless persons and immigrants from so called national territory (represented by the character of Bhoothnath Bhaduri, a Bangladeshi refugee) showcase the experiences of border and identity, whether national or civil. Biplob blames the state and mainstream media for depoliticizing minority issues, and for being instrumental in establishing the hegemony of the capitalist development model that allows for forcible eviction of people to accommodate big real estate projects. The demands for fair livelihood, right to life, and land remain unfulfilled under the neo-liberal model of

development. It is on this poignant reminder of responsibility that *Bhooter Bhabisyat* is bringing to attention these issues of economic oppression.

Pablo's music also marks a departure from the Hindustani music of the feudal system. Pablo is not restrained by patronage. He does not sing for anyone. In fact, when alive, he had sponsored his own music album, of which only thirteen copies had sold. The loss he had incurred drove him to depression, drugs and his subsequent death from drug overdose. Yet, he has not sold his music for profit. When Pablo makes a demonstration of his "nonsense verse" to Koel, she encourages him to sing Tagore songs, saying "there will be more takers of Tagore here than your kind of music", to which Pablo replies, "I don't give a damn about Tagore songs. For me, song is an attitude, a statement". Pablo says that his motivation for music is revolution, which is "the most important romantic concept" and not "the cheesy stars and flower bullshit". Pablo, who declares himself a fan of Biplob and seems to have been influenced by Biplob's ideology, mirrors the influence of Naxalite movement in Bengal that were deployed to mobilize people to join the movement. The ban on the Communist Party in the mid-1940s drove many of the poets and writers either underground or into the film industry, which began to emerge as a major source of popular culture.

He sings to deliver a socio-political message to the masses, which, according to Biplob Dasgupta, is "important to understand culture and art". He urges Koel to listen to his songs carefully, because "each song has an inner meaning". Pablo admits that he does not write songs to impress people,

Even if you say it's for the public's sake

Or that the song will be a hit and awarded.

I will sing only a passionate love song,

No silliness, no affectation.

The interaction between Ramsay and Pablo is also very significant. Ramsay is the ghost of the British colonizer whom Darpo welcomes to the haunted house as his first guest. Darpo is the "trusted native *zamindar*" who introduces himself to Ramsay as "your most obedient servant". In the figure of Darpo we see the colonial stereotype — the noble savage —, which enables colonial power to fix the colonized subject and justify the colonizer's superiority and authority. While Darpo as a mimic-man dutifully genuflects himself to the colonizer, Pablo uses his hybrid music as a subversive tool to challenge colonial cultural hegemony. His Indian roommates shun Pablo because of the heavy western influence in his music, but that impresses Ramsay and he invites Pablo to listen to some western music. Ramsay *sahib* starts singing the English version of the Scottish song "Auld Lang Syne" (Long Long Ago) while playing the piano; Pablo cuts in on him and starts singing a highly modified and contemporary version of "*Purano shei diner katha*", the timeless song composed by Rabindranath Tagore, which is an adaptation of Robert Burns' song. This could be read as Pablo's attempt to "write back to the empire" with revisionist adaptations of classical music.

In mixing European cultural ideals and traditional Indian music, Dutta follows a familiar template used by Satyajit Ray, which made available an "extra cinematic set of associations" to those "familiar with the vogue in late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Bengal for phonograph recordings of European Ballads, on the one hand, and classical and semi classical Hindustani music, on the other". It is this very mismatched quality of the songs and their misplaced coexistence, which Ray frequently relied on in his

period films, and "whose effect is to draw the viewer into a remembered structure of feeling expressible only through music", that is cleverly intimated by the Ramsay and Pablo song. (Ganguly 142)

The clashes between Bhootnath (Bangladeshi refugee) and Darpo (native inhabitant) reflect the Hindu Bengali inter-community rivalry resulting from partition schisms, where both try to establish their cultural superiority over the other by proving their authentic Bengaliness. The clashes between Bhootnath and Khaja Khan represent the Hindu-Muslim rivalry where both try to establish their patriotism. Darpo, Bhootnath, and Khaja Khan's desire to establish their national identity is rooted first of all in their memory or anxiety of being displaced/displaceable.

Atmaram is another obvious victim, being of lower class and caste. It is interesting to note the placements of Atmaram in relation to other characters in the film. Atmaram always appears to be looking up to the other characters: always placed lower than the rest, he does not sit at the table with the rest of the characters, and he remains obviously excluded from the larger group. But as the different classes of spirits come together to fight their common enemy, the Capitalist builder, and create a new and equitable social order, there comes an integral sequence in the film when the class conflicts are visibly resolved through a musical scene. Through this musical performance and through temporal movement the constructed difference between upper and lower classes are eliminated. The ghost characters come together to perform a collaborative, hybrid, cultural show. The *zamindar* dresses as the British colonizer and vice versa. Bhootnath dresses as a Muslim, and Khaja Khan as Hindu, and Atmaram as God. And Koel and Kadalibala exchange their costumes. These enactments of cultural difference or sameness "confound our definitions

of tradition and modernity, realign the customary boundaries between private and public, high and low, and challenge normative expectations of high and low" (Bhabha 5). This temporal movement "prevents identities at either end of class hierarchy from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha 5). In the essay, "DissemiNation", Bhabha distinguishes between the 'pedagogical' and the "performative". The former denotes the nation's narrative authority "signifying the people as an a priori historical presence, a pedagogical object", and the latter denotes the 'people constructed in the performance of a narrative, its enunciatory "present" marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign' (Bhabha 147). Thus, the performance stage, which is an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 5). Through the political act of song performance, the performers emerge as subjects parading their heterogeneity and ambivalence.

IV.7 De/class-ifying Music

The spirits come together on the night of *bhoot chaturdashi,* which is the Bengali equivalent of Halloween. On this night, Bengali Hindu families light fourteen candles in their homes to appease the spirits of the past fourteen generations of ancestors. It is believed that on the night before *Kali* Puja, these lamps guide the spirits to find their lost homes. This sequence in the film, where all the spirits come together in a celebration of Bengal's musical history, indicates that the long history of Bengal's past is still intermingled with its present and still relevant. This musical sequence, resolves the irreconcilable social tensions resulting from the colonial and nationalist history. Here, the

film highlights the integrating function of music. It is after the music sequence that we get a glimpse of the deeper humanity of all the characters. The class and caste difference between Atmaram and the other characters seem to take a backseat as he sings, “When all of us start dancing together/we get the whole world moving” (Datta 2012). After the musical performance, Atmaram appears higher than the other characters in the film. *Bhooter Bhabisyat* thus shows that class relationship of labor/owner producer/patron is revised, and that music also has a class transformative capability, in the same way that Ray imagined class and caste positions in his ghost dance sequence in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen.* The Marxist class conflict of owners and workers, bourgeois and proletariat, is transcended by the harmony of music in this instance. The socially marginalized producers in the context of both feudal and post feudal Indian society are seen to have agency. The musical show is concluded with Pablo singing, “Touchables and untouchables,/There’s no difference./We are just ghosts” (Datta, 2012). The revolution against capitalists may not have happened in the real world yet, but the joint effort at music performance by the ghosts successfully scares off the capitalist Bhootoria in the film. The film encapsulates the past, present and future in this musical sequence, and resolves the irreconcilable social tensions resulting from the colonial history through its music.

With music the characters find the only worthy partisanship, one that unites the participants across the class, caste, gender and cultural divides according to their devotion to music, life, struggles. The fear of displacement unites the spirits in a joint effort to defend their only shelter. Whether it is the patriotic music of Nirmalendu Chowdhury, or Thumri, or Bihari folk song, or Qawali, the singers comprise a diversity of backgrounds and occupations. The viewers learn that music can help diverse individuals transcend their

differences by making distinctive but complementary contributions to produce art through translocal solidarities.

The only characters in the film, other than the narrators, who are not given any songs, are Bhootoria[32], the builder, and the local politician Pramod Pradhan. Both are preoccupied with supplanting the rich and layered history of Bengal with a modernizing outlook — bringing down old historical sites to build monstrous malls. In fact, Pramod and Bhootoria are presented as crass, uncultured citizens who are driven solely by profit and ahistorical perspectives. Pramod Pradhan, despite his attempts to appear sophisticated, is unable to hide his laughable misinterpretations of Bengali literary masterpieces. It may be said that through the music-less characters of Bhootoria and Pramod Pradhan, Anik Dutta is making a jibe at capitalists who will leave no marks on the cultural history of Bengal, which has been historically marked with anti-capitalist sentiments.

Through spectral music, unresolved memories, anxieties, and fears of the time are reflected in *Bhooter Bhabisyat.* As this article has shown, music in *Bhooter Bhabisyat* is boundariless and incongruent, upsetting the flow of time and displacing the present moment from itself. Music gives voice to the unspeakable nature of trauma resulting from social, political and economic upheavals. And because *Bhooter Bhabisyat* problematizes these familiar and relatable issues, the Bengali audience connects with it even though the film may appear to be fantastical on the surface. *Bhooter Bhabisyat* showcases how film music can resist and exceed linear historical discourse, thereby expressing that which dialogue and narrative cannot.

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[32] Bhoot-toria can also be read as ghost-chaser

With the help of songs, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* is able to extend the historical discourse beyond the confines shaped and dominated by elite cultural and political discourse and practice, access to which depended on certain kinds of literacy and cultural capital available only to a small minority of the Indian population. By refusing to be limited by the homogenizing imperatives of mass media, *Bhooter Bhabisyat* stages an anti-capitalist protest to transform popular consciousness. In identifying film songs as a medium capable of upsetting the boundaries between high and low culture, this article recognizes the song space as an interstitial site of minority intervention.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My research involving the examination of articles, interviews, and films over the years revealed the multiple subjective and contingent perspectives relating to the classification of parallel cinema. In depth examination of a variety of texts shows that different subcategories of films are collapsed under the umbrella term "parallel/art" cinema based on their distribution, audience receptivity, budget, profitability, use of songs and social realism. It is generally accepted that films with high degree of social realism target elite audiences using formal and thematic characteristics that achieve a status of "high art". While "low art" films using "degraded techniques" of commercial cinema, like song and dance, target mass audience. This dissertation argues that the heterogeneity of stylistic approaches adapted by art filmmakers (from different regions) makes such arbitrary categorizations of Indian cinema into high and low art problematic, especially since the post-liberalized Indian economy has led to a change in audience receptivity leading to commercial successes of these films. The arrivals of multiplexes and malls to smaller towns and the reach of television have somewhat flattened the old rural-urban aspirational divide, as Indian filmmakers are increasingly making films to reach a diverse audience from both urban and rural spaces.

Several emblematic features of Euro-American films have been transferred to post-colonial productions as models of modern aesthetic and as the ultimate goal of film practice. The dominance of the mainstream cinematic institution has been "indispensible" in India "as the site that enables discourse about Indian cinema, providing the tools for

critical intervention, determining at an unconscious level, the reading practices we bring to bear on Indian film texts, as well as serving as an ideal for film making to aspire to" (Prasad 5). The Indian film industry is under constant pressure from the state, filmmakers, and intellectuals to create an international-style realist cinema

Thus, by deemphasizing European definitions of good cinema, and refocusing on Indian historical and cultural contexts and narrative styles, including song and dance — the use or exclusion of which was one of the primary distinguishing factors between Art House Cinema and Commercial Cinema — this dissertation proposes a classification of cinema based on their activist intent. Defining movies by their artistic and political intent rather than style, technique, and the mechanics of funding, distribution and exhibition can reduce the stark distinction between high cultures and so called mass or commercial culture. For example, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Newton* (2017), and *Raazi* (2018), even though artivist films were also some of the highest grossing films of the respective years. In other words, instead of focusing on style and technique alone, this dissertation highlights form, content, context, situation and intent to define art/ivist films. Because, if there is one thing that all art films have in common it is the intent to impact social change. The category of artivist cinema identifies an egalitarian style of film that is more suited to purvey the more serious social realism or social issue or minority issue films in order to reach a wider audience.

This dissertation argues that the technical and stylistic differences used to classify films is limiting, because such classifications based on accepted standards of "high art" and "low art" run the risk of extending the epistemological conventions and academic refinement that work to marginalize or other films and film makers that do not conform to

these hegemonic standards. For example, Dalit films may intentionally denounce the accepted modes of filmmaking and representation. These categorizations overlook the heterogeneous background of filmmakers, class and caste hierarchies, which is especially problematic for an industry infamous for nepotism. Having dismissed the class-based Eurocentric definition of parallel cinema that undermines the very intent of art films, which is to foreground stories about exploited people, this dissertation analyzes artivist films and film songs as political projects in which subordinate and marginalized peoples can be active consumers and engaged audiences.

Artivist cinema, in its attempt to fuse commercial and art forms, highlights the postmodern embrace of blurred boundaries between high and low culture. In other words, with artivist films, the demarcation between art and commercial, which also seemed to delimit the viewership, can be corrected. Identifying a new activist category of cinema becomes especially important since:

> The nation is currently undergoing a tumultuous neoliberal restructuring, characterized by a commitment to consumer capitalism, foreign multinational investment and an inexorable thrust towards a global free market economy. These liberalization induced vicissitudes in the Indian national state are punctuated by a paradoxical retrenchment of right-wing Hindu religious and nationalist ideology…This is attributable in large measure, as Diana Dimitriva (2014:86) cogently points out, to the obsessive thrust by religious nationalist power structures towards a return to 'Aryan root' and the idea of a 'modern Hindu-Indian nation from which Muslims, other religious minorities, women and dalits' are excluded. (Devasundaram n.p)

Artivist films narrate the minority and alternative stories of nation that have been excluded from Bollywood film representations, which has historically not been a champion of minority rights and voices. Not only that, the Bollywood industry has consciously tried to silence the voices of certain minorities to emphasize the voices of the Hindu upper caste

people. Bollywood is neither politically innocent nor conveys an unequivocal secularism. It has predicated the politics of inequality and escapism, relegating minorities to the status of second-class citizens. How can it be explained otherwise that the three Khans of Bollywood — Shah Rukh, Salman and Aamir — have collectively played eleven Muslim protagonists across 200 movies? Even the biggest stars of Bollywood have to temper their Muslim-ness even in their roles as Muslim characters. Shah Rukh Khan's "in-your-face Muslim character" in his latest film *Raees* (2017) has launched an unsavory debate with SRK being accused by mainstream media and self-proclaimed nationalists of using the film to flaunt his Muslim identity. His fault, apparently, was that this is the third consecutive film in which he has played a Muslim character after *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016) and *Dear Zindagi* (2016). Critics claim that SRK has abandoned the caution exercised by Muslim actors and paraded his Muslim identity in *Raees*. Critics have also suggested that the two preceding films were carefully rehearsed prequels to this one, where he "finally blows his cover". This explains why Salman Khan's second ever Muslim role is in 2016 release, *Sultan.*

The increasing visibility of minority characters marks a shift in Bollywood. De/classifying the categories of art and commercial cinema can carve out a space where film language can be made more accessible to a vast majority of the audience. This dissertation attempts to study these representations/voices of the 'minority' that remain hidden in the interstices in popular culture and mainstream cinema.

Artivist films, despite representing marginal and subaltern individuals and communities, and tackling difficult sociopolitical issues like caste discrimination and honor killings, or depicting urban bourgeoisie, often use flamboyant songs and dancing

like mainstream Bollywood films. These film songs offer a counter discourse to hegemonic narratives and delineate a space for active engagement with social and political discourse. Songs, therefore, as a safe space, have always been significant in art films — a genre of film songs that have gone unnoticed and under theorized even though they put the whole scholarship/criticism of song-dance as commercial distraction in new light. This dissertation analyzes songs as essential components of the polyphony of storytelling and historiography.

I want to caution my readers here that I am not saying that this music should be seen in isolation from the many other sites in which resistance is produced and multiplied. This dissertation then does not define music as the only force in the complicated global struggle for equitable rights and social justice. Rather it documents how a wide variety of film songs with significant narrative functions and playing important role in that struggle are often neglected— a role that must be highlighted in association with multiple other sites in which the same struggles are being fought.

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