INDIAN MASS MEDIA
and the POLITICS OF CHANGE

Editors
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Indian Mass Media and the Politics of Change
Dedicated to the memory of Sacredmediacow
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List of Abbreviations

ABP Ananda Bazar Patrika
ADRI Asian Development Research Institute
BBC British Broadcasting Corporation
BJP Bharatiya Janata Party
CCTV Close Circuit Television
CEO Chief Executive Officer
CMFS Centre for Media and Film Studies
CNN Cable News Network
FMCG Fast Moving Consumer Goods
HRM Human Resource Management
ICICI Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India
IIT Indian Institute of Technology
IM Instant Messaging
IT Information Technology
JKLF Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front
MCCS Media Communication and Content Services
MMS Multi-media Messaging Service
NDTV New Delhi Television
SEZs Special Economic Zones
SMC Sacred Media Cow
SMS Short Messaging Service
SOAS School of Oriental and African Studies
TAM Television Audience Measurement
TG Target Groups
TOI Times of India
TRP Television Rating Point
UPA United Progressive Alliance
Foreword

Sacred cows are real animals and subjects of political debate in India but in London they are irrational beliefs which must be destroyed. Sacred Media Cow (SMC) is a new beast, a hybrid breed of Indian and European origin, which removes protection from irrational beliefs which it tests and destroys, to form a real presence in critical debates, a remover, not a creator, of gobar (bullsh*t). The four major limbs of SMC, Meenu, Angad, Matti and Somnath, are or were SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) Ph.D. students, and I am delighted that the Centre for Media and Film Studies (CMFS) at SOAS, which has just completed its first decade, has been such a rich pasture for them to flourish and to develop their own research activities and to host their conversations. Yet, the full credit belongs to them directly for hosting the conference on which this volume is based, a wonderful event in itself, and for finding time among completing their Ph.D.s, teaching and other commitments, to bringing the book together to mark what I hope will be the beginning of their work in research and publishing.

These four researchers bring together their diverse training and fieldwork and huge personal engagement with their research to push new boundaries of the role of media and film in constructing the region, the nation and the transnational and showing the dynamic interactions between the local and the global. The range of their topics and their demonstration of the mediated self in the transnational transmedia networks marks a major intervention in the study of the media in India. Angad Chowdhry and Kriti Kapila’s discussion of the transformation of sexual intimacy by the media is a case in point.

The examination of the range of media and their interlocking networks is at the core of this volume. Matti Pohjonen and Soumyadeep Paul, Angad Chowdhry and Aditya Sarkar theorise and philosophise on the media, drawing on a range of thinkers, though most centrally on Deleuze and Guattari, in papers that frame other discussions in the volume. Important papers show
the recent changes in the news that once represented the Indian nation via its state-controlled media but which has now become an institution where celebrity and other media become part of the 'news'. Somnath Batabyal details the changes in the news media while Prof. John Hutnyk, based at Goldsmiths College which has been a strong backer of the CMFS, develops this in his discussion of television in the Kali Yuga.

Wider debates by SMC, led by Meenu Gaur's research, note that Indian cinema, previously a negotiator between the state and civic institutions, is now becoming a corporatised multimedia advertising form for which the term ‘film’ is no longer appropriate. The last two decades have seen film at the cusp of change from interrogating the state and the nation before the cinematic turn to the diaspora in the 1990s, then back to the question of 'Islamic terrorism'. Meenu Gaur’s discussion on secularism and the film Roja continue to develop these themes. The relationships of the variety of media which SMC have noted are part of the dynamic of the CMFS which is developing into an important global centre for the study of non-Western media.

Recent video footage of the 2008 attacks on Mumbai included a message from the mastermind of the operation, who used the classic movie-trailer slogan to show that these attacks were just the beginning, as he announced, ‘Picture abhi baaki hai’ (you have yet to see the feature). The use of media in these operations reminds us all of the power and centrality of the media in all representations and that their study is vital to all areas of contemporary thought. I have no doubt that the contributors to this volume, in particular the members of SMC, will be loud and clear voices in these debates.

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Introduction

‘The abstract does not explain anything, but must itself be explained’
(Deleuze and Parnet 1987)

‘Things are always changing’
Sesame Street

It is hard to believe that four years have already passed since we launched our collective on Indian media and practice at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. I can still fondly remember four snotty Ph.D. students coming together united by our passion for Indian media and film but — as importantly — by our dislike of academic convention and having now to translate our passions into the strict rules of academic writing. Faced with the all-too-familiar drudgery of mandatory journal articles, drowsy conferences and other rites of passage of academic life, we wanted to desperately try something different: an alternative way to conduct research and publish perhaps; a way to break through the insularity of the Western elite universities and reach out to the messy complicated world ‘somewhere out there’. So we made noise. We spat. We called our collective Sacredmediacow and made our coat of arms a cow with an iPod stuck up its ass. We hosted unconventional film shows and speakers and used films unconventionally in our research in return. We launched a popular blog that mixed highbrow theory with smuttie vernacular until even we could not tell the difference anymore. And for a moment, we became more successful in our efforts that we had dreamt of ...

But things change.

It is therefore perhaps befitting, if not a bit ironic, that this chapter in our lives now draws to a close with a somewhat conventional collection of articles on Indian media we have edited. But how does one introduce a book that not only carries the echoes of our years of hard work and fun but which also represents the many changes we have undergone in these years: from fledgling Ph.D. students to full-time academics, film-makers, activists and practitioners — even
sometimes the very enemy we ranted against? What would such a book then represent, a book that talks about the media in India but also of all kinds of changes, rhythms and narratives of time, of the ghosts of the past that still haunt us? Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari have written that ‘there is no difference between what [a] book talks about and how its made’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). A book is never a closed entity that can be interpreted in a vacuum; rather it is a heterogeneous assemblage that connects to all kinds of things around it: to complex personal relationships; changing forces; pushes and pulls; histories; narratives and happy accidents that all have made it possible (ibid: 3–25). So perhaps the best way to begin the introduction to this particularly strange assemblage-book would be not to talk about what it means at all in the first place but rather begin with how it all came about? That is, what motivated and inspired us? What were the problems that interested and concerned us at the time? What was it that has now brought us here, to the present, to a beginning that is also perhaps an end — our last introduction?

Indian mass media and the politics of change

The seeds of this book were disseminated one rainy September afternoon at a conference held at SOAS in 2007. The ‘Indian Mass Media and the Politics of Change’ conference had brought together an eclectic group of young researchers working on Indian media to discuss the complex relationship between Indian mass media and the abstract concept of change. Why change had emerged as the key trope we wanted to investigate can now be easily understood in retrospect by looking at the political context at the time of the conference. India had just finished a turbulent election campaign that had circumambulated around the different and contested articulations of change. The leading Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) India Shining election campaign had claimed ownership over this abstract concept by taking credit for anything from a rapidly-growing economy to the monsoons, the information technology (IT) boom and a skyrocketing stock market. Old India, it was commonly prophesied, with its five-year plans and
narratives of socialist progress, was now rapidly being replaced by a new brash and confident India of middle-class consumerist bliss, economic growth and unprecedented prosperity. Yet, despite all the predictions to the contrary, this platform predicated on change had failed: especially the poorer sections of the Indian electorate had not bought into this articulation of India’s shiny future. The majority had wanted a change from change — a different kind of change. And the pundits, speculators, commentators, analysts, psephologists and other political astrologers in the Indian mainstream media were dumbfounded by having not been able to predict the outcome.

For those of us researching India at the time, something felt awry. Something seemed to have changed but we could not put our fingers on it. How could we, then, begin to think more systematically about this politically-loaded concept that we had witnessed in the Indian mass media where much of this rhetoric was being propagated? And more importantly, how could we begin to formulate some kind of a ‘politics of change’ and, perhaps, make some kind of an intervention to the many debates and empty rhetoric around this loaded concept? To pry open some of this confusion, we decided to organise a one-day conference that would bring together different perspectives to critically debate these ideas in an open forum and see what would emerge out of this mix. Our conference call reflected these concerns:

Rhetoric about India’s rapid economic growth and burgeoning middle classes suggest something new and significant is taking place. Something is changing, we are told. The old Nehruvian discourse of socialist scientific progress has eclipsed and a new brash consumerist India is now shining. The elephant has finally arisen and the 21st century will be Indian.

Arguably, one key locus where such radical re-imaginings of India’s contested future take place is in its burgeoning mass media. Yet much of the analysis of India has overlooked the complex role media has in articulating India’s economic and cultural landscape. What then are these articulations of change taking place
daily across the cinema halls, TV screens, newspapers and computer monitors across India today? How should we best understand the relationship between the Indian mass media and the politics of ‘change’?¹

Yet, despite the many excellent and lively presentations (including the first-ever Skype presentation at SOAS from Patna, India) and the discussions and arguments that continued over the drinks that followed, we nonetheless felt something more needed to be done. We felt we still wanted to pursue and explore the many themes that had emerged in a more formal setting: these many overlapping, conflicting, diverging and intermingling perspectives that had each opened up, in a small yet significant way, different aspects of this impossible yet necessary object of change.

Even in a book.

The impossible object of ‘change’

Now fast forward three years — to 2010. India has changed. The world has changed and still keeps on changing. Recently an entire election campaign was bitterly fought over the premise of change: ‘Yes we can! A vote for Obama is a vote for change!’ echoed the hope and optimism of millions of people across the world. Even a Nobel Peace prize was given to a president fighting two wars on the promise that this change will manifest in some far away future where today’s less peaceful actions can be judged. The very future of our planet, many now also seem to argue, is poised on this abstract notion of change. A recent climate change conference on this theme ended in resultless bickering about who would promise to change more in an effort to stop change.² Yet, despite all these prophecies and political astrology, for much of the world things still remain much the same: life remains hard amidst unpredictable weather patterns and dwindling resources and a global economy that offers little prospects for the poor to improve their lives for the better. So given this abundant idolatry, hype and confusion this

¹ The ‘Indian Mass Media and the Politics of Change’ conference call held on 13 October 2007.
² 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen between 7 and 18 December (also commonly known as COP15).
concept of change evokes in contemporary political discourse in India and elsewhere, the first question we wanted to ask when editing this book was how could we critically approach something that means so much today but perhaps nothing at all? That things change, we all know, is a platitude: it does not tell us anything new. How could we experiment with new ways of imagining this old problem with its complicated links to older debates on the philosophy of history, post-colonialism, modernisation, development, progress and all the different utopias and dystopias we were all too familiar with? And perhaps most importantly, when editing such a book, how could we ourselves avoid becoming yet new recruits in this ever-growing cadre of armchair teleologists, who each in their own way claim magical powers to interpret the signs of change taking place today in order to tell us what the future will (or should) look like?

In Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time, G. S. Morson looks at what is it, in fact, that is at stake when we talk about historical change. He asks, ‘are there laws to history and does it tend to some goal? Or does history admit of many possible directions, the determination of which depends in part on contingency, chance, or human choices’ (Morson 1994: 3)? In other words, if we understand the ‘facts’ clearly enough, does this then mean that we can (with different degrees of certainty) predict what the changes today mean for the future to come? That is, does history have a comprehensible form? Or is human life more complicated than this? Looking at the different ways historical change has been imagined, Morson argues, that there are in fact multiple ways in which time becomes implicated in the ‘temporal dimension of politics’ (ibid.: 1). One way this happens is through the technique of ‘foreshadowing’. This refers to our common tendency to imagine the changes taking place today as if they would possess signs of a future to come. Thus, for instance, in orthodox Marxist understanding of historical change, it is the economic antagonism of class struggle that carries history forward to a pre-determined telos of world communism. Similarly, in populist liberal capitalist ideology, it becomes the ‘invisible hand’ of the market that unavoidably slaps history forward towards a future utopian society of efficiency and productivity. All that is then perhaps left for the politically-committed intellectual to do is to interpret the signs of the changes taking place
in the present and remove all the obstacles that prevent the natural unfolding of a better future society. In each case, what takes place in the present therefore always carries a deeper meaning behind it: events and actions are not only defined by their complex conditions of possibility but also by their very imagined future according to which their significance should be judged and assessed. The changes happen in a kind of a counter-intuitive way:

instead of being caused by prior events, they happen (or also happen) as a consequence of events to come. Foreshadowing, in short, involves backwards causation, which means that, in one way or another, the future already must be there, must somehow exist substantially enough to send signs backwards. (Morson 1994: 7)

Another similar way time is implicated in politics is what Morson calls ‘backshadowing’ (Morson 1994: 234–67). This is our common tendency to narrate the past as if it would always contain clear signs that help us understand the present condition. Here events and actions that take place in the past are explained as being merely necessary steps in the unavoidable unfolding of the present which, in retrospect, we can easily decipher and make sense of. Thus, in effect, ‘the present, as the future of the past, was already imminent in the past. A more or less straight line is drawn between the past period under examination and the observer’s present’ (ibid.: 234). But, as Morson asks, are such historical processes really that easy to understand? Or are we dealing here again with a serious problem of anachronism? That is,

if the possibility of what in fact happened later could have been foreseen, were there not also countless other possibilities? Not knowing, as later observers do, what was to happen, could people in the past have foreseen which of all the possibilities was to be realized? And might later observers be mistaken when they assume that what did happen later was the most likely possibility? (Ibid.: 235)

Indeed, if we look at many of the historical changes that have taken place, many of these have surprised even the most astute observers at the time. Could we really have predicted the events of 11 September 2001 or the fall of the Berlin Wall? Could we really
have predicted the rapid changes that have taken place in India following the 1991 liberalisation of its economy if only we had all the facts at our disposal? Or are there perhaps more complex social dynamics underlying these simplistic meta-narratives that politicians often exploit to explain to us how the past, the present, and the future — our very lives — should be understood?

Mikhail Bakhtin has called this kind of thinking ‘theoretism’ (Bakhtin 1993). That is, the kind of analytical approach that abstracts ‘from human action all that is generalizable, then transforms this “transcription” into a set of rules or laws, and, finally, denies that anything of significance has been left out of the process’ (Morson 1994: 21). The problem here is that this of course usually gives the politician (or the enlightened intellectual) the enunciative power to interpret the signs of change at the expense of many other perhaps less obvious and conflicting ways of understanding the present situation (see Foucault and Deleuze 1972). What such over-determining meta-narratives of change do then is in fact, erase any accidents, chance encounters or contingency from our understanding of historical change (see Lyotard 1984). They leave no real alternatives to these powerful interpretations of historical change that, as we know, have often been complicit in the complex (and often bloody) politics of history (see Foucault 1975). Thus, such

theoretism repeatedly produces this dismal result because it cannot allow for real choice and meaningful uncertainty of outcome. It can allow the future to be unknown due to lack of theoretical or factual knowledge, but not genuinely uncertain. For theoretism, the present moment is simply the instantiation of a pre-given pattern, and experience consequently resembles a part of a prerecorded film that we just happen to be watching. Thus do timeless laws close down time. Theoretism precludes the attribution to any particular moment of the potential for the unforeseen and the weight of real, irreducible significance. (Morson 1991: 1075)

When editing the articles of this book, we therefore wanted to carefully avoid closing down this ‘impossible object of change’ by providing such simple meta-narratives of change. Instead of such absolute certainty of ‘theoretism’ that tends to crush every
conflicting detail and fact under its interpretive iron collar, we wanted the book to celebrate these diverse moments and perspectives to how the politics of change can be critically understood in Indian mass media. We did not want to provide a pre-recorded film, but many conflicting and diverging ‘snapshots’ and ‘freeze-frames’ each of which, in its own way, illuminates a different aspect of this important topic.

Morson coins the term ‘sideshadowing’ as a strategical alternative to such closed ways to understand historical change (Morson 1994: 117–73; see also Morson 1991, 1998). Here contingency, unpredictability and openness are championed against rigid meta-narratives of history that try to close time under determinate structures and/or predictable futures. Sideshadowing as a concept therefore admits that things are one way but they, as importantly, could have as well been different: ‘there were real alternatives to the present we know, and the future admits various paths’ (Morson 1994: 6). In other words, sideshadowing reminds us that the presentness we so palpably experience pertained as well to earlier moments and will characterize future ones. In this respect, it calls attention to the ways in which narratives, which often turn earlier presents into mere pasts, tend to create a single line of development out of multiplicity. Alternatives ones visible disappear from view and an anachronic sense of the past surreptitiously infects our understanding. By restoring the presentness of the past and cultivating a sense that something else might have happened, sideshadowing restored some of the presentness that might have been lost. It alters the way we think about earlier events and the narrative models used to describe them. (Morson 1994: 6–7)

In a similar spirit, we have also kept the structure of the book as open as possible and tried to avoid easy conclusions. Against the certainties of the political rhetoric of change that we see proliferating in the Indian mass media, we have instead preferred to emphasise the unpredictability of the present situation and its many possible ‘sideshadows’: the contingent practices, rhizomatic connections and de-territorialising narratives through which change becomes implicated in the myriad forms in the Indian mass media. In an effort to open up new perspectives to this problem that has been over-determined by academic research, political necessities
and media commentary, we have focused on the many ‘lines of flight’ where such theoretical certainties of power break apart and can be critically investigated (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3–27; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1986). We invite the reader to shift through these different articles and draw his/her own conclusions to an ongoing, and by no means finished, debate.

The ‘artifactuality’ of change

Nonetheless, even if we have tried our best to promote such multiplicity of perspectives, a book can never be an authentic dialogue or discussion (Bakhtin 1981). A book is always and unavoidably a product that is fixed and closed off at the moment of its inscription. It is an object that is paradoxically both open and closed: open to interpretations that fly off in all directions but also fundamentally closed by the necessities of its production and form. As Derrida would say, despite such claims to open narratives, all we can ever do in the end is produce the ‘effects’ of such openness. Like any other media practice, a book always ‘negotiates with choices, with frames, with selectivity … [it] is produced before transmitted’ (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 40; italics in original). It is a practice in what Derrida has called ‘artifactuality’. He writes that

this portmanteau word, “artifactuality,” signifies first of all that there is actuality — in the sense of what is “timely” or rather, in the sense of “what is broadcast under the heading of the news on radio and on television” — only insofar as a whole set of technical and political apparatuses come as it were to choose, from a nonfinite mass of events, the “facts” that are to constitute actuality: what are then called the “facts” on which the “news” or “information” feeds … The choices are, of course, never neutral, whether they are made at the television or radio stations or whether they are already decided at the press agencies. All actuality negotiates with the artifice, in general dissimulated, of this filtration. (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 42)

An introduction is always also an exercise in such ‘artifactuality’. It is about the different choices we have made from the potentially infinite amount of facts by providing a reader with a manageable way to approach this relationship between Indian mass media
and the politics of change: which articles to include, what sequence to present them in, how to edit the articles to give uniformity of style, how to crunch these centrifugal ideas within the word limit set by the publisher and the academic book format.

This is what we have done.

In the first article ‘NDTV 24x7, The Hanging Channel: News Media or Horror Show?’ John Hutnyk makes an opening move into this uncharted terrain by speculating whether the many changes we are seeing on contemporary Indian television and especially in its televised ‘live’ news could be seen as the manifestation of the age of Kali Yuga — the last stage in the Hindu time cycle where human civilisation begins to deteriorate spiritually. Moving freely between different theoretical registers from postcolonial theory to media/cultural studies theory and even mythology, the article explores the many different ways live television is implicated in the re-imagining of contemporary India amidst its economic and geo-political shifts. This changing and sometimes troubled relationship between academic theory and tele-visual practice is used to explore especially the televised coverage/lynching of the trial of Mohammed Afzal and the hyper-mediated Mumbai attacks in 2008. Looking at the problematic nature of the live coverage of these events and the role television plays, Hutnyk makes the case for both a theoretical and ethical intervention into understanding the politics of change in Indian mass media: this ‘televised pantheon of the “overmighty” current affairs presenters, star interviewers, celebrated talking heads, “corrupted” pundits, experts and guests’ in whose practices we can identify ‘the contemporary avatar of the local-global nexus of nationalism and warfare’ — the allegorical frame of the Kali Yuga.

In the second article, ‘Editorial! Where art Thou? News Practices in Indian Television’, Somnath Batabyal zooms in from a more speculative account of Indian television news and its imaginings of change to look at the nitty-gritty of how this happens. Drawing on his extensive ethnographic work at two major Indian television channels, Star News and Star Ananda, the article makes the case for a detailed analysis of how the liberalisation of the Indian economy has changed news production practices in India. Amidst the unprecedented explosion of news channels in India, the national
project is now being re-imagined in complex ways within these very practices where the Sales, Marketing, Research and Human Resources departments battle for editorial control of what is ‘news’. Behind these fragmented and conflicting narratives of change within the newsroom, the article warns us, are increasingly corrosive ways through which the corporate policies of Indian television are taking over the production of news content thus, ultimately, providing a snapshot of broader commercialisation and corporatisation of the national project of India itself.

Focusing on these conflictual narratives of change in Indian history, and notably the recent debates about the shift from Nehruvian secular nationalism to the rise of the Hindu right, in the third article ‘The Roja Debate and the Limits of Secular Nationalism’, Meenu Gaur looks in detail at one key locus where change is imagined in India: the politics of its cinema. Focusing specifically at the popular film Roja, the article makes a case for a more contextual analysis of positioning films in the broader teleological narratives of change and how the Indian nation is imagined vis-à-vis its relationship to secularism. Viewing Roja and other cinematic representations of Kashmir as a key trope for how this secular/anti-secular dichotomy is changing in India, the chapter argues that a close reading of the film shows us not only the emergence of the Hindu right as a political force but also the limits of Indian secularism itself where the Muslim is seen as a ‘national failure’. Such periodisation of Indian films in relationship to national events therefore is problematic in understanding films as they often force the more polyphonic readings of films into simple narratives of change, ‘the tendency to write films into a teleological narrative of India as a secular democracy’.

In the fourth article ‘Identities in Ferment: Reflections on the Predicament of Bhojpuri Cinema, Music and Language in Bihar’, Ratnakar Tripathy and Jitendar Verma shift focus from such meta-narratives of change to look at the micro-practices taking place across smaller cities and towns in India. Focusing specifically on the role that the emergence of the Bhojpuri cinema and music has had in the construction of the Bihari identity and its many contradictions, the article looks at the complex nexus of language politics, poverty, regionalism and migration taking
place in contemporary India. Arguing against the middle-class contempt for such expression of vernacular folk culture and for taking seriously these emerging forms of cultural expression and identity, the article sees these representations as reflecting the ‘core anxieties, dilemmas and despair’ of a changing in India, especially outside its core metropolitan centres. While this increasing demand for such vernacular cultural expressions are changing the face of both rural and urban India, the article concludes that ‘it is not yet backed either by passion in the street or political’. Researchers, however, better pay careful note to what is going on below the radars of middle-class visions of India as ‘this slow-burning fire may yet go a long way’.

Moving from secularism to sex in the metropolitan centres, in the fifth article, ‘MMS Scandals and Challenges to the Authority of News Mediation’, Angad Chowdhry looks at the different ways the hysteria over youth sexuality has been implicated in how change is imagined. Looking at the various instances of MMS scandals and the ways people have used mobile phones to record themselves having sex, the article looks at the shifting ways in which adolescent sexual practices, technologies of mediation and moral panics about these, interact in complex ways. Behind this rather innocent nexus of petty porn and technologies such as mobile phones, bluetooth and the Internet, Chowdhry argues are more complex ways in which the ‘empty signifier’ of change is being used to contain and discipline social transformations through the articulation of fear about what this change will bring about (moral corruption, Western contamination, the wild and unruly lands of the Internet).

Picking up on this emergent theme of changing representations and mediations of sexuality in India, in the sixth article, ‘Circulating Intimacies: Sex Surveys, Marriage and Other Facts of Life in Urban India’, Kriti Kapila takes a more structured look at the ways in which such representations of sexuality have been produced by the mainstream media. Focusing on the first ever major sex survey in India, these much-debated changes to Indian sexual norms (produced by a condom manufacturer) are looked at critically as examples of how statistics and other narratives of change are used to produce the impossible object of Indian sexuality and
intimacy by the mass media. These representations that repeatedly articulate an urban India of changing sexuality and intimacy, rather than reflecting a pre-existing reality, play a central role in its construction. By comparing these sex surveys to ethnographic work done on women’s own narratives of sexual history and changing norms, Kapila makes the case for a more complicated analysis of the power relations behind how these often middle-class representations of sexuality and intimacy are increasingly linked to the changing imagining of Indian nationalism and the role mass media plays in this.

Moving away from sexuality, in the seventh article ‘Indian Haunting: Representing Failure as “change” in Contemporary Mumbai’, Angad Chowdhry and Aditya Sarkar look at the complicated ways in which politics and change interact. Focusing on especially the ‘phantasmagoric’ representations of change in the Obama and BJP’s electorate campaigns and the complex labour politics of the mills in Mumbai, the article takes us on a ghostly narrative of how historical events should be understood in the present analysis. If change presupposes history, the article asks, what in fact are the ghosts of the past that still haunt us? Making a case for such ‘hauntology’ that combines philosophical analysis and historical and personal ethnography, the article looks at the traces of the different struggles and historical experiences that still haunt the present and contemporary media practices. It argues that often these ‘ghosts of the past’ are not found in structured analysis but in personal narratives: the laughter, in the comedic moments in which the mass media becomes implicated in the wider narratives of change. Media studies, the article concludes, should therefore not look at such ‘repressed’ narratives hidden from public view, but on the instances where such ghosts and laughter returns — in the past that still haunts us.

In the eighth article, ‘Theory and Practice in Emerging Digital Cultures in India’, Soumyadeep Paul and Matti Pohjonen look at how rapid changes in the digital media has problematised both the academic research into these technologies as well as the practice behind creating them. Because of the speed of development, the article argues, we need to come up with a new method of ‘creative experimentation’ to keep up with the pace of change.
The problem is both theoretical and practical. From the theory perspective, the slow turnover of academic publishing and conservative frameworks of analysis prevent us from seeing what might be new and innovative and relevant in especially the emerging digital cultures in India. From the practice perspective, the rapid development of such new technologies and the necessity to constantly innovate, does not allow for structured ways of developing new technologies. The article therefore argues for a more collaborative approach where such theoretical and practice work can escape the ‘double bind’ of theory-praxis by working together to create and criticise both how new digital technologies are developed and what their broader social implications might be. Focusing especially on a software project the two authors have been involved in, the article concludes that it is exactly such collaborative theory-practice experiments that are better suited to capture this object of change rather than older frameworks of analysis, based on slow reflection and analytical certainties.

In the ninth article, ‘The Uncomfortable Truth Behind the Corporate Media’s Imagination of India’, Naresh Ferdandes concludes by reminding us that — despite all these articulations of a shining, growing India — the uncomfortable fact still remains that India is a poor country. Focusing on the work of the exemplary journalist, P. Sainath, and his stories of this ‘other’ India, the article argues that hidden somewhere behind these glitzy images of conspicuous middle-class consumption and prosperity, remains a vast barren India with depressing levels of poverty, farmer’s suicides and the never-ceasing struggle for survival. Even more, by neglecting to report this ‘other’ India, the mainstream media is creating a increasingly growing disconnect between the hyperreal ‘mass media’ of the middle classes and the ‘mass reality’ of the majority of India’s citizens. This disconnect, if not addressed by critical research and writing, will continue to rip India apart into two antagonistic worlds that rarely seem to meet any more. Bringing the themes of the book full circle, the article therefore concludes with the cautioning words of Sainath: ‘Evading reality helps no one … a society that does not know itself cannot cope’ (1996: 434).
The end: A death sentence?

Every act of using language, Deleuze and Guattari have argued, carries behind it a subtle death sentence. Language is therefore not as much about meaning or signification as it is about commanding people, getting something done — the ‘order-word’. They write that we may begin from the following pragmatic situation: the order-word is a death sentence; it always implies a death sentence, even if it has been considerably softened, becoming symbolic, initiatory, temporary, etc. Order-words bring immediate death to those who receive the order, or potential death if they do not obey, or a death they must themselves inflict, take elsewhere. A father’s orders to his son, “You will do this,” “You will not do that,” cannot be separated from the little death sentence the son experiences on a point of his person. Death, death; it is the only judgment, and it is what makes judgment a system. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 107)

Similarly, an introduction to a book also carries with it a little death sentence. Somewhere behind these words lies also the silent cry: ‘Sacredmediacow is now dead, finished. This is what we have accomplished. Nothing more can be changed. No more can be done.’ This book here, therefore, represents the final result of a collaborative experiment which began four years ago. But it is time now to move on to new projects, to once again adopt our individual personas behind this symbolic coat of arms. Such a timely death, however, can never completely efface the ghosts of the past that haunt us: this spirit of unruliness, creative experimentation and fun that inspired our work with the collective. So while this book may represent the more conventional work we have done, we nonetheless hope that these ghosts will eventually find a new readership to haunt. We hope the ‘snapshots’ of change we have provided here will, inspire the opening up of new ways of thinking about the mass media in India.

And then again — who knows? Who can predict the future? A death sentence always carries behind it the possibility for rebirth and reincarnation: a new project, perhaps, a new form where this spirit of experimentation and fun that inspired us will be made flesh again? What form this avatar takes will of course be
entirely judged by the readers of this book in the future to come. As Bakhtin has said: ‘nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future’ (1984: 166). It is in this spirit of openness that we have refused, or truer still, been unable to provide a definitive conclusion. We invite you instead to draw your own, if any, to this ongoing conversation.

On behalf of Sacredmediacow Collective,
Matti Pohjonen

References


NDTV 24X7, the Hanging Channel: News Media or Horror Show?

John Hutnyk

If we are to evaluate the rhetorical media-driven re-imagining of India as having a ‘shining’ future amidst dramatic and transforming geo-political shifts (on the one hand economic reordering, on the other escalating ‘terror’), then representations of local and global political struggles might be considered crucial. This article examines one dimension of the new discursive mode of things ‘Indian’ through attention to what is shown on television and specifically on the ‘news’. Of course, if the Indian encounter with the apparatus of television is to be approached critically, it may be the case that an exclusive use of ‘media theory’ is not always the first or best step. Theories of the tele-visual and specific local mutations of genre formats in a global and postcolonial ‘milieu’ can of course be problematised in several ways. A postcolonial/globalisation model may suggest a review of the theoretical frameworks that inform media theory in general, especially in the context of national(ist) and international(ist) pressures. Examples of recent ‘terror incidents’ and the ways they have been reported, discussed and presented through television have been discussed: in particular, issues around the trial of Mohammed Afzal in 2006–07, but also with reference to the terrible Mumbai attacks of November 2008. Whilst tragic in multiple ways, these events are also made spectacular, emotive and divisive, according to interpretation, by television. What remains to be considered is how the ‘models’ available for analysis might break down these (mere) ‘case studies’ in ways that offer insights more generally applicable. Television news has variously engaged in information war and
controversy before our eyes, and on our screens. As such, the televisual deserves to be questioned and challenged.

Kali TV (Black and white life)

If I were not aware of the critiques of Indology that must be applied, I would ask if the ‘Horror Movie’ of 24-hour television news in every sitting room is not the way in which the age of destruction, Kali Yuga, appears to us today. We are often appalled, but perhaps also somehow numbed, by the constant barrage of images of terror on our screens. I want to suggest, as an experimental and only partly serious opening move, that the idea that we are witnessing the age of Kali Yuga is as valid, or as arbitrary, an allegorical frame as any other for those who approach the phenomenon of present times in a mode of resignation. The news, as it is presented to us ‘live’, reports a world of pain and we watch this attendant to various degrees to suffering, and, more or less, becoming acclimatised to its everyday presence. Let me insist that I do not think Kali Yuga is the only possible way we can think of the news. Indeed, I am keen to promote rather different frames of analysis and critique. In making a somewhat randomly mythical or fantastical opening, I am trying to show that we can see the news not as realist commentary on what is going on, but as commentary within frames. Staged commentary. Maya. None other than Sumit Sarkar, in his book Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History (2002), starts with Kali Yuga, so why not I? Sarkar takes his material from the Mahabharata, Vanaparva Sections 187–90 of the ‘Markandya-Samasya’ (2002: 14n) and writes:

A few details about standard notions of Kali-yuga need to be presented here […] A recurrent and powerful format for voicing high-caste male anxieties for some two thousand years, the evils of Kali-yuga include disorders in nature, oppressive alien kings, Brahmans corrupted by too much rationalistic debate, overmighty Shudras no longer serving their caste superiors, and women choosing their own partners, disobeying and deceiving husbands, and having intercourse with menials, slaves and even animals. (Sarkar 2002: 13)

It is somehow appealing, at least to me, that this sounds exactly like contemporary television. We might then be tempted to suggest
that television is an Indian format, accidentally invented by the
British (to adapt Ashis Nandy’s witticism about the provenance of
cricket, [1989] 2001: 1). I am concerned to understand how the
malevolent power of television, as a system of images, as represen-
tation and network, as imaginary, permeates understanding and
shapes a kind of state-sponsored or endorsed cosmology of fear and
anxiety, as seen in the nation, and even worldwide.

Other commentators on Indian media make moves that attribute
statecraft to media. Arvind Rajagopal, for example, notes that the
1987 television serialisation of the Ramayana trades on a myth of
‘a golden age of tradition that was yet ahead of the modern era in
statecraft and warfare’ and which ‘adroitly made appeals to diverse
social groups’ (2001: 15). Madhava Prasad speaks of cinema as
‘an institution that is part of the continuing struggles within India
over the form of the state’ (1998: 9) where he identifies a spectrum
with ‘Hindu nationalism at one end appropriating the fragile
national project in an attempt to re-establish political unity on a
communal foundation’ and at the other end a globalisation that
‘seems to be eroding the function of the state as a political restraint
on a re-vitalized, rampaging capitalism’ (ibid.: 8–9). Remembering
that cinema and television is not the same as television news,
I still take the suggestion of Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha
seriously when they offer an analytical perspective that notes ‘the
interdynamic relationship between the local and the global, the
national and the international […] to draw attention to the audio-
visual and cultural economies […] and the flow of representational
capital and technologies of production’ (2005: 23). I think there is
a mode of analysis that can be usefully described here, watching
television in the age of Kali Yuga. Of course, I want to do this
without evoking what Jyotika Virdi calls a ‘throwback’ to an
‘indigenous anti-Western, anti-imperialist epistemology’ that relies
upon ‘foundational myths’ that see the ‘figures that appear in classic
epics as archetypes of Indian cinema’, thus assuming some ‘kernel
of pure, untouched Indian culture’ behind ‘the ravages of colonial
dislocation’ (2003: 3). Yet I think there is something in Sarkar’s
commentary on Kali Yuga, quoted above, that can pierce the dry
‘statecraft’ of the media and media studies with the suggestion that
the televised pantheon of ‘overmighty’ current affairs presenters,
star interviewers, celebrated talking heads, ‘corrupted’ pundits, experts and guests, can be identified as the contemporary avatar of the local-global nexus of nationalism and warfare. An entire televisional goddery makes up this videographic spectrum, and it waits ripe and ready for an infidel to offer an irreverent and profane dissenting view.

**Media theory can offer a lot (not much)**

The critiques offered by media theory are useful and deserve attention, though it will be my contention that these are insufficiently heretical to challenge the sway the gods of televison news have over us. Blasphemy and sacrilege that it might be, I do not think a media theory is adequate as a theory of the media. Instead, I will rely upon the work of people like Sarkar, and others such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Rustom Bharucha, as well as Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler’s book *Echographies of Television* (2002) and Jonathan Beller’s *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (2006). All of these authors are influential, I contend, because their work is much more than media theory, yet media are necessarily their stock in trade. Spivak, for example, writing of ‘Indian Modernity’ as ‘represented in videographic news’, mentions Kashmir and the film *Roja* (1992 dir.) as ‘contextualized by the fierce near-Fascist nationalism daily shown on Indian national television’ (2000: 307). Bharucha, also mentioning *Roja* and Kashmir, says we ‘need to confront that dangerous border where nationalism becomes fascism by questioning our own complicities in the legitimisation of violence around us’ (Bharucha 1998: 115). I choose these two mentions of Kashmir because the example I want to take up — a series of violent incidents and events presented to us on television — has its origins in part in the Kashmir question, but also because a scrupulous critical commentary on Indian modernity relies upon the kind of contextualisation these authors provide. I will not, however, have much to say of Kashmir directly. It is 20 years since I visited, for obvious reasons, and I think one of the complicities we need to attend to is that Kashmir is nowadays a code word for many people, much more than it is a place. Kashmir,
largely through the news, has become a cipher for something else, a frame for discussion.

Learning from Bharucha and Spivak, an approach to the media that attends to presentation, to framing, to performance and the way the news is presented as news, also deserves attention. What first strikes me as apparent, but often necessarily overlooked, in media presentation is to look closely at just what is presented on the screen. One way to pursue media analysis is to examine station identification, presentation formats, props and styles of news for clues to what sort of media phenomenon we are examining. The obvious things to look for here are the slogans and catch phrases of media news. Most revealing of what I mean here is the possibility of an analysis of station ‘idents’ and slogans such as that of New Delhi Television Limited’s (NDTV) strapline ‘NDTV 24X7 Experience. Truth First’. Remembering that the 1998 elections were the pretext for the creation of India’s first 24-hour news channel (disputed by ZEE, but generally agreed to be NDTV 24X7), it is possible to raise a number of questions here: first to do with the origins of the name NDTV. Derived from what was initially a content provider company for Doordarshan — the public television broadcaster of India — in the days of state monopoly, NDTV was a private concern run by Prannoy and Radhika Roy, initially broadcasting a half-hour news programme called ‘The World This Week’ from November 1988 until the mid-1990s. From ‘The World This Week’ to 24X7 is perhaps not so huge a temporal shift, but it is possible to say that the Roys brought with them a considerable track record, if not a ‘24X7 Experience’.

In terms of a strict reading of time, one experience that was carried from the weekly news segment on Doordarshan to the 24-hour television format version involves a quite curious delay. Television scholar and journalist Nalin Mehta identifies NDTV as the best ‘place to begin the story of what was happening to television news within the larger framework of television expansion’ (Mehta 2008: 76) in part because the idea of ‘live news’ so troubled the prime minister’s office (Rajiv Gandhi). As Prannoy Roy describes it:

On the first night when I went on air, I said, ‘the time is 8 o’clock’, I looked at my watch and said ‘we are coming to you live with the
news'. Apparently the prime minister’s office people were watching and immediately they started phoning saying, ‘Is this live? You can’t allow him live’. They didn’t understand what live meant. They were just terrified at the thought. (Roy interviewed in Mehta 2008: 77)

NDTV’s solution was to delay the live telecast by 10 minutes, broadcasting at 8 PM a programme recorded at 7:50 PM. The story of the multiplication of television channels through satellite in India is already well known (see Rajagopal 2001; Mankekar 1999 and Gupta 1998) but it is curious that when NDTV moved from Doordarshan to Rupert Murdoch’s Star TV network, and in 1998 started a 24-hour dedicated news channel, this delay in live transmission of the news was still in place (by then at a 5 minutes delay). All NDTV offices then had two clocks in each room, according to Roy, ‘one on Indian Standard Time, and the other on “NDTV time”, which was always five minutes behind’ (Mehta 2008: 82). Roy insists that despite calls, for example during the Gujarat riots of 2002, including threats, the station did not stop its ‘live’ broadcasts. Live that is, for those in the room on NDTV time, for everyone watching five minutes later. Consider again the NDTV slogan: ‘Experience. Truth First’ and notice where the period has been placed. You will not, as a viewer, experience truth first, but rather the experienced news editor looks at the truth first and then broadcasts. Incidentally, in 2003, when Rupert Murdoch split Star TV into a Chinese and an Indian ‘footprint’, the Indian news was outsourced to be provided by NDTV and ‘The World This Week’ was briefly reintroduced, but in its 24-hour version it did not survive long. A week is a long time via satellite.

What is screened shapes understanding. I think it significant that NDTV 24X7 shifts from a reporting-as-public-service function in the early — can we call them Doordarshan/Nehruvian — days of national project television, to something that updates that project with much more of a spectacle and attention-economy focus. Speaking of NDTV’s weekly debate format show ‘The Big Fight’ — to be discussed later in the article — Mehta says that television ‘turns politics into spectacle, but politics has always been about spectacle’ (Mehta 2008: 255) and interviews NDTV’s managing editor (1997–2004) Rajdeep Sardesai who says:

TV is now increasingly entertainment. News is entertainment. You have to create some element of entertainment … people shouting
at each other … or some kind of conflict. It is not always about information. I am not saying in the Big Fight you don’t try to inform but if the entertainment element was not there the programme would probably not have survived. You have to package it […] First Punch, Second Punch […] Otherwise who will see? There has to be some heat. (Sardesai interviewed in Mehta 2008: 55)

Even if NDTV is not watched by everyone all the time (not everyone is entertained by this format), it is still possible to elaborate what is presented on the channel as indicative of a certain interpretive agenda without falling for the rhetorical justifications of management. The suggestion that the news be entertaining is all well and good, but the format of debate itself is not transparent. Just as the name NDTV makes visible but does not discuss the ‘New Delhi’ view of India — where New Delhi here could be code for a politically-centralist nationalist and parliamentary project, so too the ‘First Punch, Second Punch’ format of the debating chamber does not draw attention to the ‘entertainmentisation’ of contested information. To do so would of course undermine any pretence to newsworthiness or relevance, which would be another kind of television. Other kinds of television of course also participate in the ideological formation of the national and the international — Game and Reality TV shows just as much as movies — all have been often examined in this way. But Reality TV is not (always) as horrific as the news. To turn on the television and see that it is always on, that the news never sleeps, and that the most monstrous atrocities, crimes, injuries, deceits and iniquities are played over and over as current affairs, this is the most grotesque consequence of news as entertainment. Our concern does not need to be about the degree to which we are appalled or inured to terror attacks, but also about how this entails acquiescence to the routine hype that promotes the State security regime which provokes such attacks, the accepted surveillance and the constraints on civil liberties that deserve our contempt but are reported as initiatives of the government, the pathetic and transparent lies of those who operate detention centres, extra-judicial assassinations, special renditions, black ops and, in fact, the whole militarised counter-intelligence terror regime that is the staple of daily news in uncertain geo-political times. That’s entertainment.
Afzal and trial by media

On 13 December 2001, a little over two months from another now over-determined date of significance in New York, five men (at least) piled out of a white ambassador car that had driven into the grounds of the Parliament building in New Delhi. The winter session was on, and guns blazing these miscreants/terrorists attacked, killing nine people and then dying themselves in a hail of bullets, having failed to set off their car bomb as the detonator had been damaged in a collision with the president's parked vehicle. Military deployed and border with Pakistan sealed, terror legislation and terror threat level on high for a year, high profile court case, debate all through the press.

Accomplices of the attackers were subsequently arrested. The Inspector of Police declaring all hands deployed, a national effort, the nation appreciates the sacrifice of the police who left no stone unturned, etc. Many commentators have said that 13th December was a fairly incompetent raid, and the news channels reported it as such. The accomplices were presented as dupes or clichéd trouble-makers, no match for the intrepid security forces — as I said, these were 'miscreants'. Also 'terrorists'. However, some among the commentators, Arundhuti Roy for example in *The December 13 Reader*, have questioned the swift 'case cracked' response of the police in arresting and bringing to trial the four accomplices (2006). The *Reader* was published in December 2006, and serves to expose contradictions and inconsistencies in the case, as does *Manufacturing Terrorism: Kashmiri Encounters with Media and the Law* (Geelani 2006), a commentary on Kashmir published the same year by Syed Bismillah Geelani, columnist brother of one of the four accused — Syed Abdul Rahman Geelani (who was a Ph.D. student at the University of Delhi when arrested on 14 December 2001). These publications raise a whole series of disturbing questions within a wide public debate where the 'facts of the case' have become fairly common knowledge, but have also drowned somewhat in a news media circus. Of significance for this telling, on NDTV Vikram Chandra (not the novelist) hosted a 'Big Fight' teleconference in a boxing ring to illustrate the stakes involved.

Three of the cases, including Geelani's, were eventually dismissed, only Mohammed Afzal was found guilty and sentenced to hang,
so as to appease what the presiding judge would call the ‘collective conscience’ of the nation. Afzal Mohammed, also known as Afzal Guru, had been a 20-year-old border crossing militant youth in Kashmir, but had ‘surrendered’ to authorities in the early 1990s and then enrolled at University in Delhi. His experience with said authorities was of course not all pleasant as he was first tortured in the mid-1990s, and found to be ‘clean’ by one Davinder Singh. It was Singh who proudly announced during a television interview that he tortures ‘for the nation’ (as cited by Arundhuti Roy in The Guardian, 15 December 2006). Disturbingly, the method of ‘chilli and petrol enema’ was the ‘cleansing’ facilitator of confession (even petrol seems to get the red hot vindaloo treatment) some years after his initial encounter with Singh when Afzal was picked up and interrogated shortly after the 13 December 2001 incident. Afzal’s video ‘confession’ implicating himself in the raid was later judged to have been illegally obtained and to be unsafe by the Supreme Court, leaving his conviction to be based upon serious, yet circumstantial, evidence of him being seen by a shopkeeper buying the mobile phones and explosives used in the Parliament raid (the phones were left in the Ambassador), renting rooms to the five men (or were there in fact perhaps six attackers — as closed-circuit television footage shown immediately after the attack seemed to suggest, but was then restricted) and having possession of the computer upon which the fake identity cards were made.

Found guilty and slated for hanging on 20 October 2006, NDTV 24X7 screened Afzal’s video confession. They did so without mentioning that this was a five-year-old and discredited piece of footage. After the screening it emerged, from reports by a police inspector, that this video was version three of a much rehearsed ‘statement’. NDTV omitted mentioning the Supreme Court’s rejection of the footage, all the while allowing an on screen (SMS) commentary to announce the ‘collective conscience’ viewpoint: that terrorists should hang, that Pakistan was behind it all, that the national institutions of law must be respected and due process must take its course. At this time, Afzal’s execution was being reviewed on appeal, but the SMS (short message service) poll seems to have decided his fate. The death sentence was upheld by
the Supreme Court on 12 January 2007. Only a plea for clemency by his wife forestalls the hanging. Two sitting presidents with the final decision on hanging — immediate-past president Abdul Kalam and then present president Pratibha Devisingh Patil — have yet to decide.

I am particularly interested here in the justice process as it is played out through the tele-visual public sphere. Roy and other prominent intellectuals speak out, television stations set up opposing views and spokespersons of note. This is an elite mohalla discussion with commentary by SMS and phonecalls of the lynch — mob variety. 'The Big Fight', hosted by Chandra, claims to 'pit those on opposite sides of an issue against each other' in a 'thorough 360° view of the key national or global issue at hand'. This 360 degree theatre can be hilariously and disturbingly literal, such as the discussion of the case of Afzal. Certainly not something to be trivialised as sport, as it has to do with a man's life and a nation's attitude to the death penalty, this 'Big Fight' boxing ring performance reduces issues of crucial significance to questions of ratings and uses a format that replicates celebrity games or quiz competitions.

SMS participation as the semblance of reasoned views (adding a necessary frisson of controversy) seems quite problematic. Mehta notes the thousands of SMS messages solicited by the stations as 'television actively sought to construct a united nation' by way of this 'new and revolutionary theatre' in India (Mehta 2008: 6–8). Vikram Chandra, the 'Big Fight' host, has been uniting India through NDTV since 1994 and has been its special correspondent, covering the Siachen and Kargil wars, and the conflict in Kashmir. He won the Indian Television Academy Award 2008 for 'Best Anchor for a Talk Show' — award shows themselves being part of the ideological manufacture of 'Experience. Truth First'. Of course, SMS should be considered a part of participatory media which requires that we should also evaluate the framing of 'vigilante reporters' armed with mobile phone cameras contributing to what must now be the world's largest 'tele-democracy' (Mehta 2008: 257). Television worldwide also provides, and may be examined in terms of, an emergent public interface of which SMS is only a part, as is multiscreen, phone in, video contributions, etc. This is
in fact an old model, largely pioneered by music television stations and the shopping channel, only recently adapted to news, and especially in India. The commercial and pop origins of this managed interactivity are significant but should not be overplayed. There has been considerable complaint in the past that television was a ‘push’ media. The ‘pull’ factors discussed here, however, are significantly constrained by form, so that it remains an open question as to whether these technologies imply a transformation of media space or otherwise. Surely, we are not yet unable to judge if the popularity of the NDTV style of current affairs debate should be attributed to an ‘argumentative tradition’ or to versions of ‘adda’ as suggested by Mehta (2008: 245), or if, as seems more likely on the other hand, the incorporation of SMS and commercial consumer consolidation mixes with national security and anxiety of the incorporated public to provide a mere semblance of debate in the ‘Shining’ India of 24-hour News.

Mohammed Afzal continues to cool his heals 24X7 on death row, and experiences this as a kind of torture. He has gone so far as to request the president to make her decision. The trouble is that there are 50 death penalty clemency applications in the queue.

Parliament attack convict Afzal Guru is not the only man waiting for his death pardon to be reversed by the President. Sentenced to death in 2005, Afzal Guru may be the face of a raging debate on death penalty and clemency. But an Right to Information activist who petitioned the President’s office found that the number of pending mercy petitions of those who want their death sentence changed to life is as many as 50. (NDTV, 27 August 2008)

In perverse mode I imagine how television might handle the eventual hanging of Afzal. I have suggested there be commissioned a satellite Hanging Channel slot that could aggregate scenes such as Saddam Hussain’s hanging, movies like the Dead Man Walking, the story of Bhubhaneswari (this is a reference to Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ essay and its rewrite in her book Critique of Postcolonial Reason — the story of a woman who killed herself

in order not to betray her revolutionary comrades but was still mis-spoken for by history, 1999: 306–08) and a ‘reality TV’ scenario of the Afzal appeal, again with SMS voting to allow the people to decide. I suggest this of course with considerable bleak irony and do not hold out much prospect for the various anti-capital punishment campaigns that periodically arise since their media face does not chime with national and international requirements.

Instead, NDTV go on to host the successful show ‘Airtel Scholar Hunt: Destination UK’ — a mobile phone company-sponsored reality TV vehicle to bring a media and cultural studies scholarship student to Cardiff (they will get a surprise — winner announced 22 September 2007), and management students to Warwick, etc. A great publicity coup for the UK teaching factories, in which the cultural construction of fantasy India, a UK Vice-Chancellor’s dream of subcontinental expansion (of the teaching factory) and a tamed public sphere without a hint of critique proceeds apace (it was once thought the university was a place for rampant intelligence, now its sold like soap on TV, not even as smart as a quiz show like ‘Crorepati’).

As a coda for this section, think also now of Mumbai in 2008. Another NDTV ‘Big Fight’ debate on the terror attacks in Mumbai lines up a number of prominent pundits in similarly tactless, though perhaps more atmospheric, surroundings. The pundits — including Najma Heptullah, Imtiaz Ahmad, Aamir Raza Husein, Waheeda Rehman — sit in the open-air garden outside an impressively lit Indo-Gothic building, possibly a hotel forecourt. There is a ‘studio’ audience in attendance, though they are not inside the studio, and the compère chairs a passionate, wide-ranging debate that only sometimes steers beyond — though importantly it does go beyond — the protocols of expectation: speakers question the requirement for all Muslims to show remorse that the attackers were Muslims; the requirement for Muslims in India to show a distance to Pakistan; routine denunciations of Pakistan; praise for police and terror forces; concerns about lapses in security (solution — better funding of security forces and more training); calls, from the compère, for the guests to think of ‘ways we can channel our anger’ and be ‘united as a nation’; and so on. Watching NDTV on another occasion offers further opportunity to see the
nation affirmed and confirmed through the response to terror — this time viewers are able to watch ‘Walk the Talk’ with J. K. Dutt, Director General of Security, now retired, speaking of Operation Black Tornado, the response by the security forces to the attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 (NDTV, 4 April 2009), once again the SMS facility, the backdrop, the polite reporter allowing the director general to ‘finally’ speak out, always in a tone that affirms the ‘job well done’ congratulatory and civil society affirming success of it all.

Television format contains as well as promotes fear, acclimatises us to anxiety

Our complicity in ‘the legitimisation of violence around us’ (Bharucha 1998: 115) is something achieved by way of our television screens. We are the audience that watches, and by watching convenes the community of television within which these complicities are played out, and indeed enact the violences they depict. It is clear by now that the varieties of the ‘terrorist’ we know so well are in fact shaped — constituted — alongside the equally fictive moderate citizen, or television audience, that we are presumed to be. The terrorist, of course, has bombs strapped under his/her shalwar kameez, the other is in constant SMS contact. The audience, both nationalist and economically aspirational-ascendant, is conjured into existence by way of engagement out of proportion to the extent (be careful what you wish for) of actual terrorism. Framed above by the logo of NDTV and captioned below by a rolling ticker giving headlines and stock prices (though too fast to give any meaningful correlation between shares and events), the low resolution CCTV footage of the attack on parliament is contained in the same frame as the honoured guests on ‘The Big Fight’. Equivalences are not intended, but inevitably made — viewers become inured by way of format. Indeed, viewers are encouraged to be vigilant and provide commentary, perhaps even on occasion be the eyes and ears of NDTV, recording mobile phone video of events and proving it to air — the development of the ‘citizen journalist’ and ‘vigilante reporter’, an exceptionally rare occurrence, but nevertheless anticipated as the way of the future with some fanfare. Terror events will catch us all, live reports by way of
networked personal media produced by and available to viewers who could just as easily be caught up in events as be watching at home. In this way Indian modernity and postmodernity are both manifest in a low-level everyday fear or anxiety about security and prosperity. This security and this prosperity both rely upon electronics — and thus a convergence entails the simultaneous promotion of robust surveillance and a widespread consumer sector. The work of promoting this doubled platform combines design, framing, training, organisation, intellectual labour and celebrity punditry, infrastructure and planning, co-ordination, and luck — none of which appears as a seamless whole, but which nonetheless combines to great effect.

Terror is presented as affecting everyone. Yet it comes from outside — it is both familiar and alien. It is to be discussed, analysed and detailed. There is a concerted effort to combat and contain it — inspectors of police are interviewed, experts arrayed and displayed, pundits confer with their close-up cameras. The correspondence of despair and celebration is written in the text of NDTV. The double façade of presentation on screen — the framing of each item, not only the content of what is said — is the preserve of media and especially news when it stages traumatic events as shared, and reassures us that everything will be OK, that the nation is defended. Terror strikes, police cordons go up; bombs fall, politicians debate. Stiegler tells us that the media ‘co-produce’ what happens (Stiegler [1996] 2009: 115–16). Inside this theatre there is no place for recognition that this framing is constitutive of terror, that the police, the promoters, the formatting specialists, the political grandstanding, the policy platforms, the talk-back format, all this legislates terror and bombing. The decoration of the screen with both shocking and gruesome terrors — news flash, breaking news, scoop — manages this uncertainty with the live ticker, updated scripts and item ‘idents’ that reassure continuity, even while leaving ambiguous gaps in the record. Our co-production as viewers is also involved, we contribute attention by looking (and also, perhaps more problematically, we agree to a kind of inattention), internalising the parameters of ‘debate’ as if the ‘Big Fight’ format were our own, as if this were the nation (or the planet) as we would have it, as it would be, never otherwise, just so. It is the obligation of critics to open up these problems, not to let the frame close them down.
NDTV is television in the service of selling mobile phones and demonstrating their functions to the enormous consumer classes (the Airtel and SMS links). That this is then grafted onto the current incarnation of the ‘nation’ or national-modern as subject only updates Nehru with Noida. The Nation building project becomes the National business model. This, however, is not merely a national question. The diaspora is accessed now as NDTV 24X7 becomes available in the USA and Europe. Again the format is 24-hour news, with an added strand of reporting from home to those NRI’s abroad or who have business interests in the subcontinent, and the occasional media-interested cultural studies scholar. The format of the ‘Big Fight’ debate remains popular internationally also, perhaps because, like sport, the action is always at the spot scheduled and covered by the cameras placed on location in advance.

There are protests of course, duly reported. Dissident voices are part of the entertainment of ‘The Big Fight’. There are exposures of corruption that lead to resignations — every week a new scandal — or apologies. Government leaders may be voted out of office every four years — only to be replaced by another horror show compère. There are theorists of change, and even sometimes the advocates of revolution may be invited on stage to be interviewed — French philosopher Alain Badiou as well as Nepalese Maoist Prime Minister Comrade Prachanda have appeared on the BBC (for Badiou, see the ‘Hard Talk’ interview broadcast on 24 March 2009) and Prachanda was seen on NDTV reports where he said he ‘clearly means business’ on a visit to recruit Indian investment (broadcast 18 September 2008). As ever, the format of the report and the time slot — in Prachanda’s case a breakfast news item of 45 seconds — determines the extent of the discussion. It is a matter of ‘First Punch, Second Punch’ and then there is a restoration and return to the normative format.

Is this the new fascist TV?

Where have we seen this before? This horrible combination of police violence, constant surveillance and bureaucratic proceduralism — sensation and formality, the script of all news
programmes — is nothing if not a latter-day Gestapo operation. Rustom Bharucha cautions that ‘The charge of fascism […] can be a violence in its own right, and therefore the word should be used sparingly and consciously. While acknowledging the burden of the terrifying legacy, one should not censor it automatically from contemporary usage’ (Bharucha 1998: 116). In this context, in his essay ‘On the Border of Fascism: The Manufacture of Consent in Roja’, Bharucha cites Chomsky and writes that ‘nationalism is mediated and disguised through layers of cultural expression, which have been consolidated through a ‘manufacture of consent’ engineered by the local agencies of the State in the market and the media’ (ibid.: 115).

If we must be careful not to make the charge that there are fascists in the sense that there is a brown-shirted (or saffron) phalanx marching towards a pogrom, we can certainly speak of fascist structure to a system that has rewired social life in the manner of the work camp and the concentration camp and how — this is the most grotesque element — we have become more and more acquiescent towards the impossible outrages that are telecast before our eyes. We go on working and concentrating while persecution is made routine, in our name, in the name of the nation, the public, security or peace. Syed Bismallah Geelani writes that Kashmiri Muslims are often portrayed in the media as terrorists. ‘Films like Roja, Mission Kashmir, Maa Tujhe Salaam, The Hero and even TV serials have systematically constructed this image.’ He reports that in a 2005 serial on ZEE TV called Time Bomb 9/11, Osama bin Laden himself surfaces in Kashmir (Geelani 2006: 26).

The all too common police procedures of torture, interrogation and detention described by Geelani are harrowing at the same time as they are just what we have come to expect. There are also a number of extrajudicial killings by police of Kashmiris in ‘encounters’ (ibid.: 94) of the sort made famous in an earlier era when it was Naxals that would meet such fate at the hands of the state, duly reported as another triumph for order. Such horrors — the bombings, detentions, imperial wars, fratricidal aggressions — do not disrupt the rampant pursuit of wealth and the subservience of political figures, as executive committee of the bourgeois class, to nothing but the facilitation of that wealth.
Even communist parties in Bengal encourage big capital today, as the slaughter in Nandigram\(^2\) showed. The 24X7 talk show is the bureaucratic form of the parliamentary fiasco which provides the unedifying spectacle of a bland and phantasmatic version of politics alongside an entertainment-containment of debate. A 'Big fight'.

**Working the televisual archive: Hard work if you can get it**

On NDTV, nothing unusual can happen. The debate is already scripted. The separation between extreme entertainment and considered argument has been fudged by lazy and cynical media operatives and the national agenda (not a national agenda worked out with a five minute delay by the prime minister), but a national project, of ‘Unite the Nation’, that deploys anxiety and hatred — of Afzal, of calls to ‘hang him’ — and links up with a global media thriving on the ‘same’ anxieties, the same ‘Unity’. All the better then that premium commercial subscription rates are achieved through sensation-attention, and the more controversial the debate, the greater the attention from a wide and diverse audience and the greater the containment (this is not to see this audience as conflicted and confused, but the format possibly encouraging traffic in, not critique of, the format). Here, some say attention is the premium, I would add that there is also a production of an attentive inattention. Something like this is suggested by Jonathan Beller in *The Cinematic Mode of Production* where he argues for the ‘productive value of human attention’ (Beller 2006: 28) and says that the labour theory of value must ‘account for the systematic alienation of the labour of looking’ (ibid.: 23). He suggests:

> equally significant [is that] in viewing the image, we simultaneously and micrologically modify ourselves in relation to the image as we ‘consume’ it — a misnomer if ever there was one, since images equally, or almost entirely, consume us […] this production of both value and self (as worker, as consumer, as fecund perceiver)

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through looking […] means] visual culture must be set in relation to the development and intensification of commodity fetishism.
(Beller 2006: 24)

Beller’s work accesses another model that can supplement media theory for a theory of the media. The media work offered by Marxism is of course vast, and a survey of its parameters is well beyond the scope of this article (see Wayne 2003; for India see Madhava Prasad 1998 on subsumption, among many others), but relevant to this commentary, there are some staple perspectives offered by Marxist film studies, redirected to television as I have hinted in cursory form in the preceding pages. More explicitly, the task set out is to take the appearance of news and examine what kinds of labour go into its production. There are new elements, and old. I think it is the case that a series of sensational ‘breaking news’ terror events have transformed the appearance of news, and yet often nothing much happens on screen — often the appearance of news is still, distanced, nothing to ‘eyewitness’. Considering the few occasions where mobile phone uploads of CCTV footage are offered, usually the ‘same’ images over and over on very high rotation, the ‘live’ aspect of the news story consists of a presenter standing before the police lines, or the cordon tape, reporting to camera. The camera will very often then zoom over the presenter’s shoulder into a cleared cordon space while we are told what we are seeing — a distant building with smoke, a ruined bus, the smoking towers. A city where nothing happens, live.

Of course, uploads must be uploaded, and framed. They must be introduced, they are captioned. Some presenter — formerly a journalist, now a desk-bound reader of the prompter — is required to decipher, and speak over, the images on the loop or the live scene shots (no longer five minutes delayed) where there is a police stand-off or ongoing investigation or security barrier. Such imageries are of course ‘news’, but someone is editing them, framing them, adding a station identifier and superimposing an item logo, and elsewhere the ticker strap info must be typed in, the stock prices checked, the wiring to the stock exchange maintained. Cameras must be set up, purchased, built, tapes stored, catalogued, reviewed. And satellite up-links are not spontaneous, there are shifts of workers (it is 24X7 recall) producing the news that the audience
attention then consumes — even where the audience is solicited to participate and gives their attention for minimal subscription charge, this labour is not offered free and is certainly not the supersession of paid skilled work of many kinds. It is true that increasingly the formatting, idents, studio props and so on are always prepared in advance, as are the trucks, catering, tailoring (for the presenters’ suits) and the research that identifies which pundits might be called upon from the little black book of punditry, but even all these events are produced. Nothing is happening on screen, the camera stands still at the side of the police chief managing the barricade, images of the burning hotel, the damaged bus, the shooters, the towers — all these are what Stiegler calls a ‘tertiary retention’ (2009) — but this does not mean the economy of contribution has changed the ideological field.

It is still the case that in the mix of multiple satellites and constant ‘debate’, the evidence before our eyes (Experience. Truth First) means that all the work that goes into representation of these tragedies can be understood as necessarily contained by a modernity that presents itself, for a certain constituency (of Indian television viewers and internationally) as the work of the nation. What it also, more worryingly, means is that in screening and containing anxiety in these formats, the possibility of other Indias or of an India not the same as the one scripted in the national imaginary, is left off screen. So too for other alternative worlds, other possible lives. To combat this, a concerted effort to tamper with the framing of terror might do three things: (i) develop a global postcolonial study that can rethink television in the context of financialisation, commercialisation and vernacular globalisms, such that NDTV’s ‘The Big Fight’ and the like will be recognised as a locally-produced framing of the same, an appearance of television doing ideological work at home and abroad, for home and abroad; (ii) recognise the residues of nationalist and national construction project television, and cinema, in the context of geo-political reorientation as well as a neoliberal vernacular that trades on a globe-facing specificity, where local incidents articulate with international themes, shaped by financialisation and neoliberal political alignments; and (iii) develop a theory of attention and attraction in the media comportment of the news
NDTV 24X7, the Hanging Channel

channel that shapes both the globe-facing home-audience as well as the occasional incident-related global scrutiny that comes from outside — and do this with considered attention to the labour that goes into framing news as entertainment and as ideology. I hazard that it is worthwhile attempting to develop these three as a new theory of the media without media theory, as a critique of fascism without fascists, of combating terrors without terror, and as a way of learning to watch TV in order to see it for news.

Is there something to be learned from the critique of Indian television as ideological framing, as sensationalised but faked ‘debate’, as a sop to entertainment and commerce which also cows viewers into a ‘nationalist’ security in anxiety? It is my view that a postcolonial critique learnt from Gayatri Spivak shows how to use these models with an eye to critical engagement. Spivak learns from Derrida, but often goes one better. Let us nevertheless start towards a conclusion (however provisional) with Derrida, and Stiegler. In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida notes that televisual recording both captures immediacy more and can be more readily edited and manipulated, such that there will need to be a change in the legal axiomatics of the courts (Derrida and Steigler 2002: 93, 97). I will leave NDTV’s SMS vote intervention during the time of Afzal’s appeal hanging, as a question. There is much that Derrida has to say of interest on television, the archive and justice, but sometimes Spivak is so much better on Derridean themes than Derrida himself, that it is best to cut straight to her. I note that Spivak apparently was working for a time on the text of the Mahabharata — let us hope she will take it up again, and perhaps share views on elder brother Karna. Though Karna is not exactly subaltern, his position on the side of the Kauravas is at least interesting and the archival exclusion is operative, gridded over by a counter female patriarchy and, as national and global reworkings of the narratives insert stories onto developmental teleology, neoliberal hype as well. No surprise that in order to shift the frame of the epic Spivak would take up the case of the tangential character. It is because of this careful, critical, but oblique style of reading, that the archive in Spivak is more difficult than Derrida’s ordering. For Spivak, entry into the archival with a possibility of progressive intervention requires more effort than we usually can
manage (‘more’ — means persistent, language learning, privilege-unlearning, patient, painstaking scholarship). This, too, would require more work on television than I could afford, though since no media theory is enough for a theory of the media, it is her work on terror, suicide bombings and planetary justice which is inspirational.

Thus, on the telematic, Spivak is more epistemological than Derrida. For her, media would be something like knowledge, reason, responsibility, and so something to be conjured with, to be interrupted in a persistent effort of the teacher through critique to rearrange ordained and pre-coded desires. Not just to fill up on knowledge but to further transnational literacy and an ethics of the other. On terror: the ethical interrupts the epistemological. There is a point at which the construction of the other as object of knowledge must be challenged: ‘the ethical interrupts [law, reason] imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self’ (Spivak 2004: 83). The task suggested here that seems most difficult to get our heads around is to accept complicity in a way that makes possible an identification, ‘alive to visible injustice’ (ibid.: 89) as well as ‘not to endorse suicide bombing but to be on the way to its end’ (ibid.: 93). Is there a message we can hear without an automatic move towards punishment or acquittal? SMS texts are not audience participation and an NDTV SMS poll is nothing like democracy. Here, the ethical and archival task of knowledge is to learn what is in the mind, and what is the desire (or motivation?) of the media just as much as of the terrorist bomber. This is a way to combat the fascism of manufactured Terror.

And the motivations are many, the ethical a problem. Consider that someone is paid to put these terror images together, and someone else profits from their labour as they do it — consider, a vast apparatus of production orchestrating news as infotainment and archiving the nation in this way and not that. The terror event lights up a shocking and systematic public awareness and at the same time activates circuits of production that were prepared in advance to contain it. Consider that there is no terror without the social and media relations — class, work, ideas — that make it possible. Consider that these are interpretations, and that interpretations are the stuff of a struggle over meaning. This is the point
of the obligation the well-intentioned critic has to raise questions, to challenge perspectives and framings, to explore alternative possibilities and to insist upon, and to provide, with an eye to education for emancipation, a critical debate that moves minds, rather than affirms stability. Consider the frame must be shifted.

In this context, consider how new media has come to India and that sometimes no-one seems to really have noticed its impact. Of course, this is not to say that new media has ‘arrived’ with an explosion in the subcontinent — that is the standard view, often reiterated. Instead, it might be possible to make the argument that there has always been a media sphere in India, that it has always been a contest, that there are conservative elements that often prevail, and that these can and are being challenged, and they change. The suggestion that cross platform televisual media (satellite with talkback and audience participation via phone, SMS or street interview) has always been an Indian phenomenon is one I would only contingently claim, as I have done at the start of this article with reference to Kali Yuga. The status of this perception of Indian television news as being 24-hour horror show is just that — a contingent interpretation. The terrible thing is that an analysis that attends to the mechanics of presentation on screen — the format, the peripheral text, the framing — also may miss the very content that framing contains. This is the catch, the terror is already there in the fascism without fascists that has already framed the frame. Does the reiteration of the NDTV ‘Big Fight’ slogan ‘How can we Unite the Nation?’ not already affirm this? Even when, in ‘The Big Fight’ debate over the Mumbai attacks, there was a forceful critical Muslim position complaining that every time such an incident occurs Indian Muslims would be expected to publicly distance themselves from terror, from Pakistan and from violence; even when critiques of the security state are aired, even when the constraints of globalisation and geo-political regional strategy are questioned, again all this affirms the notion of a nation and a public — the civil order of viewer-consumers, each contributing to this market, either nodding their heads in agreement or shouting at the screen.

Is ‘The Big Fight’ all there is? The revolution does not happen precisely because it is televised. I do not think the positive idea that
there is an ‘argumentative tradition’ or some other exceptionalism in India (Mehta 2008) can offer a reinvention of the form. Rather instead it seems to reinforce the same in the new. With that said, we do have to welcome further research on the various imbrications and innovations that bring Kali Yuga to the screen, as well as those forms that offer adda, or cybermohalla, or Media Nagar, even Doordarshan again, or that posit the information age — duly explained on the front page of their website — as SARAI (though in passing I notice there is something slightly, and usefully, heterodox in this name — CSDS is not exactly a street people’s scene, nor is it a tavern — as might be suggested by the word). In any case, to elect Sage Vyasa and Elephant-headed, broken-tusk, script-writing Ganesh, the dual co-producers of the extended family drama of the Pandava Five, as the patron deities of the media age, is not far-fetched and not science fiction. Alongside this rehash of the epic archetypes, I think perhaps there are other possibilities — I think of Karna, the disenfranchised sixth Pandava brother, son of Kunti — this sixth brother might also prove to be significant, as Spivak suggests. I remember there were rumours, were there not, that six attackers stormed the Parliament on 13th December? Mohammed Afzal was not that brother, he is innocent, but he can show us how the media makes the case.

References


Amongst the many unexpected changes that the liberalisation of the economy brought on India, none perhaps could have been as unexpected or as far reaching in its consequences than the transformation of the media industry, particularly television. By 2006, the industry was estimated to be worth more than ₹185 billion (approximately 230 million pounds), a dramatic turnaround from its humble beginnings in 1959 as an educational project sponsored by the state (Kohli 2006: 62). The black and white days have been replaced with gloss, glamour and money. The state sponsored Doordarshan, the lone channel on Indian airwaves until the early 1990s, has been eclipsed and the last two decades have seen a most extraordinary growth in private channels, now numbering around 360. Nearly 160 more are waiting for the government’s permission to go on air.¹ The Indian television viewer, more than anyone else in the world today, is then the most spoilt for choice. More than a 100 million households in India now own television sets. Of these, 70 million are connected to cable or satellite television. At the tip of their fingers lie choices galore; movie channels, music channels, television soap operas and 24-hour news bulletins. Cable News Network (CNN) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Rupert Murdoch owned Star TV bouquet of channels, international sports channels

and the home grown Zee Television all vie for the attention of the Indian audience.

Within the medium of television, the news genre has seen the most spectacular growth, prompting some to ask ‘is India the world’s biggest TV news bazaar?’ (Thussu 2007: 96). From just one news channel in 1998, today India has close to 60 24-hour news channels spread across the country, most of which are ‘national, but many international in reach’, and some catering to the ‘regional markets’ (ibid.: 96, 97). News anchors are the new Indian celebrities, articulating reality to India’s millions. With citizen journalism, live outdoor broadcast vans fitted with the latest technology, talk shows and discussions, analysis and reports, there seems to be no end of goodies for a nation of viewers until very recently fed on state propaganda as news. While there are multiple news channels in English and even more in Hindi, every regional language in the country has at least one news channel, if not several. Despite the seeming saturation of the media market, new channels are announced regularly.

With the proliferation of news channels in India, work practices of journalists and media managers have undergone profound changes. However, ethnographic research with sustained empirical work into news practices that can inform us about a changing news ecology remain absent. In the West, such approaches to news production have provided invaluable insights into the nature and determinants of news production and a necessary corrective, therefore, to grand speculative claims and theories about the news media. These more grounded studies have variously examined the daily routines, bureaucratic nature, competitive ethos, professional ideologies, source dependencies and cultural practices of the news media. (Cottle 2007: 1)

Despite their influence and effectiveness to inform media theory, news ethnographies outside the West remain scant. It is to understand the changing news practices in India from within that I undertook to conduct an ethnographic research in two television newsrooms, Star News and Star Ananda, part of the Murdoch media empire in South Asia. Given the tremendous proliferation of private channels, the significant injection of capital and marked
changes in the political economy of India’s news ecology, such a study seemed both germane and crucial.

The unprecedented rise in the number of news channels have led to growing concerns regarding news values, the dumbing down of content and the recent corporatisation of news on Indian television channels (see Mehta 2008; Thussu 2007: 91–113; Sonwalkar 2002). The ‘Murdhochisation’ of the Indian press (Sonwalkar 2002), it has been argued, has undermined the news media’s role ‘as a responsible institution that disseminates information and promotes debate and obliterate[es] the distinction between the editorial and business functions in a publication’ (Bidwai 1996: 6). The stringent critique notwithstanding, there are no detailed case studies of television news channels or empirical evidence that can show how business and editorial functions get merged in Indian television newsrooms. In this article, through observation and interviews with the senior management and journalists of Media Communication and Content Services (MCCS), the joint venture company that owns Star News and Star Ananda, I shall argue that the corporate in today’s television news not only encroaches on the editorial but also takes on key editorial responsibilities and duties, even to the extent that it produces news, decides schedules, commissions and cancels programmes and shows.

News channels and re-imagining the nation

India, or the perception of India, is changing rapidly. The poverty-stricken land of sickness, drought and famine has given way to an articulation of the country’s economic prowess demonstrated by Indian companies taking over Western industries. Ratan Tata’s acquisition of Jaguar in England or yet another steel plant acquired by billionaire businessman Lakshmi Mittal is splashed across the front pages of newspapers and on prime-time television as further proof of the emerging economic tiger. However, the discourse of economic prosperity aside, it is also equally true that India is a poor country.

We [India] are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank number 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the
UNDP’s Human Development Index. More than four hundred million lack even basic sanitation, and over two hundred million have no safe drinking water. (Roy 2000: xxiv)

How does a country where nearly 500 million live below the poverty line get to frame itself as an economic powerhouse? Nationhood being discursive, one of the key areas where such perception is played out is in the media: it is often the media that becomes the ‘primary site for the exposition of different social and political discourses’ (Chakravorty and Gooptu 2000: 93). Scholars have long commented on how the nation is flagged through news in particular and the media in general. In the British context, Scannell and Cardiff, in writing the social history of BBC have argued that the public service broadcast conveys the political idea of the nation through mass culture (1991). Scannell has also stated that the BBC provides the space for a contemporary public sphere (1989). Similarly, Madianou demonstrated how Greek nationality and nationhood is constantly invoked in its news media (2005). To understand how India’s discourse of well-being and plenty is constructed through and in the media, it is essential to understand news practices, the processes through which how and what becomes news is determined.

This article, through its ethnographic approach, examines the politics of news production in Indian television. In doing so, it seeks to intervene in a larger political debate that interrogates the changing role and nature of the public sphere under assault from corporatised news television purporting to be ‘a democratic electronic public sphere where all voices are freely represented and heard, and which apparently appeal to the free domain of popular imagination’ (Chakravorty and Gooptu 2000: 91).

In the next section, where the empirical evidence is detailed, I will first briefly contextualise the company’s formation and then examine some key departments within MCCS. Starting with the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO) role, I will provide an insight into the workings and functions of the Sales, Marketing, Research and Human Resources teams. I will also regularly compliment this focus on the corporate by including observations from journalists to show how the editorial today is a willing partner to the corporatisation of news in India. Through the empirical evidence, I shall
demonstrate that increased corporatisation of editorial spaces has resulted in homogenous news content across news channels and the editorial differences between them are negligible. This, I shall argue has led to the articulation of a hegemonic notion of India, a nation for and by the affluent.

Media communication and content services: The origins

To say that the final decade of the last century was a watershed in Indian media has now become a platitude. But the tidal wave of change which was unleashed by the liberalising of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, led to some astonishing changes, mergers and acquisitions. None was more spectacular than the formation of MCCS, a joint venture between the global giant, Murdoch’s News Corps and the Bengali publishing house, the Anandabazar Patrika (ABP). Murdoch was trying to bypass Indian broadcasting regulations while ABP was attempting a foothold in the television industry as well as becoming a major national player.\(^2\)

Murdoch bought Star TV, formerly owned by the Hutchison Whampoa group, in 1993. Operating out of Hong Kong and owned by a Chinese capitalist, Li Ka-Shing, it had captured a significant chunk of private television viewership in India since the launch of satellite television and had caught Murdoch’s attention (see Page and Crawley 2001: 76–77). Star News was first launched in 1996. As the broadcasting regulations in the country did not allow Murdoch — a person of foreign origin — to produce news in India, the media tycoon handed over the editorial responsibilities to NDTV, a Delhi-based production house. This arrangement broke down in 2002. Star News then teamed up with ABP, a regional giant in the publishing world in West Bengal and the joint venture company, MCCS, was formed. The new company initially relaunched Star News in Hindi and later launched the Bengali news channel, Star Ananda. It has now started a Marathi news channel, Star Majha, thus clearly setting their eyes on the regional market.

\(^2\) Indian broadcasting regulations stipulate that a person of foreign origin, cannot by law, own majority stake in a news channel.
The corporate office

In this section, I look at five key departments within the corporate section of MCCS: CEO’s office, Sales, Marketing, Research and Human Resources. The corporate office situated in Mumbai is responsible for the running of both Star News and Star Ananda. Through an examination of these departments I will highlight how crucial editorial decisions, including deciding daily news agendas, programming content, show timings, the inclusion of particular stories to the exclusion of others, are taken by the corporate office. The CEO, Uday Shankar, now the head of Star’s India operation’s, headed the corporate team and it is with the functions of Shankar’s office and his understanding of his role that I start my analysis.

The CEO: MCCS

The CEO’s office forms the bridge between shareholders and directors of MCCS and the everyday functioning of Star News and Star Ananda. Uday Shankar is a former journalist and was earlier the director of Aaj Tak, India’s first and most prominent 24-hour Hindi News channel. Shankar not only headed the corporate office but was also the Editor-in-chief for Star News and Star Ananda. At the very top we can therefore see a merging of responsibilities and a blurring of boundaries. Shankar had the final say in both editorial and corporate matters. Given conventional wisdom that the editorial should not merge with business affairs of the company and vice versa, the job should be a potential minefield of ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest. In an interview conducted towards the end of my stint in the Mumbai office, one of the first questions I put to Uday Shankar was how he viewed the combining of the role of editor and chief executive and did this compromise journalistic independence. He replied thus:

I do not think my becoming the CEO along with being the Editor has compromised the journalistic standards at all. We are a content company and if content is your core, who else should be heading the company? This whole disqualification of journalist from heading a company because he doesn’t understand business is complete bunkum. Who understands the business better than a journalist?
He might not understand an excel sheet, maybe. What’s so great about an excel sheet? You could get a commerce graduate to do that. But I understand the core product. And don’t forget in Rupert Murdoch’s companies all over the world, the heads of channels are always content persons. The head of Fox News is a content person, Samir Nair, the CEO of Star India is a content person, News Corps CEO is a content person. (Interview by author, 5 July 2006, Mumbai)

Shankar’s role as CEO and also as head of the editorial team meant that he had tremendous control over everyday functions of the office. He not only had to undertake the job of making profits (he is answerable to the shareholders), but also of balancing this with the ethics of journalistic practice and the production of a news channel. His refusal to see an ethical dilemma in this highlights the merging of corporate and editorial functions: the shared responsibility of maximising profits by the editorial; and of understanding and contributing to news content with an eye to profit by the corporate. One of the MCCS management mantras is to ensure that there is collaboration between the editorial and the corporate divisions. As the Head of Human Resources, a department we look at it in greater detail a little later in the article, Sanju Saha, in an interview told me:

There should be no differences between us to the extent that the corporate objectives need to be met. We should have open and free communication with each other (corporate and editorial), we should be able to access information, we should share information with each other, we should share knowledge and we should build the spirit of togetherness, bonhomie and all of that, so that we can rise up to any challenges.(Interview by author, 14 June 2006, Mumbai)

Advertisement sales
Though Star News was relaunched in 2003, the selling of the news channel initially was handled by Star India, the parent company. It was in January 2005, when the prospect of launching a Bengali channel was assured, that MCCS felt the need to have its own sales team that would manage both Star News and Star Ananda. Prabal Ganguly, who was also one of the vice presidents
of MCCS, headed the team. Along with his deputy, Sonal Pandey, there were six others working in the department during the time of this study.

The main function of the Sales team was to sell advertisement slots in the two news channels to clients. Revenue earned through advertisements contributes to roughly 80 per cent of MCCS’s gross profits. Most corporate clients of MCCS who purchased advertisement slots did it indirectly through advertising agencies through their own media planning wings which handle the media policies of their clients. These media planning divisions bought airtime in various channels and advertised their clients’ products depending on particular media strategies. Sales teams from media organisations such as MCCS made their pitch directly to these advertising agencies.

Strategies of selling

Television slots are sold on two basic principles: quantitative and qualitative. If a channel is viewed much more than its competitors, it becomes imperative for advertisers to be seen on that channel because of its comparatively high visibility. This, Prabal Ganguly explained in an interview to me, is the quantitative principle of selling advertisement slots. Particular time slots are also sold to advertisers who want to be associated with a channel’s unique positioning. For example, The Discovery Channel, though by no means a highly-viewed channel in India, has a regular client base for advertising and its association with children ensures that certain companies manufacturing products aimed towards this audience will want an association with the channel. The unique position of a channel and how it is sold to clients is the qualitative principle of selling. Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of a channel need to be sold to the advertisement agencies and this requires different strategies. Such strategies are important, as not every channel can be ‘number one’ in terms of viewer preference or, as Ganguly said, acquire a distinctive feature shared with no other news channel. Given this, the teams responsible for maximising advertisement revenue came up with various schemes to boost their sales.

News viewing in India is traditionally seen as a male domain by the advertising market and television channels. The news genre, Ganguly said, is for the ‘male 25+’ viewer. Television sales teams,
therefore, generally target clients with male products. Sonal Pandey, the Deputy Head of Sales told me in an interview:

The Sales team looks at the product, the market which the client targets, where does he advertise, does he tilt towards English or Hindi, how does he spend, is it seasonal or all year spending. (Interview by author, 8 May 2006, Mumbai)

The spending habits of a potential client are taken into account. Some clients are seasonal: Sonal gave the example of clients who manufacture warm clothes, whereas a bank, she points out, would advertise all year round. For example, she said, ICICI (Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India) Bank had become a major spender in the Indian market but Star News, had so far received a relatively small portion of the spending. Star News, Sonal said, was looking at the potential for doubling this account. To do this, the Ad Sales department was trying to come up with strategies that she explained to me. The team, Sonal said, ‘can promise extras like stories on banking tips or credit cards to ICICI as sops’. The bank could also be told the kind of advertisements that are being placed by their competitors in Star News and what can be done for them to counter this. Specific extras, Sonal told me, are promised to clients to get their advertising revenue. For example, she pointed out, reporters are asked to do stories which talks about the housing boom and the availability of easy credit to help secure advertising from financing institutions. Higher education prospects are touted through stories of new private colleges coming up in the country to induce such institutions to spend their media budgets on the channel.

From interviews, to illustrate my point of how the corporate takes on key editorial functions further, I now move on to observational data and reproduce notes taken at a meeting between an editorial team and a sales executive. The meeting was held to find means to market and sell a new car show. It took place between the producer of the new show, Gopal Kaushik, his team member Preetam Bora, and Archana, a sales executive.

Notes from the Meeting

The meeting started with Archana stating that she had been thinking of clients who would be interested in car shows; she had
come up with names of two companies. Kaushik remarked that the programme would be a product she could easily sell, and, explaining the format, stated that there would be a storyline around the cars the programme chose to highlight. The format for the first episode of this show revolved around a couple, an attractive female model and her boy friend, who get into an argument on how to reach Goa from Mumbai. The girl went by train saying it will be faster than the man’s car. The car, which is being highlighted in this show, wins the ‘race’. The female model is attractive and wears ‘sexy’ clothes, which Gopal Kaushik, producer of the show said during the meeting, will be the show’s, ‘Unique Selling Point’ (USP).

In the show’s format, Kaushik said, there would be a section where two vehicles race each other, which was not to be stage-managed. He firmly iterated that editorial policy would not be changed on this and the race was to be ‘authentic’. Archana said that the car that loses the race would get bad publicity, which would affect revenues adversely. The discussion switched to potential clients. Archana mentioned that besides automobile companies, other products like lubricants could be highlighted. She then asked what other branding opportunities could be created through the show. Gopal replied that there would be two different formats: one would be a ‘takkar’ (battle) between vehicles and the second would be a test drive. Archana remarked that she could arrange for the vehicles for the test-drives from the car manufacturers. Gopal said that the branding opportunity for say, Tata Motors, in a test drive situation, could be a particular segment of the programme titled ‘Tata Motors Present’. Gopal said a ‘teaser’ would be easy to produce with celebrities for the show. Archana asked if the closing section would have tips for drivers. Gopal replied that he could include that. Archana added that if this could be done, then maintenance of vehicles could become a part of this closing section and she could get clients who would want to advertise this. Archana pushed Gopal for more regarding what else she could sell. Gopal mentioned again that he had a model (Manpreet Waraich) who would wear ‘sexy’ clothes. Archana wanted Manpreet to wear a cap that she could sell. She then asked for a five-minute pilot presentation that she could show to potential clients. Gopal agreed to get it ready and asked Preetam to prepare it. They decided to meet again soon.

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3 A teaser is a short promotional material aired on channels to advertise particular programmes.
The details of the above meeting serve to emphasise the amount of control the sales executive had over her editorial colleagues and over the content of the show. She voiced disapproval of the actors and asked for new segments to be added. Both Gopal Kaushik and Preetam Bora, producers of the show, knew that to put it on air, they must first get the approval of the Sales team.

While it can be argued that the Sales team has a job to do, the Editorial at MCCS is a willing partner to the corporatisation of its own spaces. At times, as the excerpts from the interviews of the journalists below show, they are vociferous supporters.

 [...] it must be about maximising sales. After all, this is a business we are in and we must never forget that. (Bitonu Chatterjee, Bureau Chief, Star Ananda, interview by author, 30 November 2006, Kolkata)

Finally it’s a product. You are not here for social services. Only thing I understand is that if TRP [television rating point] is down, money is down, that means you are a bad producer. (Moumita Tarafdar, Producer, Star Ananda, interview by author, 30 January 2006, Kolkata)

Marketing news

The primary job of marketing departments in television channels is image management, i.e., finding ways in which a certain perception of the channels can be created and maintained amongst the audience and the media market. This is generally achieved by three broad means: influencing content, through promos (promotions) and placing of advertisements and finally, through public relations exercises. Given the focus of this article, I will focus on the first, i.e., how the Marketing team at MCCS influences and produces news content.

Context

When Star News relaunched in Hindi in 2003, there was one established news channel in the language — Aaj Tak. The fight for second place was between Star News and NDTV India, which were both launched around the same time. Zee News was
also establishing itself and Sahara India was on the verge of being launched. Three years later, television news channels are dime a dozen in India, with more than 20 in Hindi available nationally.

Aaj Tak, being the first to establish itself in the market, branded itself as the fastest to get the news. Not unlike CNN, which comes with the tag line ‘brings you the news first,’ Aaj Tak sold itself with the line ‘SabseTez’ (The Fastest). NDTV India, which had been producing news for almost two decades had a recognisable face in the form of its proprietor, Prannoy Roy, and other established anchors. Perceived as a serious channel, it coined the the catch line ‘Khabar wohi joh sach dikhaye’. (News is that which shows the truth). Yogesh Manwani, Marketing Head, of MCCS said that in coining the phrase ‘Aapko Rakhe Aage’ (Keeps you ahead) Star News became the first and only customer centric news channel. ‘Our approach therefore editorially was that we will report keeping your (audience) interest at heart, we will report keeping you in mind, we will report news that affects you’, Manwani told me in an interview. The positioning of Star Ananda was relatively simpler given that it was the first Bengali news channel viewed nationally, he added.

According to Manwani, once decided upon, the impression of a ‘customer-oriented' channel needed to be continuously reinforced through content. This required collaboration with the editorial team. Marketing also regularly came up with programme ideas that furthered the desired image of the channel. Giving an example, Manwani stated that on 31 March 2006, Star News had a programme that was completely developed by the Marketing team. It was called ‘Khabar Hamari, Faisla Aapka' (Our News, Your Decision). He described the programme as a way to show their audience that the news was for them and that they have a say in it. The programme, he said, had a section where viewers could call in and give their response to the various stories and feel empowered and the Marketing team regularly worked with the Editorial on such ideas.

A new development in Indian media is that almost every major Bollywood production now has its media partners and this
will include at least one news channel. This is a strategic tie-up which allows the movie producer to have ‘unlimited’ air time on a news channel to promote the movie while a news channel has rights to ‘exclusive’ interviews with the actors, access to film footage and other exclusive rights. These are primetime news material as films occupy a very significant chunk in every news wheel on all national news channels. Manwani was responsible for making these strategic alliances with movie producers thereby controlling a significant amount of time in every news bulletin.

As can be seen from the above two examples, the Marketing team of MCCS, not only asks for specific stories but actually ‘organises’ new content. While it can be pointed out that programmes like ‘Khabar Hamaari, Faisla Aapka’ do not strictly fall into a ‘news category’, Bollywood stories are included in the general news cycle in Star News, as indeed they are in every other news channel.

Both the Sales and Marketing departments depend heavily on data and inputs provided by the Research team at MCCS. This team also plays an important role in content management. It provides an analysis of the ratings data on which the Sales, Marketing and Editorial team rely to maximise their ‘impact’ and profit.

The research team

In terms of control over the editorial and in providing inputs to them regarding programme timings, its market viability, the need for changes in the shows, the power to suggest new shows and to scrap existing ones, the Research team perhaps has the most say amongst all the Corporate teams that work with the Editorial at MCCS. Though the team also provides inputs to the Sales and Marketing teams to improve their performance, given the focus of my article, I will limit my analysis to the team’s work on editorial matters.

The Research team’s input on editorial matters is based on its analysis of data, primarily provided by Television Audience Measurement (TAM), a private company that measures audience ratings or TRPs in India. Besides this data, the Research team also sometimes employs private companies to conduct audience surveys. In an interview, I asked the head of the team, Jyotsna Viryala,
for her views on news and how her department contributes to content management at MCCS. She replied thus:

In a broad sense the genre is news, but within news it is amazing what the possibilities are. It could be a news show based on automobiles, a news show on finance, or it could be a news show targeting the women or youth. So programmes are completely slotted based on viewership data, and also on past experience and on what the competition is showing at that time. (Interview by author, 9 May 2006, Mumbai)

As Jyotsna stated, programmes are ‘slotted’ based on her team’s analysis of audience data. Audience profile, she said, varied according to the time of the day. Accordingly, the Research team advised the editorial on programmes. Giving an example, Jyotsna said that housewives are the target audience in the afternoons as data revealed that women who do not have office jobs tend to watch television after 2 PM once the household chores are over. The popular programme on Star News, ‘Saans Bahu aur Saazish’ (Mother-in-law, Daughter-in-law and Conspiracy), a show based on television soap operas and highlighting the lives of soap opera stars, was designed keeping this audience in mind and is aired in the afternoon. The producer of the show, Bivha Kaul Bhatt, talking about the rationale for the show, in an interview with me stated:

My mother, when she watches television, watches news and all that but she would like to know about it in bare headlines. She would not want details. Given a choice between news and these kinds of programmes, I am sure she will go for SBS (Saans Bahu aur Saazish). You have to understand that women are also very important. If you want them in your fold, then you have to give programmes which are exclusively for them. You have news throughout the day. Why can’t you give half an hour which is totally dedicated to them. It is an appointment viewing. Sales show that right from 2 PM till 3 PM people switch on Star News. The women have their lunch at 2 PM and then from 2.30 PM they have ‘SBS’ (Saans Bahu aur Saazish). And if you have a 3 PM breaking news then they sit through that too. (Interview by author, 1 June 2006, Mumbai)

Star Ananda, too, does a Bengali equivalent of the Hindi show: ‘Hoi Ma Noi to Bowma’ (Either the Mother-in-law or the Daughter-in-law). Keeping the audience profile in mind, Viryala told me that
both the channels would provide ‘hard news’ between 8 AM and 9 AM, targeting the office-going male. The attempt, she reiterated was to provide a ‘tailor-made product’ targeting specific audience groups. The Research team also used the TAM data to reorganise or scrap existing programmes and shows. The data, Jyotsna stated, revealed how programmes have fared on ratings over a longer period of time and the Research team analysed the trends taking into account what the rival news channels are providing to the audience. Jyotsna gave an example. A crime show at 11 PM on Star News might not have attracted the best viewership if Zee News was showing a popular Bollywood-based programme at the same time. The Research team could ask the editorial to shift the timing of the show or to come up with a similar programme to counter Zee News. It might also ask the Marketing team to adopt various strategies to promote the existing programme. The team, Jyotsna said, might even ask for the programme to be scrapped or suggest improvements.

From the brief description of the work scope of the Research Team at MCCS it is evident the amount of control they have over editorial decisions. What is perhaps to be noted is how senior journalists like Bivha Kaul Bhatt echoed the same sentiments as her corporate colleagues at MCCS. This perfect alignment between the journalists’ work ethic, understanding of news and news values and corporate policies, as Sanju Saha, the vice president of HR (Human Resource Management) stated above, was desired by the company ‘so that we can rise up to any challenges’.

The main challenge that MCCS — like any other television company in India — faces today, is the increasing fragmentation of the audience. While the spread of cable connection might have brought in more Indians into the community of television viewers, the multiplication of television channels means that actual viewership is decreasing. There is also more pressure on television houses for a limited advertising budget which accounts for almost 80 per cent of revenue. The audience, their numbers, their interests and viewing patterns, and as described above, TRP, are therefore of paramount interest to both advertiser and broadcaster as they ‘needed to know how many people were listening to justify their advertising expenditure’ (Ross and Nightingale 2003: 21). In this larger political economy of market-driven television, the
term ‘core audience’ has assumed significance within newsrooms. It refers not to the entire audience watching a particular television channel, but a certain viewership that the channels want to target. In the corporate world of MCCS, the audience who has the money to buy the products advertised on the channel is defined as the ‘core audience’. For example, Saha in an interview with me stated that a person from a lower income group might be watching Star News regularly but will not have the purchasing power to buy a car. The car advertiser is not interested in him/her and thereby nor is the channel which desires the car manufacturer’s advertisement revenue. To facilitate the conversation between the core audience and news producers, the HR team had initiated several policies and plans which I discuss next. These, I argue, has resulted in a fundamental shift in news content.

The human resource management
The HR team is responsible for the management of the personnel at MCCS, their recruitment, promotions, punishment and rewards. This broad range of powers allowed the department to attempt a change of profile in the recruitment of journalists and also to promote a certain kind of news content with an eye on the profit margin. Saha, commenting on the need for changing the profile of journalists at MCCS said that he aimed to recruit news producers from the affluent sections of the society. He felt that personnel hired from the same background as the ‘core audience’ will have a better understanding of the audiences’ tastes, likes and dislikes.

Earlier, Hindi news channels had set a precedent by recruiting a substantial majority of their editorial personnel from the rural Hindi heartland of North India, the target region of these news channels. However, MCCS is now making a conscious effort to change the profile of the ‘core audience’ by targeting an ‘upmarket’ clientele that was not previously associated with the Hindi-speaking belt in India. Saha wanted a significant proportion of the future journalists to be recruited from the affluent classes and from big cities, to fit in better with MCCS’s new audience focus. He said:

Of late we realise that even within our top target audiences or target consumers, there is a certain niche. There are a lot of English-speaking people who watch news; hence what is relevant to them
Somnath Batabyal requires a little change in the sort of profiling of our editorial people. We need journalists who are able to understand lifestyle, who are able to understand big city issues, big city stories, and stories which are of interest to a different mass. I will have a very hard look at the profiling of people, in terms of background, classification; define them as per the TAM classification. I will have to do that. For example, if I am looking at SEC [Socio Economic Criteria] A, I will be looking at someone with a good academic background, has English-speaking capability, has gone to respectable college, has had a fair bit of influence of party circles and then see how they perform. (Interview by author, 14 June 2006, Mumbai)

Besides this overt management policy of changing the recruitment profile of journalists to suit a new kind of audience, there were other subtle strategies that the HR team employed to ensure journalistic compliance for a certain editorial policy; especially the way rewards and bonuses were handed out. The HR team, Saha stated, proposed to firmly link the increments and annual salary hikes of journalists to a corporate structure of bonuses and performance based indices. He said that TRPs would decide a journalist’s worth. This meant that if the viewer did not watch a ‘good’ story or more specifically, a story failed to get a high viewer rating, its worth was diminished within MCCS. This also meant that the editorial judgement of a good or bad news story, however erroneous, was being replaced with the fortunes of TRP ratings. Saha stated:

We are actually now taking the key result area concept right to the last employee in the organisation. By defining key goal areas. Or telling you at the beginning of the year, what you are supposed to be doing. If I take a reporter, he is supposed to have five niche stories say, hypothetically speaking, in a month. He is supposed to do things different from what the others are doing. We are going to build parameters for assessing these. (Interview by author, 14 June 2006, Mumbai)

The policies and vision of the HR team at MCCS sought to significantly alter and tailor news content. The desired core audience is affluent and the recruitment of journalists from a similar social and economic background was to ensure that the communication was between the rich; by the rich and for the rich. Only journalists acquiescing to this particular vision were to be rewarded.
It might be tempting to surmise that the examples sketched in this article are somehow an isolated incident and part of Murdoch’s excesses, that most other television news channels are somehow immune to the market processes. It is necessary to iterate here that almost all television news channels in India fight for the same advertising pie. The sample size of the rating system on which advertising revenues depend is heavily geared towards noting the viewing habits of the affluent amongst India’s cable viewing population. TAM samples also measure only the urban areas.

‘India’s entire rural population, consisting of an estimated 145 million households, is totally ignored’ (Mehta 2008: 180). At the time of this study, Indian homes fitted with cable television had exceeded 69 million. TAM records audience activity through their ‘people monitor’ in just 4,500 homes. ‘[…] the sample size is too miniscule for a country as diverse as India’ (ibid.: 180–81). Despite being ‘the largest such measurement system in the world, it is still fairly inadequate as a barometer for a heterogeneous country with over a billion people, six major religions, 18 official languages — with an additional 96 documented ones — and hundreds of dialects’ (ibid.).

Given that the sample size on which advertising depends is miniscule, the target audience is the same across the channels. While there might be differences in language and certain viewing particularities between the different regions of the country, the audience profile that is of interest to the television companies remains the affluent viewer. The content produced for this particular group too, thus, remains largely identical. News on cricket will dominate across India; the focus in Mumbai might be Sachin Tendulkar and in Kolkata, Sourav Ganguly. To enumerate how content structures are similar, to the point that they can hardly be differentiated from one channel to the next, I want to highlight a particular meeting of corporate and editorial heads at MCCS held in Mumbai. The meeting, however, needs to be contextualised within the larger political economy of the cable television industry.

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4 Zee News is the only exception to this rule.
5 This has today increased to 7,500 homes, still a miniscule proportion.
in India. To do this I will first explain how cable operators exercise their clout over news channels and the strategies the latter adopt to counter these.

**Cable mafia, content structures and television strategies**

Neighbourhood cable operators, known locally as ‘cable wallahs’ were around long before the satellite invasion happened in India. Providing cheap entertainment to a mostly urban population, the cable industry in India has been operating since 1984. A lack of laws governing their operations accentuated their growth and by the mid-1990s, when Star and Zee entered the Indian market, cable wallahs were in control of a delivery system to individual homes. ‘Cable operators had created the market for Star TV and Zee TV and were considered able to ruin their market if the satellite broadcasters did not accede to their demands’ (Thomas 2005: 118).

In theory, cable operators have to declare the number of their subscribers and pay television channels for every house they connect to. In practice, cable operators routinely under-declare their subscriptions and pocket the money directly from their subscribers without passing it on to the television companies. If a television channel protests or threatens to take action, the channel is blocked. Owing to solidarity amongst cable operators, black out by one operator would most certainly mean a black out by other operators in the same state. Such blackouts of channels result in significant drops in television ratings as audiences are unable to view them and therefore the ratings show as zero. The television industry, therefore, follows a general rule of appeasement towards cable operators despite knowing that they are being cheated. The clout of cable operators and under-declaration of subscription results

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6 I was present at a meeting between an influential cable operator in Mumbai and the vice president of Marketing at MCCS, Yogesh Manwani. During the meeting, Manwani cajoled the operator to show a slight increase in the number of subscribers. After some good-natured bargaining, they settled on a number. What was evident was both Manwani and the cable operator knew that the number declared was incorrect.
in a corresponding increase on the dependence on advertising agencies and advertising revenues. Being unable to make money through subscription, the television industry relies on advertising and therefore ratings assume an increased significance.

Continuing this policy of appeasement, NDTV — while launching two news channels in 2003 (NDTV 24x7 and NDTV India) — decided to pay cable operators ‘carriage fees’. Carriage fees are an undertaking between a television company and a cable operator through which the company’s channel will be kept on a particular bandwidth for higher visibility. The more the money paid, the higher the bandwidth a channel will be on, resulting in increased visibility. Following NDTV’s policy, other channels, to remain competitive, were forced to follow suit. The money a cable operator charges is not fixed by any law. It depends on a combination of market factors that create the weightage of the cable wallah.

The weightage, which literally means the importance of a cable operator, is worked out through the complex dynamics of TAM classification, market knowledge, claims and counterclaims and of course, the omnipresent factor in Indian television markets: rumours. Below I list some of the factors through which this is worked out.

1. To start, TAM assigns a weightage to every cable operator depending on the demographic area the operator serves. The demographic factor is dependent on a TAM calculation of average income and education of the area’s population. The higher the income and education levels of residents in a particular area, the higher the weightage of the cable operator of that area.
2. If TAM classifies an area as having high weightage, cable operators will then start making claims on how many TAM audience monitoring meters are in their area. The higher the number of meters, the more channels will pay to be visible on the higher bandwidths in those areas.
3. However, the number and the location of the meters are supposed to be secret. In practice, Uday Shankar told me in an interview, this is not necessarily the case. Every channel employs their marketing team to pick up ‘intelligence’ on
the ‘actual’ number of boxes in various areas. Between cable operators’ claims, intelligence gathered by television houses and the demography of particular areas, a weightage is assigned to the cable operator and a carriage fee negotiated with television channels.

The clout of the cable operator is also intrinsically linked, as I explained earlier, to the fact that s/he can black out any channel, a power that is frequently exercised. If a cable operator with a high number of boxes in his or her area blocks a channel, TRP ratings plummet. If this happens to be an area which advertisers target, that is, if it is a high-income group area, television channels stand to lose both ratings and revenue. However, even if all television companies paid money, not every channel can be accommodated in the most visible or high bandwidths as only a limited number of channels can be aired on each.

Understanding the Bandwidths
Every television channel operates on certain bandwidths provided by the cable operator. Depending on which bandwidth a channel is aired, its visibility can go up or plummet. These are the three coveted bandwidths and two low frequency ones.

1. Prime: This is the best bandwidth to have a channel on, as all television sets have this bandwidth. The first 11 channels on a television will generally be on this band. The fight for this bandwidth is intense as numbers are limited. Out of the 11 slots, three are reserved for Doordarshan, the state-owned network; at least three of the top channels select themselves because of viewer demands; the cable operator keeps two bands for showing movies privately. The fight is for the remaining three channels.

2. Colour: This, along with S(pecial) Band, is the second best bandwidth after Prime. It has six channels and also comes at a high premium.

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7 These would usually include two general entertainment channels and, in some areas, one news channel. This varies from state to state, depending on language and viewer preference.
3. **Special**: Most television channels will have this bandwidth and 17 channels can be viewed on this. It usually commands the same price as the Colour.

4. **Hyper band**: Quite a few of the old colour television channels will not have the hyper bandwidth. The quality of reception is poor.

5. **VHF**: Black and white television will generally not have this bandwidth. Again, reception quality is poor and some of the channels are on radio frequency, which means the quality of visuals is detrimentally affected.

Known together as PCS, Prime, Colour and S Bandwidths are the most sought after by television companies. Usually channels have to sign annual contract with cable operators. The limited number of channels that can be accommodated and the desire to be on one of them has resulted in a price war or hike in carriage fees.

Most television companies, depending on their budget, will balance visibility, target audience, and monetary factors before deciding on carriage fees to cable operators. In areas of low weightage or areas that are not the primary target areas (for example, areas outside the Hindi speaking market (HSM) for Star News), television companies will usually not pay carriage fees.

It is, however, to contextualise a particular meeting at MCCS that I have described in some detail how cable operators and television companies negotiate with each other. A description of this meeting and the above details on the ground realities of airing a news channel, I hope, will show how content across television channels tend to be similar.

**The Meeting**

This particular meeting was being held at the MCCS office in Mumbai to analyse the unexplained slump in the ratings of Star Ananda; this despite the fact that the Football World Cup was on

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8 The contract is not legally binding. Cable operators are known to renege on contracts if some television channel offers more money than the one with which they have a contractual obligation.
in Germany and a reporter from the channel had been dispatched to cover the event. Kolkata is viewed as a football obsessed city and therefore it was Star Ananda’s reporter, rather than a journalist from the more affluent Star News who was sent to report on the sporting spectacle. The weekly TRP rating, taking no account of this, showed an enormous drop in the fortunes of Star Ananda.

Since its inception, the channel had been de facto numero uno simply because there were no other 24-hour Bengali news channels around. But just before the Football World Cup, two new Bengali news channels had been launched. In the ratings for the particular week in focus, the newly-launched 24 Ghanta (24 Hours) had outstripped Star Ananda by a fair mile. The emergency meeting had been convened to understand what went wrong. The head of the Research team, Jyotsna Viryala, the head of Marketing, Yogesh Manwani and the head of Sales, Prabal Ganguly, attended the meeting. Assignment head of Star Ananda, Yuvraj Bhattacharya was on the phone. Bhattacharya blamed the dip in the ratings on the coverage of the World Cup stating that the reporter was stranded in Berlin while matches were taking place elsewhere. Because of a tight budget, his travel was limited. Several other theories were also being thrown in the air. At the end of the meeting, Yogesh Manwani, Marketing head, mysteriously claimed that he would get the ratings sorted by the following week. The next week’s ratings indeed showed that Star Ananda was back at the number one position while 24 Ghanta had dipped to its previous levels. I asked Yogesh Manwani how this unexplained dip and rise happened. He explained that the annual contract with the main cable operator in Kolkata was coming to an end. To put pressure on MCCS and to hike carriage fees, the cable operator had moved Star Ananda’s bandwidth to a lower visibility frequency and replaced it with 24 Ghanta. Viewers, unmindful of the switch, watched 24 Ghanta and their ratings shot up. Once Yogesh Manwani concluded a new deal with the cable operator, Star Ananda regained the earlier bandwidth and went up in the rankings.

What is immediately evident is that the audience was unperturbed with the switch. No cable operator can afford to offend his/her subscriber base because of competition. But given that there is hardly any difference in content, the operator thought nothing
of switching around channels. As Manwani said, ‘Most of the viewers wouldn’t even have noticed there was a switch. They would have pressed the usual button on their remote for Star Ananda and continued watching 24 Ghanta without realising they were watching a different channel.’

Conclusion

This article makes two broad claims. First, the assumed traditional divide between corporate and editorial no longer exists in Indian television newsrooms. Through an examination of key corporate departments, I have shown how the editorial space is today prey to corporate policy. The journalists, I have shown through interview excerpts, are generally willing participants in this takeover. Secondly, I have argued that despite the mushrooming of television news channels, content remains largely unvaried. News content is aimed at the affluent section of the audience as advertisers are interested in viewers who can buy their products. In pursuit of this core audience, television companies recruit journalists from wealthy and privileged backgrounds hoping to facilitate the conversation between the producer and the intended consumer. In this matchmaking a hegemonic articulation of a privileged nationhood emerges.

The critique of television news is of course not unique to India. In America, it has been blamed for having ‘contributed to a decrease in attention span and the death of curiosity, optimism, civility, compassion for others, and abstract and conceptual reasoning (Arden 2003: 48). John Simpson of the BBC has blamed television news for turning America into an ‘Alzheimer nation, unaware of its own or anyone else’s past, ignorant of its own or anyone else’s present’ (2002: 288). Another journalist, Andrew Marr, commenting on the changing British news practices and its perception has stated that ‘The idea of news has altered. It stopped being essentially information and became something designed to produce — at all costs, always — an emotional reaction, the more extreme the better’ (2004: 381). In India, however, given the yet nascent stage of the television industry, critical work on news media is limited. While there is some material that has emerged
focusing on television news and connecting it to a larger political economy discourse (Mehta 2008; Sonwalkar 2002; Thussu 2007), there is a significant lack of material looking at the particularities of news practice which, as this article demonstrates, is constantly changing. The methodology adopted for this research, therefore, is a particular burden of this work. Instead of pontificating about the media from without, ethnographic studies enter the media environment and seek to describe practice from within and thus contribute to a more ‘grounded theory of news manufacture’ (Cottle 2000: 19). This article hopes to excite more such examination across the multiple news channels that spread its tentacles across India, creating a nation ‘of citizens who are enfranchised by freedom of choice, consumption and material gratification and a lifestyle of enjoyment and pleasure’ (Chakravorty and Gooptu 2000: 91). The 500 million below the poverty line, in the meanwhile, are symbolically annihilated into silence.

References


The Roja Debate and the Limits of Secular Nationalism

Meenu Gaur

The film Roja (The Rose, Ratnam 1992) on the subject of ‘terrorism in Kashmir’ (Duara 1993) generated a sustained debate in Indian journals and weeklies and became a significant moment in Indian film studies. This debate was premised on a perception amongst scholars that Roja heralded a discursive shift in Hindi cinema due to its articulation of the nation in ‘majoritarian Hindu terms’ (Vasudevan 1994: 79) and its rearticulation of the secular in a ‘new Hindu way’ (Dirks 2001: 163). This perceived change was in the light of the rise of militant Hindu nationalist movements or the ‘Hindutva forces’ (Niranjana 1994: 79) and the Hindu right-wing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, this view did not stem from a comparison with other films on Kashmir, secularism or terrorism so as to specifically account for the ‘change’ that Roja was indicative of. The analysis of the film in this article places it in a relationship with other films on Kashmir and makes a departure from some of the central conclusions of the Roja debate. I have argued here that viewing the film with reference to certain national events such as the demolition of the Babri Mosque by militant Hindu nationalists in 1992 (ibid.) has led to scholars ascribing to the Hindu Right what should be credited to Nehruvian secularism, the project that is seen as being ‘refigured’ in the film. This argument underscores the importance of acknowledging that the Hindu majoritarian underpinnings of the film are contradictions inherent to Indian secular nationalism, and consequently the Hindu Right does not pose the only ‘crisis of secularism in India’. This article also addresses the related problem of periodisation, and the tendency
to view films and film periods with a direct reference to the immediate national political context, imposing on cinema an ‘a priori framework of political perception’ (Vasudevan 1994: 43).

The *Roja* debate: ‘Hindutva’ or ‘Nehruvian Secularism’

The Tamil film *Roja* was an astounding success at the box-office and went on to receive the National Film Award (1993) for the best film on national integration. It is seldom that a film dubbed into Hindi becomes so widely accepted and popular. Such was the appeal of the film that the media coined the response to the film as ‘The *Roja* phenomenon’¹ (Sunday Magazine 1994a: 54–55), claiming that the film had resuscitated patriotic fervour amongst the people of India (Sunday Magazine 1994b: 52–55), while others saw the film as ‘jingoistic propaganda’ (Duara 1993). Most importantly, it was one of the first films to depict the ‘Kashmir problem’ with reference to a Kashmiri separatist movement for *azaadi* (independence).

Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* was inspired by a real-life incident involving the kidnapping of K. Doraiswamy in 1991, an executive of the Indian Oil Company who was kidnapped by Kashmiri militants and spent two months in their captivity (Ghosh 2007). Other political kidnappings in Kashmir, like the one in 1991 by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) of Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of the then union home minister, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, was also the inspiration for the film, as the references within the film suggest. The film opens in Kashmir, where the Indian Army gives a chase and eventually captures the ‘dreaded terrorist’ Wasim Khan. The film then shifts to the village of a girl called

¹ The relationship between Hindi cinema and patriotism is an old one and every once in a while a film that generates patriotic sentiment amongst audiences is given extensive attention by the media suggesting that the nationwide response to the film has been unprecedented (Sunday Magazine 1994a, 1994b). Recently, the success of the film *Rang De Basanti* (Rakesh Omprakash Mehra 2006) and the nationalist sentiment it generated amongst the youth of India had also led to the media coinage of the ‘*Rang De Basanti* phenomenon’ (*DNA* 2006).
Roja, who marries Rishi, a city boy working as a code-breaker for the Indian intelligence. Just as some initial misunderstandings on the part of Roja about Rishi are cleared (the first half of the film), Rishi is sent on an assignment to Kashmir, and Roja accompanies him to what used to be a favourite honeymoon destination for middle-class couples in India. As they reach Srinagar, militants kidnap Rishi, demanding the release of the arrested terrorist Wasim Khan. Roja’s long battle with the Indian State seeking the release of her husband, and Rishi’s with the militants, unfolds in the rest of the narrative. While the State in all its paternalism does give in to Roja’s demand for the release of the terrorists in exchange for her husband, Rishi’s patriotism (by escaping and fighting the militants) ensures that such an exchange does not take place. In the end, India is victorious in all respects, in its benevolence to its subjects and in its encounter with the enemy.

A sustained scholarly engagement with the film, soon after the film was released, became a significant moment for Indian film studies.

As the Hindutva forces reoccupy the discourses of liberal humanism in India, an anti-colonial bourgeois nationalist project is refigured and the secular subject is reconstituted. The project is now one that bestows citizenship on the Hindu as Hindu, the supposed ‘tolerance’ of Hinduism allowing it to function as ‘truly secular’; in the demarcation of this new space as secular, the ‘communal Muslim’ is defined through a process of exclusion. (Niranjana 1994: 79–80)

The debate began with Tejaswini Niranjana’s (1994) landmark essay, ‘Integrating whose nation? Tourists and Terrorists in Roja’, where she argues that the film is an unabashed celebration of the newly ‘assertive and self-confident middle class,’ which is the focal point of the larger project of the film, that of national integration — an integration of all the diverse peoples into the ‘hegemonic Hindu nation’ (ibid.: 79–80). She sees the film as enunciative of the discourse of the Hindu Right, against the backdrop of the liberalisation of the economy, free enterprise and a rejection of the Nehruvian secular state. The Hindu subject in Roja is ‘really modern (read secular)’ and therefore ‘truly Indian’
while the “communal Muslim” is defined through a process of exclusion’ (ibid.). She illustrates by pointing out the modern outlook of the main protagonist Rishi, his English-speaking background, and his ‘scientific’ temperament. In sharp contrast, the Muslims ‘always appear in clothes marked as ethnically Muslim’ (ibid.: 80), and are therefore non-modern (and by implication non-Indian).

Niranjana’s observations about the religious profiling of the central protagonists in Roja are made evident through the course of the film. Rishi Kumar works for the Indian intelligence as a cryptologist. His religious belonging remains understated in the film and, as a modern subject, his allegiance is to the state, the nation, and not religion. He is modern and therefore assumed to be secular. Rishi’s boss in the film is a man of science, but also traditional, with many markers of his Hindu religiosity present in the scene where Rishi takes Roja to meet him. Roja too, in contrast to Rishi, is both religious and traditional. However, this tradition is a point of nostalgia and loss in the film — from Rishi’s desire to marry a girl from the village, to conversations between Roja and Rishi’s boss about festivals, rituals and food, to the idyllic portrayal of village life. Therefore, Hindu traditions and rituals exist in a harmonious relationship with the (secular) nation. Even when Roja’s traditional self becomes a challenge to the State, because of her refusal to foreground the nation before the self, her path — because it is that of negotiating with the State, of invoking its paternalism — is structured as an acceptable difference and not as a fundamental opposition.

In sharp contrast, Islam is represented as a threat to the secular modern nation and the Kashmiri Muslim militant leader Liaquat is represented as contrary to the ideal citizen subject personified by Rishi. Islam, according to another scholar in the Roja debate, is equated with violence and disturbance in the film (Bharucha 1998: 127–28). According to Nicholas Dirks (2001: 161) the film sets ‘Islam against the principles of Indian nationalism’. He points out that this opposition between Islam and the nation is set up right from the beginning of the film, where the Muslim call to prayer (azaan) is interspersed with sounds of military action, and as a result evokes ‘danger’ (ibid.: 165–66).

Other scenes make the nation-Islam opposition of the film even more evident. In the scene where Rishi and Roja arrive in
Kashmir, the shots of the Indian Army are juxtaposed with shots of Muslims praying, inter-cut with shots of bomb blasts, fire and destruction — forms of ‘terrorist’ activity. The army of any country fights its enemies and if shots of army drills are inter-cut with shots of people offering namaz (Muslim prayer), the possibilities of what the sequence can mean are limited. Muslim piety is related with terror in this sequence, revealing the focal point of the film, which posits the nation vis-à-vis religion, which is Islam as Hinduism is not quoted as ‘religion’ in the film, but is ‘merely part of the complexity of being Indian’ (Niranjana 1994: 80).

Rishi’s abduction by the ‘Islamic’ militants takes place in front of a temple, where Roja, unmindful of the dangers of an Islamic militancy has gone to pray, yet again positing on one hand the innocence of Hindu religiosity and the direct threat to it by a ‘fanatical’ Islam. Muslim religiosity in contrast is represented as threatening — in the flag burning sequence, when the Kashmiri militants set the Indian flag on fire, Rishi throws himself on the flag trying to extinguish the flames, this sequence being inter-cut with shots of Liaquat (the Kashmiri militant) praying. This juxtaposition also suggests that while for the Indian, read Hindu, the nation comes first, for the Muslim, his/her religion comes first. This is made evident by the plea in the song playing in the background, which is for national integration — of prioritising the nation above all else. Therefore in Roja, ‘Islam, not Hinduism, is rendered a sign of difference, a threat to secularism’ (Dirks 2001: 161–63).

While Niranjana and Dirks note accurately that the ‘modern’ in this film is synonymous with Hindu, Indian and secular, this articulation is not unique to Roja in Hindi cinema. A comparison with the Kashmir films of the 1960s–80s reveals that this articulation
of ‘Indianness’ with reference to modernity, to the inclusion of the Hindu and exclusion of the Muslim, was in place long before Roja. The language, dress and mannerisms of the Kashmiris of films like Jab Jab Phool Khile (Prakash 1965), Arzoo (Sagar 1965) and Kashmir ki Kali (Samanta 1964) mark the Kashmiri as non-modern and convey ethnicity, folk culture, and tradition. In sharp contrast, the Hindu/Indian protagonists in these films are educated, wear western clothes, speak English, and are generally modern. That this distinction between the modern and the non-modern is premised on religion and not region, is made amply clear by the fact that in the films where the protagonists are Kashmiri Hindus like Arzoo and Henna (Kapoor 1991), they are portrayed as modern. While the films of the 1960s–80s celebrate Kashmir as a symbol of consumer modernity, the Kashmiri Muslim is defined through a relationship to the community. Beyond the Kashmir films, the Muslim protagonists of the ‘Muslim socials’ like Pakeezah (Amrohi 1972) and Mere Mehboob (Rawail 1963) are also defined through their relationship to tradition and community. Therefore, the attribution of this representation to the particular political context of the 1990s by the scholars of the debate is questionable.

Roja’s problem of Indian nationhood and modernity, to the inclusion of the Hindus and exclusion of the Muslims, can be discerned as early as in Nehru’s Discovery of India (1946). Nehru places before his readers the problem of the incommensurability of modernity and the Indian Muslim. Bemoaning Muslim ‘social backwardness’ he writes, ‘[s]ince British rule came to India, Moslems have produced few individuals of the modern type,’ and though the ‘nationalist Muslims’ in the Congress are ‘remarkable men,’ they do not ‘easily fit in with modern developments’ (Nehru quoted in Mufti 1995: 81–84). The figure of the Muslim for Nehru becomes an impediment for the secular modern Indian nation, embodying the deep-seated anxiety of the nation itself. Nehruvian secularism offers Muslims the ‘Indian or Muslim’ choice, a choice that has been haunting South-Asian politics ever since Partition. To claim modernity and nationhood Muslims

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2 However, in recent years there have been some exceptions like the character of Ali in Dhoom (Gadhvi 2004).
must embrace a uniformity of citizenship or give up their claim to both modernity and, by extension, to Indian nationhood. So while Nehru bemoans the non-modernism of Muslims, the space for the articulation of a Muslim modern/secularist position within this framework of secular nationalism does not exist. The ‘who are you’ question when posed to the Muslim ‘is experienced as a trap’, because if the answer were to be ‘Muslim outright’, then that would exclude Muslims from being ‘Indian in the modern sense’ and if not Muslim, then why not just an Indian citizen (Mufti 1995: 85).

However, the representation of Hinduism in Roja, as intrinsically tolerant and therefore secular, also has its parallel in The Discovery of India, wherein Nehru’s ‘gloss on the words “Hindu” and “Hinduism” disassociating them from their commonly held association with religion’ is clearly discernible (Chakravarty 1996: 23). The ‘practices and symbols of Hinduism’ have since long been recognised as Indian values in Hindi cinema and not per se as religious values (Dwyer 2006b: 274). This is faithfully rendered in the Roja narrative where ‘Hindu associations and ritual practices having been emptied of specifically religious content [...] [are] made into markers of modal national/cultural identity’ (Dirks 2001: 163).

If religion is constructed as the problem for secular nationalism in Roja, and if it is painstakingly delineated that Hinduism is not the religion that secularism is addressing, then the question which arises is which religion is secularism addressing as religion? Following Talal Asad (2003: 192), who traces the genealogy of secularism to the Renaissance doctrine of humanism, the Enlightenment conception of nature and Hegel’s philosophy of history, Gil Anidjar (2006: 63) argues that Western Christendom ‘actively disenchanted its own world by dividing itself into private and public, politics and economics, indeed, religious and secular’ and ‘reincarnated itself as secular’ making Islam the ‘paradigmatic religion [...] the religion of fanaticism’. If Islam comes to be the ‘Other’ of secularised Christianity and secularism (ibid.: 62–66), in the Indian context it also comes to be experienced as a ‘trauma’.
Amir Mufti (1995: 88) writes that the theme of ‘conquest and conversion’ surrounds Nehru’s discussion of Islam in India, and ‘[i]n the nationalization of Indian history, […] the arrival of Islam can be experienced only as […] trauma to the nation’. Roja’s pitching of the nation against religion which is Islam is therefore also enmeshed in the history of the Partition of India and the ‘two-nation theory’, against which Indian secularism has defined itself.

Thus, if it is the transformation of the non-modern Muslim to the ‘communal’ Muslim in Roja that the scholars of the debate are particularly concerned with, then the basis of this articulation is not to be found in the 1990s but, in fact, goes back to the very foundations of modern Indian nationhood. Roja, unlike its critics, lays bare the real crisis of secular nationalism in India, by relating the question of ‘Kashmiri separatism’ to that of ‘Muslim separatism’ and the Partition of India, when the patriot Rishi ends his dialogue with the militant Liaquat with an emphatic ‘this country will not be partitioned again’.

[I]n the history that the Indian state obsessively re-enacts, the Muslim separatist is nothing more than the original sign of its failure […] And as such, every Muslim becomes, at a certain level, the symbol of national frustration and insecurity. This is how he or she enters into the history of independent India. (Devji 1992: 1–2)

Given that Indian secularism is defined by the event of the Partition (Bhargava 1998: 497–517; Tambiah 1998: 423–50), it would be correct to say that Indian secularism is defined against the ‘Muslim separatist’ demand (for Pakistan). Secular nationalism in India gives the Muslim the choice, to ‘dissolve itself within the nationalist mainstream, and simultaneously give up any claim to being “representative,” or be by definition (and perversely) communalist’ (Mufti 1995: 84). The foundations of the Indian nation itself are premised around Roja’s problem of the ‘communal’ Muslim, more so in the event of any perceived articulation of ‘separatism’, a tendency that has defined Nehruvian politics in Kashmir. Not surprisingly, Sheikh Abdullah, the Kashmiri leader whom Nehru credited for providing India and Indian secularism its greatest validation over Pakistan (Mullik 1971; Noorani 2006a, 2006b), was to be labelled ‘communal’ by him when seen to be
demanding increased autonomy for Kashmir (Mullik 1971: 34, 101–02). The majority-minority and centre-state challenge to Indian democracy is sought to be tackled by the secular-communal binary, preset to expel the Muslim to the latter category.

The contradictions of secular nationalism in India run deeper, as represented by the film Roja. On the one hand the Kashmiri Muslim is shown his/her own communalism and asked to give up his/her non-modern/communal stance and instead choose modern/secular India. However, this demand for ‘integration’ from the Muslims to forgo their communitarian loyalties, wears only a thin veneer of secular nationalism, because as Partha Chatterjee (1998) has rightly pointed out, ‘universal citizenship forces all groups into a homogenised mould which is not neutral but the culture of the dominant group’ and it is the ‘disadvantaged’ who are coerced into relinquishing their ‘cultural identities’ (ibid.: 366), and more importantly their claim to being ‘representative’. Thus, the apathetic climax of the film Roja, where the militant Liaquat tells Rishi, ‘aatankwadi ab aansoo pocheega’ (the terrorist will now wipe tears). In a previous sequence Rishi asks Liaquat to leave the path of militancy and instead devote his energies to wiping the tears of his people, that is to say alleviate the suffering of his people. Liaquat’s final statement offers redemption to the Indian nation, as the Kashmiri Muslim separatist surrenders his separatism, but typically it offers no redemption to the Kashmiri Muslim separatist, as we are not told how the distance and the difference between the modern Indian state and the Kashmiri Muslim separatist will be negotiated. The Muslim Liaquat accepts the Indian nation on its terms, as the nation concedes nothing in exchange for this acceptance. This is what Akeel Bilgrami (1998: 395–96) refers to as the ‘Archimedean existence’ of Nehruvian secularism in India, which was not the product of negotiations and dialogue between different communities, as for Nehru ‘the transcendent ideal of secularism made such a question irrelevant’.

It is here that the difference between secular nationalism and Hindu majoritarianism of the Hindu Right collapses. The Hindu Right in India does not per se have any issue with this secularist agenda, apart from the fact that it is not followed as zealously as it should be. Therefore, it terms the Congress ‘pseudo secularist’, not
abandoning the idea of secularism itself. The difference being that the Hindu Right would not feel the need for the apprehensiveness inherent in Roja’s ending, as they are quite explicit that the Muslims in India should accept this form of ‘benevolent marginalization by the majority community’ (Dwyer 2006a: 276).

To complicate matters further, even this ideal case scenario of homogenisation is an impossibility for the Muslim within the framework of secular nationalism, which requires the Muslim to be marked as ‘Muslim’ so as to illustrate its triumph over Pakistan. Indian secular nationalism requires the ‘Muslimness’ of Muslims so as to be acknowledged, validated, redeemed and to triumph. Which explains why this form of nationalist discourse in India and Hindi films ‘void the Muslim of all personality apart from Muslimness’ (Devji 1992: 8), as is the case with most Hindi films and Roja. It would be a strain to remember even a single Hindi film in which the Muslimness of the Muslim character is irrelevant, not quoted, and simply there.3 This also explains why Muslims in the Hindi-film imagination are traditional, pious and devout, intrinsically linked to their community, as it is such a Muslim definitively marked as a ‘Muslim’ that serves a purpose of Indian nationalism. Contradictorily, the Muslimness of the Kashmiri Muslim is both a validation (in the figure of the good, loyal Muslim) and a threat (in the figure of the separatist/terrorist) to the Indian nation. This discussion demonstrates that Hindi cinema’s representations of the Muslim are to be traced to the wedged status of the Indian Muslim in Indian secularism itself that requires the Muslim to both ‘be’ and ‘not be’ Muslim so as to be a part of the Indian nation.

**Secularism and the national state in Roja**

In some respects Roja is different than earlier films in its approach to Indian secularism, but in some ways opposed to those that scholars have argued. Hindi cinema, even as it portrays the Hindu

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3 The ambiguous names of these Kashmiri characters do not reveal their religious identity, for instance Raja in Jab Jab Phool Khile and Champa in Kashmir Ki Kali. However, the dress, dialogues and songs in these films are suggestive of a Muslim culture. For instance, the refrain of ‘Ya Ilahi,’ (‘O Allah’) sung by the character of the Kashmiri boatman Mamdoo in Arzoo.
norm as the universal Indian norm, has relied on the ‘pluralistic’ meaning of secularism (Dwyer 2006b: 133), emphasising the ‘plural possibilities of faith,’ of ‘inter-faith dialogue,’ of ‘equal respect’ for all religions. This according to Ashis Nandy (1998: 324–28; 2003: 34–35) is the ‘non-modern’ meaning of secularism in India, based on the Gandhian model as opposed to the ‘modernist’ Nehruvian model of secularism which devalues the role of faith and religion in public life. This representation of religion as the basis for co-existence is not limited to the Kashmir films, many of which invoke the concept of Kashmiriyat or Kashmir’s traditions of religious syncretism, like Mission Kashmir (Chopra 2000) and Yahaan (Sarkar 2005). Rather it has been common to Hindi cinema, wherein a recourse to faith as the negotiator of difference in films such as Dhool Ka Phool (Chopra 1959) with the well-known song ‘Tu Hindu banega na Musalman banega’ (You will be neither Hindu nor Muslim), forwarded a common sense version of pluralism as Indian secularism. Even the notion of the ‘sacha Mussalman’ (‘true Muslim’) which persists in cinema from as early as the 1950s Kashmir films like Kashmir (Jolly 1951) to recent films such as Sarfarosh (Matthan 1999), patronising as it may be, values the role of religion in nation-building, and uses the tenets of Islam to define the ‘true Muslim’ as one whose loyalty to the Indian nation is supreme. As a result, Hindi cinema has generally depicted Muslim piety as a sign of integrity and a marker of loyalty to the Indian nation.

Mani Ratnam’s Roja does not invoke the ‘plural possibilities of faith’ but rather uses the idea of universal citizenship to negotiate difference. Westernised, modernised Indians like Nehru, according to Nandy (1998: 326–28) have preferred a version of secularism in which religion is kept separate from public life, made apparent in slogans such as ‘Indians first, Hindus second’. The Nehruvian loyalist Mani Ratnam replicates this conception of secularism, not only in Roja but also in the film Bombay (1995), where the hero when faced with a violent mob demanding to know whether he is Hindu or Muslim, replies ‘Indian’. This Nehruvian conception of secularism is also endorsed in the film Roja, made apparent in the song ‘Bharat humko jaan se pyaara hai, Sabse nyyara gulistaan
hamara hai’ (India is dearer to us that our lives, this unique garden of ours). The lyrics of the song dwell on the notion of abstract citizenship and the territorial integrity of the nation — ‘Assam se Gujarat tak, Bangal se Maharashtra tak … Kashmir se Madras tak … hum ek hain’ (From Assam to Gujarat, from Bengal to Maharashtra, … We are one). The lyrics go on to stress a pan-Indian identity — ‘Hindustani naam hamara hai’ (Our name is Indian), and in its insistence on foregrounding the national over region and religion, Roja champions the secular state and is a Nehruvian film if ever there was one.

The Indian claim to Kashmir in the film Roja is also made on the grounds of territorial integrity of the nation. In the scene where Rishi’s boss expresses security concerns over him travelling to Kashmir, Rishi responds by stating emphatically that Kashmir is in India, implying that he feels no fear travelling to a part of his ‘own’ country. Even the argument against Partition in the film does not forward the usual argument of religious syncretism of India, but invokes the notion of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The foremost plea in Roja is to place the nation above all other commitments, but most of all religion. Thus, while Nehru often turned to the argument of religious syncretism of popular life in India in order to denounce Muslim separatism as ‘elitist’, nonetheless it would be in keeping with Nehruvian desire to see this ‘transcended and sublated into a modern rationalist secularism’ (Mufti 1998: 115), like that of Roja.

Madhava Prasad (2002) in another response to the film, highlights this further by pointing out to the ways in which Roja posits a change in Hindi cinema by privileging the state over traditional forms of belonging. Focusing on the ‘ideology of the form’ in Roja, he draws our attention to the particular formal method employed in the film, which marks a shift from conventional Hindi film norms.

To recapitulate, in the ‘classical’ Hindi film, two resolutions to the narrative crisis would follow in quick succession, one enforced by the traditionally given authority of the exemplary subject(s) of the narrative; the other, following immediately after, and comically redundant in appearance, enforced by the agents of modern law. (Prasad 2003: 146)
Roja marks a break, as it reconfigures Hindi cinema’s relationship with the state and in effect prioritises secular ‘law’, the narrative process being complete only ‘when the subject posits the state as the external embodiment of its Self’ (Prasad 2002: 163). Using Prasad’s formulation, Roja de-prioritises the personal, the familial, the community in favour of an abstract citizenship based on modern secular law. Therefore, while ‘justice’ in an earlier avatar of terrorism films, like Elaan-e-Jung (Sharma 1989), is rendered in front of the idol of the Goddess Kali with the hero Arjun holding a trishul (a trident carried by Shiva) at the throat of the terrorist/villain, justice in the form of the couple’s reunion in Roja takes place under the gaze of a secular authority, the Indian Army. Roja epitomises the arrival of the Indian state in Hindi cinema, as Hindi cinema has usually marginalised the state in ‘discourses about inter-community relationships,’ (Vasudevan 2007: 239) but Roja attempts to change this equation by bridging the ‘emotional distance between state and nation’ (Vasudevan 2002: 14).

The regional and the national state in Roja

However, the Nehruvian idea of ‘unity in diversity’ as the basis of a modern, secular state addresses other diversities apart from that of religion, recognised by the film Roja, but largely missed by the debate. Beyond religion and secularism, the relationship of the region to the nation is also significant in the film. Some of the contributors to the debate have argued that by focusing on the dubbed Hindi version of Roja, scholars have sidelined all regional specificities to the film. Dirks (2001) calls attention to the regional political context — the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 in Tamil Nadu by Sri Lankan Tamil tigers.

In this context, a Tamil hero sacrificing himself for the Indian nation in Kashmir readily displaces the guilt by association for the death of an Indian national hero on Tamil soil, even as it dramatically enacts

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Prasad (1998) has argued elsewhere that the institution of Hindi cinema is a part of the continuing struggle within India over the form of the state.
The sudden change in Tamil political relations with the national state; after 1991, the Tamil tigers were designated as enemies of all Indian Tamils and Jayalalitha’s govt. associated itself more comfortably withmainline Indian nationalism. (Dirks 2001: 161–62)

In this context it must also be remembered that Tamil Nadu had its own very strong anti-Brahmin, Dravidian movement, which was ‘flamboyantly secessionist’ up until the 1960s (Menon and Nigam 2007:137–38). This was adequately represented in Tamil cinema, a cinema that has been unequivocal about its ‘ambivalent relationship with the idea of the “Indian” nation’, and it has been argued that it was with Mani Ratnam’s ‘national oriented films’ that Tamilians were placed ‘within the discursive and representational framework of the Indian nation’ (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 156–67). Later Tamil films like Indian (S. Shankar 1996) are an example of the ways in which Roja was to successfully redefine the region/nation relationship between Tamil Nadu and India. In his essay, Vasudevan (1994) urges us to see Roja in the light of issues around language and the Tamil film:

...[In the original version, language functions to highlight differences of identity which are entirely suppressed in the Hindi version [...] In labouring to transform the text of Tamil identity into that of an Indian one, the film seems to have come up against a symbolically intractable edifice. (Vasudevan 1994: 46–47)

In one sense the film must be viewed as addressed to the Tamil people. One region in India is being shown the devastating and destructive separatist politics of another region in India, and the plea for unity and integration is being made to the Tamil people, made amply clear by the lyrics of the Tamil version of the song ‘Tamizha Tamizha’ (Tamil), which in the Hindi version of the film becomes ‘Bharat humko jaan se pyaara hai’ (India is dearer to us than our lives). The song ‘Tamizha Tamizha’ directly addresses the Tamil people, but in the Hindi version of the song, the word ‘Bharat’ (India) changes this address to that of the whole nation. The translation of the lyrics of the Tamil version of the song is as follows:
Oh Tamil!
Tomorrow is ours
Oh Tamil!
The nation is also ours
Say my house is Mother Tamil Nadu
Be firm that you are an Indian. (Devadas and Velayutham 2008: 154)

Vasudevan (1994), Dirks (2001), S. Shankar (2005) and Devadas and Velayutham (2008) are right in pointing out that the issue of translation, regional and language specificities should complicate our understandings of the film. However, this doesn’t necessarily make the politics of the film less problematic. If the film addresses regional specificities of Tamil Nadu and ‘dramatically enacts the sudden change in Tamil political relations with the national state,’ (Dirks 2001: 161–62) this ‘change’ in staged not through a narrative of ‘Tamil separatism’, but by making an example of Muslim Kashmir for the (Hindu) Tamil people, there being an unsaid consensus about the ‘Islamic threat’ (and therefore the constant repetition by the militant Liaquat that he is fighting a jihad or holy war). The question when do Tamil people become Indian in Roja, generates discomforting replies.

The introduction of the category of the region in the Roja debate is significant for another reason not acknowledged by the debate itself. The secular-communal binary of Indian secularism and Indian secularism scholarship (Bhargava 1998, Needham and Rajan 2007) seldom acknowledges that the region (centre-state relations, regional autonomy, secessionism) has posed a great challenge to the transcendental ideal of the secular Indian nation. Thus Roja attempts through a secular nationalist turn to erase the nation-region, centre-state tension of the film by replacing it with the religion-secularism dichotomy. It is by converting ‘Kashmiri separatism’ to ‘Muslim separatism’, that Ratnam is able to divert the sympathies of the audiences to the national State. This is why the demand for azaadi (freedom) in the film is swiftly explained with reference to a jihad, so that the demand for autonomy or independence in Kashmir (and indeed elsewhere) is seen through the lens of religion which is Islam, immediately invoking the threat of another Partition.
None of the films on the subject of the conflict in Kashmir (except *Yahaan* and *Fanaa*, Kohli 2007) mention Kashmir’s tumultuous history with India over the issue of autonomy guaranteed by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and the ‘subversion and destruction of the federal autonomy which was a condition of Jammu & Kashmir’s accession in 1947 to the Indian Union’ (Bose 1997: 19). Thus, ‘[w]e are never told or Liaquat is never allowed to say within the film why he and his men desire *azaadi* or freedom’ (Chakravarthy and Pandian 1994: 644). The narrative of *Roja* cannot allow for the causes for the demand for *azaadi* to be told as the story of the Indian state’s machinations in Kashmir, as such a story may have sympathisers in different parts of India, particularly so in Tamil Nadu. This is not to deny that ‘religion’ has been used at various times, in a range of ways and by all the different sides of the Kashmir dispute, but rather to underscore that this narrative has been privileged in *Roja* so as to allow a homogenous secular nationalism to mask the centre-state and nation-region tensions of the Indian polity.

This ‘imperative’ of increased centralisation of the Indian state has surfaced at various times in the history of post-independent India. The period when Kashmir’s troubles with the Indian State precipitated into the dismissal and arrest of its democratically-elected leader Sheikh Abdullah (1953) was also the period when the Indian state was beseeched with ‘the contest between the central power and the forces of regionalism’ in other parts of India (Harrison 1956: 621). In the south of India, for instance, a Gandhian leader Potti Sriramulu (1901–1952) fasted until he died while demanding a separate regional state for Andhra within the Indian Union (Gray 1971: 463; Patel 1953: 3), while Tamil Nadu was spearheading a political movement for secessionism from the Union and for the ‘sovereign republic of Dravidasthan’ (Harrison 1956: 624). It is in this situation that the logic for the need for ‘exercise of supreme central authority’ became

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5 Kashmir has a special status in the India Constitution which grants it federal autonomy under Article 370. For more on Article 370, see Bose (1997), Puri (1993), Lamb (1994), Singh (1995) and Jha (1996).
the norm, rather than the exception (ibid.: 635). As Harrison writing on the regional challenges to Indian nationalism in 1956 says, ‘While representative institutions might survive the rise of a commanding central authority, the great danger is that sooner or later the center will discard the restraints of Parliament and Constitution in the name of nationalism (1956: 636).

The idea of a centralised State in India has supporters in all sections of the political spectrum, from the Left to the Right, including Hindutva supporters who according to Nandy are completely ‘statist’ (Pinney 1995: 11). While the 1990s may be a period of increased ‘State repression’ in different regions of India, as some scholars of the Roja debate have pointed out (Srinivas 1994: 1225), it is not clear how this can be the ground to argue that Roja’s approach to the region is a departure from that of the Nehruvian state. The politics and history of Kashmir would not bear out such an argument.

There is still something left to be said about the film Roja (in all probability the most discussed film in Indian film studies), given that at least one scholar (Dirks 2001) believes that the film is about gendered subjectivities and the irreconcilable distance between ‘the home and the nation’, while others believe that it represents the stressed relationship between regional and national identity (Vasudevan 1994; Dirks 2001, Devadas and Velayutham 2008). These scholars allude to a relationship which forms the central ploy in Ratnam’s films and yet, has not been discussed in much detail. The reconciliation of the part and the whole — the personal and the political, individual and collective, desire and law, the region and the nation — are central to many of Ratnam’s films (Roja, Bombay [1995], Dil Se [1998], and Guru [2007]). Most of these films begin in the realm of the personal, one that signifies innocence and desire while the other part of the film is about what transpires when this world of the individual clashes with the larger world of the political. Whether it be the couple in Roja which meets with

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6 The more significant argument is about how the liberalisation of the Indian economy changed the nature of the Indian State, an argument that both Srinivas (1994) and Niranjana (1994) allude to but fail to elaborate in any specific way with reference to the film Roja.
terror in the realm of the nation, or the Hindu-Muslim couple caught up in inter-religious violence in the film Bombay, or the ambitions of an industrialist circumscribed by his struggles with the law in Guru, Ratnam’s films stage an irreconcilable struggle between the individual and the collective, the part and the whole. That Ratnam is negotiating this relationship in Roja is made apparent through the long dialogues staged in the film, between people from differing worlds and world-views, and the plea in the film though ostensibly for dialogue, is in fact for integration.

This argument can be made clearer with examples from the film. Rishi signifies the modern, westernised city, while Roja represents the traditional and the non-modern village. Rishi’s nostalgia requires for the village to be constructed as an idyll, with no antagonisms whatsoever. The villagers are traditional but they are open to modern ways. Rishi too, despite being modern, is patronising about the traditional ways of the village. An ideal balance is achieved through discussion and dialogue between these differing world-views. In the sequence where Rishi’s mother insists that the bride and the groom speak with each other, to establish whether or not they are compatible, the villagers who are initially aghast at the suggestion as it is against traditional norms, eventually relent. Similarly, Rishi’s decision to marry Roja instead of her older sister (who is in love with another man and therefore requests Rishi to decline the marriage proposal), leads to a misunderstanding on the part of Roja. However, when Roja finds out that Rishi’s decision was in favour of her sister’s welfare, she realises her folly and the couple are reconciled. Thus, a balance between the opposite worlds of the traditional and the modern, the village and the city, the woman and the man, is reached through dialogue. This logic — that conflict is the product of a misunderstanding of hierarchical but benevolent relationships — is made clear in this personal segment of the film and carried over into the realm of the nation in the second half of the film.

In the section following Rishi’s abduction by militants, Roja’s familial pleas clash with the hard rationality of the State in the form of Major Royappa from the Indian Army. Roja’s insistence that the State give in to the militant’s demand for the release of a terrorist in exchange for Rishi, leads to the ire of the Major,
who thinks that Roja’s incapacity to prioritise the nation above her family suggests a lack of patriotism on her part. Roja replies by asking him whether he would argue the same if the person abducted had been a minister’s daughter rather than an ordinary citizen of the country. She asks, what is the point of an army if it cannot protect ordinary citizens like her husband. This question of ‘who is the State for?’ attacks the undemocratic underside of democracy, and as a result Major Royappa is seen to veer towards Roja’s position in the latter part of the film. Dirks (2001: 169–70) argues that the heroine of the film as a gendered subject not only refuses ‘the State’s political logic and her husband’s calculus of sacrifice’ but also ‘to enter into the discourse of State rationality’. However, more than a figure of resistance as Dirks suggests, Roja’s place in the narrative serves a definitive function. In the first segment, Roja’s valid critique of Rishi (her query as to what gave Rishi the right to make the arbitrary choice of marrying her, given that Roja herself was against the marriage) is portrayed as a misunderstanding so as to let Rishi’s stance emerge as moral. Roja’s almost childlike demand of the Indian State in the next segment allows for the State to emerge as paternalistic and moral. Roja’s almost childlike demand of the Indian State in the next segment allows for the State to emerge as paternalistic and moral.

There is another world apart from Roja’s which is at odds with the nation and the State, and that is of the Kashmiri militant Liaquat. A long dialogue between Rishi and Liaquat is staged, in which Rishi tries to convince Liaquat to give up his militant stance and instead choose the path of dialogue and negotiation with the State. However, these differences may run too deep as unlike the personal, in the realm of the nation, no amount of talking it over between Liaquat and Rishi leads to easy resolutions. These worlds remain consistently opposed to each other, only to be reconciled by an unconvincing climax. The staging of the last scene is telling and reinforces the argument made in this article. The Indian Army is framed high above on a ridge, while down below Roja runs to meet Rishi and collapses at his feet, while Liaquat — the now reformed militant is somewhere in the margins of the scene but not visible (as he disappears into the surrounding forest). This scene unfolds under the benevolent gaze of the State (Major Royappa). Like most Hindi films in which the family is re-united in the last scene, so is the State with its constituent ‘parts’ in Roja — the family, region (Kashmir), and religion (the Muslim).
Sumita Chakravarty (2000: 236) writes that narrative cinema can only represent the nation through its fragments, ‘and project them as evidence of the whole’. Ratnam juxtaposes these different fragments in *Roja* against each other, to set up a series of hierarchical surrenders, culminating in the State — the village to the city, the traditional to the modern, the woman to the man, the family to the nation, the Muslim to the (Hindu) Indian, and the region to the nation. As is evident, in Ratnam’s calculus, it is the part that needs to integrate with the whole. Having opened up some fissures, the irreconcilable worlds within the secular nation, the filmmaker closes them with recourse to yet another universal, that of secular nationalism. And herein lies the deeply problematic politics of the film that sees the margin as a challenge to the nation’s hegemony.

The question, which has the potential to destabilise Ratnam’s wonderfully-crafted logic of surrender to the State, is posed in an earlier avatar of the terrorism films. The Muslim protagonist Khairoo asks the patriot Vishwa Pratap in the film *Karma* (Ghai 1986), whether or not the incessant demand for the sacrifice of the individual in the service of the nation is a form of terrorism. Khairoo’s question has the potential to open up a discussion about the ‘fundamentalism’ inherent to the idea of transcendental (secular) nationalism (Devji 1992: 5), but is dismissed by Vishwa Pratap in the way that many Indian secular nationalists may dismiss such a question — by calling him ‘jahil’ (‘ignorant’ and ‘illiterate’).

**Concluding remarks**

Inspired by *Roja’s* success, scores of directors turned to the subject of the Kashmir conflict in their films. Just like the Kashmir holiday films, the political thriller set in Kashmir (albeit ironically not shot there) became popular. Films like *Jaal* (Dhanao 2003), *Zor* (Sivan 1998), *Hindustan ki Kasam* (Devgan 1999), *Mission Kashmir* (Chopra 2000), *Maa Tujhhe Salaam* (Verma 2002), *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (Sharma 2003), were made on the theme of terrorism and *jihad* in Kashmir. However, while certain iconic scenes and themes from *Roja* were repeated in later Kashmir films, like the saving
of the flag by the hero in *Diljale* (Baweja 1996), or the abduction of the heroine and the demand for the release of a terrorist in *Jaal*, these films were in other respects quite dissimilar to *Roja*.

It has been argued here that *Roja* stays loyal to Nehruvian secularism. However, that is not to suggest that Hindutva discourses did not find their way to the film screen. To the contrary, films like *Jaal* and *Maa Tujhhe Salaam* explicitly borrow a great deal from the Hindu Right. The story of *Jaal* makes the war in Kashmir one between Hinduism and Islam. If on the one hand the soundtrack is dominated by calls of *Allah* when the terrorists come on screen, refrains of *Shakti* (strength and the name of a Hindu goddess) and *Om namah Shivah* (adoration to Shiva) take over the soundtrack when the (Hindu) hero and heroine fight the villains. Similarly, *Maa Tujhhe Salaam* is dominated by slogans for Pakistan which were used extensively by the Hindu Right in India (Deshpande 2004), such as ‘*Doodh maango kheer denge, Kashmir maango cheer denge*’ (ask for milk, you’ll get pudding/ask for Kashmir and you’ll be ripped apart). In the film *Indian* (Maharajan 2001), the hero legitimates the violence against one’s ‘own’ brethren by invoking the war between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. While in the film this is said in the context of the hero killing his father-in-law (who is involved in terrorism), the statement appears to legitimise the killing of fellow (Muslim) citizens, now deemed terrorists. Further, the figure of the loyal Muslim in the film is made to masquerade as a ‘Hindu’ by wearing a *tilak* (red vermillion mark on the forehead worn by Hindus), suggesting that Muslims can be Indians if they accept the symbols of Hindu culture. Quite chillingly, the loyal Muslim character says in the film, ‘*Hindustan se gaddari karne walon ka rastaa seedhe kabirshan jaata hai*’ (the path of those who are disloyal to India leads straight to the graveyard), reminding one of the Hindu right-wing slogans chanted during the demolition of the Babri mosque by Hindu mobs in 1992, ‘*Mussalmanon ke do sthan, ya Pakistan ya kabirshan*’ (there are only two places for the Muslims, either Pakistan or the graveyard) (Sethi 2002). Thus, many of these Hindi films on Kashmir were explicitly inspired by Hindutva. However, *Roja* owes its allegiances to Nehruvian secularism and is misread as favouring Hindutva, primarily because the film is
viewed in conjunction with national politics — the belligerent presence of the Hindu Right in both political and cultural spheres of the 1990s. As a result of this misreading, the critics fail to acknowledge what Roja amply reveals, albeit not critically — the inherent limits of Indian secularism itself. What this debate fails to recognise is that ‘the Muslim would exist as a sign of national failure and remain a focus of attack even were there no Hindu nationalist parties, because the real problem is not religiosity but the politics of [secular] nationalism itself’ (Devji 1992: 7).

The Roja debate highlights the problem of the political periodisation of Hindi cinema. Most ‘histories’ of the Hindi cinema reflect a film periodisation that is derived from national events and sometimes even more narrowly from those who command political power at the centre (Central Government) at given points of time. For instance, the characterisation by film critics and scholars of the 1950s cinema as Nehruvian secures a narrow reading of a period in which competing nationalisms vied for space. Archival research reveals that a large number of nationalist films of that period highlighted militant revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekher Azad, Subhas Chandra Bose or the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ of 1857 (Patel 1949: 3–5). In sharp contrast, very few films from the 1950s are specifically based on the Congress and Gandhi-led struggle for independence. This is not to suggest that the Nehruvian vision of a modern secular India did not have an influence in the film industry, which indeed it did, but this cannot lead to the consensus that the post-independence period of cinema was ‘Nehruvian’. This problem of periodisation leads us to the related problem of naming the 1990s films as dominated by Hindutva discourses, following the ascendancy to power of the Hindu Right and the BJP. This periodisation which is based on the national political context, relegates the cinema to being a mere reflection of national politics, and consequently its audiences as being homogenous. Moreover, this periodisation is premised on the idea of India as a secular democracy and therefore depends on a political ontology that sees the cinema as either conforming or deviating from a nationalist ideal.
References


Plate 1: Examining representation, Kashmir: Residents of an orphanage look at their photos on the display of a digital camera.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed

Plate 2: Walking the airwaves, Kashmir: Recording an interview at a community radio studio in Kashmir.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed
Plate 3: Live politics, Kashmir: Workers at a hotel restaurant watch political protests live on TV.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed

Plate 4: Language media, Kashmir: The Kashmir valley has seen a substantive increase on Kashmiri and Urdu media in the recent years, in a scenario where people perceive reportage about the valley in the national media as biased or neglected.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed
Plate 5: Listening in, Bihar: The mobile phone, where one can listen to music and radio, has become an all purpose and a very powerful communication tool.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed

Plate 6: Varanasi: A young man stops to talk on his mobile phone as the world rushes by.

Source: Matti Pohjonen
Plate 7: A TV is born, Varanasi.
Source: Matti Pohjonen

Plate 8: New movies, Varanasi.
Source: Matti Pohjonen
Plate 9: Changing worship, Varanasi.

Source: Matti Pohjonen
Plate 10: Old news, Chizami, Nagaland.

Source: Matti Pohjonen
Plate 11: When old and new meet: Shooting a documentary in Chizami, Nagaland.

Source: Matti Pohjonen
Plate 12: Visibility of voice, Tripura: A member of an indigenous rights organisation speaks to journalists on various issues.

Source: Kazimuddin Ahmed
Identity in dissonance: Articulating a parochial concern

This article attempts to trace the contours of the Bihari identity through a focus on popular culture, media and language. It is an outcome of three years of fieldwork and research on Bhojpuri cinema and music in Bihar. This includes a year-long study devoted to Bhojpuri cinematic texts and a survey of the industry done in Bihar and Mumbai. The survey on cinema was followed by another, though briefer, one of the vernacular music industry in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The factual aspects of the article are thus based on information gleaned from members of both the cinema and music industry. While the film industry is tangibly based in Mumbai in the shape of an enclave of mainstream Bollywood, the music industry is strung along the smaller towns in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh with Delhi forming the main hub for Bhojpuri as well as other languages from the Hindi heartland such as Haryanvi, Kumaoni and Bundelkhandi.

Bihar, the seat of the ancient Mauryan and Gupta Empires through the late BC and early AD eras in India, lies at the eastern edges of the Hindi/Gangetic heartland, bridging North India with Bengal as well as remote stretches of the north eastern extremities of the country. Separated from the larger entity of Bengal in the early 20th century, Bihar remains one of the most underdeveloped states in India, a label that continues to be integral to its identity.
In this article we have used a small kit of operative concepts to expatiate on the issue of Bihar’s identity. A distinction has been made between ‘emergent identity’, a largely spontaneous process and ‘willed identity’ as a conscious ideological/agitational exercise with or without the potential of turning popular. A distinction is also made along another conceptual axis, between the self-image of Bihar and Biharis, and the numerous clichés and stereotypes of Bihar that have by now acquired a nation-wide currency in India. Self-image and ‘projected image’ are thus another binary used in the discussion. Apart from these one also needs to be mindful of the subtler distinction between a passive image, avowed or unavowed, and one that is actively sought as part of attention-seeking or theatrical display, e.g., through agitational action.

The general context for this article is the emerging sense of differentiation and cultural topography in various regions in the relatively flat cultural-political landscape of Hindi-speaking India. But the specific context here is the sudden and startling rise of Bhojpuri cinema, music and the Bhojpuri dialect itself in the last 10 years in Bihar. It is as if the dialects in the entire region have begun to murmur all over again after a century-long silence, largely self-imposed in the service of Hindi. The article discusses several intertwining issues — the rise of Bhojpuri cinema and music industry and its reception among different sections; relation between Hindi and Bhojpuri; and also the changing relations between Hindi and English in India — all of which are of central concern to the media in the region.

Ironically, the context for this discussion is not that Bihari identity is a burning issue to be addressed with great urgency. The fact is despite intense advocacy among parts of the regional intelligentsia, Bihari identity has proved to be a very reluctant one despite the intense political debates around other issues in the region.1

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1 Even as this article is being written, the present chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, is touring the Bihar countryside to disseminate the twin slogans of development and Bihariness as the rubric for all possible issues of popular empowerment. The chief minister clearly premises development on the rise of Bihariness, a minimal if not an impassioned sense of identity that may effectively instil and catalyse a will to develop. This assumption has acquired the status of a fond wish and is widely shared by the political
The reasons for the lack of a distinct sense of identity among Biharis are indeed numerous, some of them being a divisive-caste society, lack of an entrepreneurial middle class, blurring of distinctions among a broad expanse of Hindi-speaking states of the country — all of which may indicate that the Bihari identity was destined not to be. Starting from the other end of the causal chain however, it may appear that Bihar must will an identity of its own to create a sense of collective self and at the least, a prosaic vision of shared development, if not an epic sense of collective destiny. Of course, the issue of political-cultural self-assertion lies somewhat above the binaries mentioned earlier, awaiting a more complex synthesis of images, words and sounds collated from a variety of sources from within and without. This article, however, offers no ideological formula to serve the cause of Bihariness. In fact, the analysis presented here focuses on elements of Bihari identity already in the process of coming together without judging their value for various political agendas. In brief, what happens to be the case is the main concern here, rather than what ought to have been the case, wishfully speaking!

It is useful to inform and remind the reader at the outset that perhaps the most poignant part of the Bihar story lies in widespread migrations from the countryside and towns, the scales of which are comparable to the Bangladeshi exodus into India and the 1947 partition. The important difference is that whereas for the Bangladeshi, there is no looking back, the typical Bihari never stops looking back and forth (South Asia Analysis Group 2010). At any rate, the Bihari population has for some time certainly been the most mobile one in the country (Karan 2007).

class and the intelligentsia who tend to puzzle over the right recipe for the much-needed upsurge.

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2 For the most exhaustive socio-economic analysis of this, see Gupta 2002.
3 [...] there were 27.69 per cent households reporting migration in 1982–83. By 1999–2000, there is a steep increase in the number of households with at least one migrating family member (hereby referred to as migrating households) and their percentage jumped to 48.63. It means approximately every alternative household is effected by migration, whether for a short or long duration, depending upon the whole host of circumstances'. (Karan 2007)
well as the southern peninsula. The trickle of remitted wages from outside has kept many parts of the state above levels of poverty that may have been unbearable otherwise. Notably, it is not just the rural poor who choose migration. A very large section of the educated middle classes, seeking education and jobs, have left their state for other regions with equal if not greater zeal. Being outward-bound is thus a stamp of the Bihari character. Ironically, wanting to escape the economic quagmire of Bihar is now an established Bihari trait. An ingrained dread of being stuck in one’s birthplace quite naturally leads to a very conflicted sense of nostalgia and allegiance. A feeling of being condemned to the label ‘Bihari’ is just one more part of the Bihari predicament and identity. The search for Bihari identity has a lot to do with the undoing of this shame and redacting it into a sense of pride. Curiously, a sufficiently deep sense of shame may provide useful raw material for the forging of an identity.4

This article on popular culture and media in Bihar and their relation to Bihari identity starts with the assumption that the messy issues of identity are arenas for embattled selves, as much in agonised entanglement with layers of one’s own self as with others. Identity rarely comes as a secure perch with a clear tag and a mental map. Within India, certain regional or sub-national identities like Bengali, Maharashtrian or Tamilian have now got a halo of confident obviousness mainly due to a spiralling history of distinctiveness acquired through, for instance, well-acknowledged literary and artistic spheres. There are other identities, such as Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, which carry a strong signature of their own, even though they are yet to come into being. Amidst this mosaic of regional identities in India, there are also ones like Assam that seem very distinct from the outside and yet show signs of crumbling into smaller domains.5

5 Identities unfortunately do not acquire distinctiveness in the manner, e.g., scientific taxonomies. Generally, Indian states seem to be divided on the basis of languages. Broadly speaking, the recent struggle for separate Telangana
The Hindi-speaking states in India have on the other hand, always had trouble finding a distinct and separate identity under the huge umbrella of Hindi, even though the prominent dialects of Hindi indicate clear dividing lines all over. This has a lot to do with a tendency among the 'Hindi' regions to emphasise their commonalities through a greater part of the 20th century, when other linguistic areas such as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh sought distinctiveness. The issue of identity may at times be torn between the need to belong to a majority and that of carving one's own discrete image. This ambivalence has proved more a rule than exception in several tales of identity formation. While the overarching presence of Hindi in the region gives it a semblance of 'heartland', the fact remains that there are too many sociological and cultural discontinuities between Punjab and Bihar, or Rajasthan and Jharkhand to keep the cracked 'heart' intact (Brass 1974).

Interestingly too, tribal states like Jharkhand or even Chhattisgarh within the Hindi fold have found themselves in a great hurry despite their synoptically brief histories, barely going back a decade. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which form the Hindi heartland for that very reason, carry a strong and vivid image in the country without the accompanying political heat that goes with the politics of identities. Part of it may be due to cultural-political complacency cultivated in these parts during the long-drawn freedom struggle when they took a clear agitational lead. Such delusions have now been considerably eroded due to the label of 'underdevelopment' that these states carry. However, one can look at this blurring of identities as a price paid by the conglomerate of Hindi-speaking regions over the past hundred years that saw the tiny and composite dialect of Khadiboli/Dakhni/Urdu spread over large parts of the country to stake its claims as both a national language and a lingua franca. This pitted the heartland, with Delhi at its core, in a series of confrontations with other regions — Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south but also other areas like Assam and the smaller

would indicate that identities have a self-affirming way of asserting themselves. For example, a series of suicides may incite frenzied passions, re-affirming an identity repetitively till an official stamp of distinctiveness is obtained. See Times of India, 7 December 2009.
states in the north-east. The case of Hindi is not entirely dissimilar, however, to linguistic syntheses carried out in Indonesia with Bhsa Indonesia and in Philippines with Filipino in the 20th century. Languages first strive for political power through agitations and then claim a higher ‘official’ status as they clamber higher. What works with nationalism or national identities seems to apply to regional identities as well once they are upgraded into statehood (provincehood). Following the same logic, the many dialects of Hindi are showing signs of ‘cultural’ restiveness even if we have not had a full-blown political movement yet.

One of the earliest ironies pointed out by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* was that even though national identities acquire tremendously precise definition and clear contours with the formation of the nation state, once one begins to examine reasons that brought them together, one ends up in a sea of ambiguities and uncertainties (Anderson 1993). To exaggerate somewhat, it is almost as if loosely strung bits of scrap came together to form an entity defined by unquestionably clear physical and legal boundaries. The forged entity even seems inevitable once formed, carrying the aura of eternity and deathlessness! On the other hand, is not that rather akin to what happens to us as individuals as we grow up?

**Bhojpuri cinema: Thresholds for journeys towards selfhood**

The dramatic rise of Bhojpuri cinema from practically zero to an average of 50 films per year in the new millennium will continue to fascinate culture experts in India for some time to come, requiring multi-pronged investigations into the social changes in the extended region of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh in India (Tripathy 2007a). But there are other interesting and closely related puzzles and intellectual challenges we need to confront as part of a long chain.

To begin with, once one gives due attention to the obvious fact that Bhojpuri, the language of approximately 120 million people is still a largely unwritten language, a number of implications begin to show in the unattended mail. For instance, it suddenly begins
to occur that a language and culture are asserting themselves in a 21st century politico-cultural scenario not through the classically-prescribed media of print but through cinema. One cannot ignore to add to this the thriving Bhojpuri music industry to complete a picture of identity. Amidst all this, print media seems to be an afterthought. Although it now seems that the rudimentary but fundamental task of standardising Bhojpuri spellings has at last begun and at least two extant commercial Bhojpuri magazines — *Bhojpuri Sansar* and *Sunday Indian* (Bhojpuri edition) — have of late been consulting grammarians and linguists to form some ground rules for spelling, just to manage the daily chaos at the copy desk. This is hardly like a grand project of identity or linguistic upsurge, but more akin to running to a dentist when the toothache becomes unbearable.

In this entire process, the middle class of the region have been left agonising over parochial issues of identity that may seem densely metaphysical when compared to the glaringly material reality of Bhojpuri cinema and music industry. An earlier article by one of the authors of this article had discussed the fundamental dissonance of the Bihari identity — each time we get over our shame to admit our Bihari identity, the interlocutor (mainstream media) turns around and recites in a glissando ‘of course we know you are UP (Uttar Pradesh)-Bihari … Bhaiya … North Indian, celebrator of Chhath festival’ etc. (Tripathy 2007b) in the same breath. When we thus ask for a clear cut snapshot in the national media, we get a collage full of ill-fitting scraps taken from all over the North-Indian culture. We might come back gnashing our teeth from a political meeting in Mumbai for instance where Amitabh Bachchan from Uttar Pradesh and Laloo Yadav from Bihar get confoundingly bracketed together. As if Allahabad was the capital of Bihar and Patna was just a small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Search for identity is indeed easily trivialised by a media which has no stakes in it.

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6 One of the authors of this article (Jitendra Verma) was approached by the chief sub-editor of one of these magazines for some expert advice on standardisation.
Not to dwell on the emotional hurt alone, the dissonance or asymmetry between projected identity and Bihari self-regard is interesting for logical and cognitive reasons as well. As we know, incipient identities before their phase of smug affirmation, become stronger when they are embattled, carrying high levels of political heat consonant with a cause worthwhile enough to argue and fight for, not to mention the blood spilled on the streets. Separate statehood for Andhra Pradesh is a good example — it has come a full circle since the early post-independence years. To begin with an overall ‘Telugu’ identity was the undisputed focus which has of late split into a demand for Telangana and an equally vocal opposition to the demand (Sorabjee 2009). Bihari identity on the other hand seems to operate coolly at living room temperature, and the heat seems to belong to places like Mumbai, Assam and Punjab, where the migrant workers get beaten up, killed, drugged and economically exploited by the host. If the desired markers of identity are regretfully missing, let us in the meantime look at those signs of identity formation that are already there.

In recent times, the one rare occasion when someone came close to the idea of Bihari identity, it was Mayawati, the current chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (2007–) and a leader from Ghaziabad in western Uttar Pradesh, who for reasons of her own proposed the inclusive but politically-contested approximation of ‘Purvanchal’. This involved a major re-division of Uttar Pradesh into its disparate cultural components. Curiously,
the last time Mayawati made a similar statement, Amar Singh, a Samajwadi Party leader from Uttar Pradesh insisted on smelling a sizeable bandicoot where there may have been just a small rat and wrote a rebuttal almost within 24 hours, nipping the very idea in the bud. And yet admittedly, if Bhojpuri cinema and music are co-terminous with anything, it is the broader geography of Purvanchal (eastern margins of Hindi-speaking India) and not just Bihar in its present shape. One may add, however, that the Mumbai film maker sees his main market in the movie-music-mad Bihari and not Uttar Pradesh which gives him very low returns.10

Thus somewhat in the manner of Marxian super-structure or more accurately a levitating banyan tree, an ever-thickening mist of Bhojpuri culture must float above its landmass, sending down its adventitious props to claim some tangible substratum. This is definitely an interesting case of culture waiting to reclaim its socio-political territory. To put it prosaically, the cultural projections of identity made by Bhojpuri cinema and music do not correspond to the given political reality, and instead in a curious and convoluted sense come in the way of consolidation of the even a minimum or truncated programme of Bihari identity.11

It is part of a Bihari’s pride and arrogance not to discuss openly his/her feelings of inferiority when compared to a person from Uttar Pradesh, the cultivated cousin if you like. To give an everyday example, a Bihari Brahmin is very likely to feel sheepish marrying into an ultra-aristocracy like the Kashmiri Brahmin stock, but marry him across the border in Uttar Pradesh, and he will come home a proudly contented man. Such irrational sentiments are fully reciprocated by the people from Uttar Pradesh and may explain why politicians such as Laloo Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav

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10 Tripathy (2008).

11 Another Hindi-speaking state — Madhya Pradesh — too has its own political culture but has an even more indescribably diffused identity except in textbook statistics.
do not easily coalesce despite representing the same caste in the neighbouring states.

The above Bihar-UP dissonance gets further confounded by what may seem a footnote to the larger issue of popular culture of the Purvanchal region, either in its fullness or the truncated Bihari version. And yet this footnote may have the potential of engulfing the main text. To bring out the full emotional intensity of the problem, let me use an elaborate rhetorical ploy — what if sitting in Patna, we would imagine ourselves to be the bona fide Bihari denizen and claim that our entirely Mumbai-based Bhojpuri cinema and music videos are the invention of a displaced populace that lives much of its life anyway in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. We may even go further by way of ruthless moralising and claim that Bhojpuri cinema and music videos represent the toxic dregs of Mumbai rather than the pristine beauty of Bihari folk culture. This is not the end — we could further vituperate and claim that Bhojpuri cinema and music in their Mumbai avatar are responsible for the corruption of Bihari culture. This is precisely how the educated Bihari reacts to Bhojpuri cinema and music — by disowning, purging and wishing them away. Right from the early days of one’s textual analysis of Bhojpuri cinema, there has been constant distraction from such extra-textual clamour in the press over the scandals perpetrated by one Bhojpuri film after the other, especially the film songs.12

While the reading of Bhojpuri films tells us that it is full of disparate voices, urges, concerns and anxieties, we do need to

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12 ‘Patna, June 18 (IANS), Bhojpuri scholars and intellectuals here Wednesday urged people to boycott vulgar Bhojpuri songs and encourage youths to listen to folk songs. Bhojpuri Academy president Gopalji said vulgar songs should be boycotted since they were defaming Bhojpuri culture. He added that lyricists and playback singers should popularise folk songs instead. “Double-meaning Bhojpuri songs are giving a bad name to Bhojpuri culture. There is an urgent need to discourage people from listening to such songs,” said Ram Updesh Singh Videh, a retired bureaucrat and Bhojpuri scholar. Bhojpuri scholar Girishchandra Dubey said a list of the obscene songs should be made and people should be asked not to listen to them. He added that a campaign against vulgar Bhojpuri songs will create awareness about their bad affect on society’ (Mid Day, 18 June 2008).
confront the claim made by many that Bhojpuri cinema and music videos speak in one raucous Bollywood monotone as C grade mimicry of Bollywood. After all, if the educated in Bihar do not simply despise but disown the very core of popular culture in the region, how do they expect the Bihari identity to ever take shape at all? The regional intelligentsia in brief seems to suffer from the delusion that the relatively unlettered in the region will readily swallow its own offerings and prescriptions, however enlightened or enlightening, for the greater cause of Bihari identity. The trouble is ideologies crafted in well-equipped laboratories of the ideologues are unlikely to sit well with popular imagination.

Identity and the Sisyphean self: The gulfs within

The prevalence of the above criticism makes it amply clear that Bhojpuri cinema — at least in its present shape — belongs to the quasi-literate or illiterate masses with access to modern media, whether in smaller towns or in metropolises among the migrant populations. Leaving textual issues aside for the time being, if one were to summarise the outcome of the hermeneutic aspect of one’s work on Bhojpuri cinema in the past year — the most striking thing about Bhojpuri cinema is the near unanimous contempt it receives from everyone including its practitioners but its 100 million strong audience. This alone should indicate that Bihari identity in singular must embrace the many Bihars that overlay each other in the region. These many Bihars clearly carry a number of intractable gulfs within.

We have thus begun to feel that this contempt represents a very basic cultural fault line in our times in the region, and before taking sides, we wish to underline in red the inherent significance of this divide and dissonance that should be squarely faced and made sense of. We may even dare to propose that this contempt as a cultural phenomenon is intellectually as challenging, fascinating and even inscrutable as the sudden explosion of Bhojpuri cinema or its textual niceties and nuances. It is after all rare in history for high culture to depend so crucially on the amount of derision it can heap on the popular. We increasingly believe that this contempt touches the very cultural core of the region in focus, namely Bihar.
and eastern Uttar Pradesh, compelling us to question the very basic assumptions of high culture in the region.

We thus have a curious cultural predicament — an educated middle class in Bihar disowning its own popular culture with unusual zeal without even bothering to give a close look at the existential anxieties it may try to address in its own folksy, kitschy ways. This is also a middle class that is not known for its generous patronage of literature, music, theatre, or the arts, all of which found succour among small and big feudal lords till the 1950s. The main challenge here at any rate, should not have been that of ranking the artistic qualities of Bhojpuri cinema but of unveiling its core anxieties, dilemmas and despair.

It seems appropriate to discuss at least one thematic example here. Film after film, Bhojpuri cinema examines afresh the theme of urbanism in a lot more radical manner than Hindi cinema. Behind its intense radicalism lies the fact that the rural-urban tension is its main staple as also the unchanging backdrop for all its narratives. It may indeed be claimed that around 90 per cent of Bhojpuri films focus on this. Urban imagination in our times is a double-edged matter — to put it vividly, there is the urban imagination of the owner of a two-bedroom flat in Mumbai, and then there is the imagination of a Bihari or Oriya rustic who has just landed at the VT (Victoria Terminus) station in Mumbai to begin a new life. As middle class, our urbanism may often be confined to municipal niceties, but the migrant faces the onerous task of redefining it for himself on a daily basis, a bit like reinventing the wheel every morning. While, as a flat owner, one may be able to simplify an urban imagination into the little matter of the choking sewage, a migrant has to rethink urbanity along with his whole life while taking a lonesome walk along the Marine Drive in Mumbai. Anyone who has moved around in Patna for a day would have clearly seen that Bihar needs not simply urbanisation, but ‘urban values’ as Shaibal Gupta has emphasised recently (Gupta 2007). Why is it then so difficult to comprehend the existential soul agony of the rustic migrant reflected in the naive urban fantasies

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13 For a more detailed textual analysis and illustration of this point see Tripathy (2007a).
on the screen? Even if some of these authentic phantasies get clouded by a few bawdy numbers that cause a genteel Bihari the inconvenience of blushing?

Notably, Bhojpuri films merge their own models and images of rather modest towns in the neighbourhood such as Benaras, Allahabad, Lucknow or Patna with rural nostalgia. The reason may be that these thresholds perhaps seem too narrow when faced with the dramatically immodest images from the metropolises — the skyscrapers of Mumbai, glass-caged software parks of Bangalore or the never-ending flyovers of Hyderabad. Urbanity is, however, only one of the myriad issues that Bhojpuri films routinely take up. As for Hindi cinema, as early as the 1980s, it had begun to habitually equate village life with slums, choosing to deal with rural themes indirectly through the mediation of the slum, which could be conveniently seen as part of the urban culture, but could also be used to emphasise social polarities of all kinds. It is difficult, however, for a recent migrant from rural Bihar to conflate the slum with the village in the manner of the Bollywood cliché. In his optimistic moods, he probably looks at the slum as a refugee camp or an interim city, if he is not to accept it as his destiny.

The purpose of this article is not to defend Bhojpuri cinema on either aesthetic or moral grounds or through dishonest political posturing. Neither do we wish to hit out at the puritanical enemies of Bhojpuri cinema who find it unacceptable in toto in the radical sense of the term. We would instead like to continue to hear them fantasise further over what Bhojpuri cinema should be like under their legislative guidance, and perhaps what popular culture in general should be like. Though such an exercise in cultural critique risks reducing the role of a culture critic into an aspiring censor board, not to mention the risks of cultural withdrawal and isolation of the educated. One of the reasons popular culture fascinates us is that in its self-absorbed narcissistic day-dreaming, it generally does not heed to anyone’s chiding or prescriptions, except to the box office and audience response. It may not even be aware of the keen gaze of analysts like us. To sum up this section, repeated and impassioned search for identity in no way guarantees identity, and a Sisyphus may have to scale its sublime heights over and over again without gain or respite.
Celebration of the self:
Orgies of song and dance

Incredible though it may seem, it is possible to quantify festivities and celebration in small town India. All you have to do is traverse a town at a jogger’s pace on a festival day to make decibel measurements and to put down a precise number for loudspeakers, and you are ready for comparisons between festivals, between towns and even between sociological profiles of town zones and residential lanes. Facetious quantifications apart, while Bhojpuri cinema with its fourth–fifth rank among regional cinemas in India is seen as the public face of Bhojpuri, the Bhojpuri music industry forms its real muscle, blood and bones, spread as it is all the way between the slums of Bombay to remote hamlets in the boondocks of Bihar.

Bhojpuri/Maithil/Magahi music industry is at least ten times the size of the Bhojpuri cinema industry. Unrelated to Bhojpuri cinema, based in Delhi and with outreaches in small-town Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, this music industry has been growing since the cassette era of 1980s and right through the CD/VCD boom in the late-1990s. This was the major finding of a pilot survey carried out by one of the author at the Asian Development Research Institute, Patna in mid-2009 (Tripathy 2009).

But the more dramatic finding concerned the scales of the live show industry with the CD technology as its core. Spread over small and big towns and the remotest of villages, the ‘ephemeral’ concert business turned out to be at least ten times bigger than the CD industry according to informed estimates. The survey revealed that given the very nature of the digital technology, music industry — unlike the centralised movie industry — comes in different scales ranging between gigantic musical behemoths based in Delhi to a shop-based production hub in a small town. It is indeed possible to construct a musical calendar for a small town listing events on a daily basis and calculate the huge cumulative earnings made by what we call a ‘trickle economy’ that adds up to impressive annual turnovers. A good part of the money earned by the live show business is pumped into the CD industry as investment by enterprising individuals who aim at mechanical replicability.
The returns from the CDs may be modest except for major hits, but the constant churn of the live show industry keeps the cycle going. The survey was compelled to conclude that groaning under the piracy menace, the big music companies are no longer the chief investors in the CD industry even if they continue to be the main beneficiaries. It is the artists/producers with steady earnings from live shows who make the backbone of the industry. This was a difficult conclusion to swallow but the moment the research team from Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) did that, we began to see the light of the day. Quantifications apart, we found it easier to fully appreciate the centrality of vernacular music in Bihar’s everyday life. Tales of assured income in an economy as depressed as Bihar’s that came streaming from singers, musicians, composers, lyricists, producers, directors for VCDs, actors, arrangers, editors, sound recordists, equipment owners, choreographers and even dancers were overwhelming indeed.

Heartbeats of Identity: Between lyrical Bhojpuri and prosaic Hindi

Having critiqued the critics of Bhojpuri cinema, we now wish to turn our backs on the cultural dead-ends and fault lines that cut right through the likelihood of a unitary Bihari identity. Hoping that they may resolve soon through a new phase in linguistic dynamics in the region, we will now examine the broader politico-cultural context for Bhojpuri cinema and music, through focus on the Bhojpuri language in its myriad aspects, both formal and informal. There are several ways to approach the dynamics of Bhojpuri and other dialects in their relation to Hindi and English and even other Indian languages. Historians and socio-linguists like Dasgupta (1993) and Pollock (2007) would prefer to take up a large historical topography to place a specific language within it. Dasgupta examined the cases respectively of Sanskrit, Persian and English as court languages through the last two millennia in his defining work with a focus on the status of English in India. More recently, Pollock closely studied the case of Kannada, a vernacular language that began to displace Sanskrit in early-medieval Karnataka around the 9th century as the language of
A second set of historians and socio-linguistic experts take up what might seem to us a tighter canvass. Dalmiya (1997), Orsini (2002) and Rai (2001), in their works on Hindi and its relation to Urdu, examine the politico-cultural process through which Hindi was forged in the last 150 years since the pre-Fort William days and how in the process Urdu was disowned as a mark of a separate cultural identity. Much of their effort lies in finding parallels between the forging of Hindi nationalistic-communal ideologies and the consolidation of languages.

Rajendra Singh and Ramakant Agnihotri (1997) on the other hand, in their professional capacity as linguists assert that Hindi and Urdu are two different names for the same language. They assert with an air of obviousness that linguists do not feel the need to distinguish between the two languages or are unable to do so. They also try to sensitise the lay Hindi speaker to the fact that his Hindi is heavily laced with English, at times even when he is unable to converse or write in it. Indeed, being hyper-sensitive to the impact of Sanskrit-Persian-Arabic on our language registers, we Hindi speakers merrily and unselfconsciously accept English influences in our syntax and morphology even when we querulously resist its vocabulary, thus accepting the more pernicious influence in favour of the relatively harmless ones. It is in fact possible to claim that a Hindi speaker from the 1940s would find our Hindi very English-like, for good or bad or entirely justifiable reasons. Indeed, over the years as an editor at a national Hindi daily, one has had to edit and indulge any number of Hindi articles attacking intrusions from English vocabulary but nevertheless carrying a heavy load of English syntax/morphology, a bit like writing English in Hindi. The interesting thing here is how unselfconscious these authors seemed to be.

There is a fourth set of voices which we have been carefully listening to since the past one year. Sudhish Pachauri (2007), the editor of *Vaak* (Sanskrit for ‘speech’), a newly-founded literary
journal, presented a series of essays by Hindi writers willing to reflect on the changing relation between Hindi and English in two consecutive issues (*Vaak* 2007). The picture that emerges through these essays is that of a language increasingly confident of its political, cultural and conceptual muscle, no longer deserving the pity or the condescension of English. Indeed, if Hindi is now a capable language, the credit may be due not to the advocates of Hindi but largely to the Hindi of Hindi cinema and TV, the Hindi of everyday politics in the country, and the Hindi of print and TV journalism, not to mention the street Hindi of metropolises like Mumbai and Hyderabad. It is not surprising that Hindi, a language synthesised out of a few dialects around 150 years ago and placed on the national throne as recently as the Indian independence through a political decision, has been overly concerned with its purity.

Hindi is now increasingly, however, showing clear signs of a new-found large-heartedness. We regularly listen to Venkaiah Naidu, Deve Gowda, Mamta Banarjee and Pranab Mukherjee, politicians from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal respectively, who speak Hindi laced with thick accents, and it never occurs to us to laugh any more. We also have the Hindi of English-speaking Mumbai film stars like Upen Patel, Genelia D’Souza, Katrina Kaif, and the latter two have not stopped taking Hindi lessons even after delivering several hits. These numerous Hindis together keep pressing on English to claim their proper place. Hindi is now the language of national politics and it need not get itself into trouble by intruding into areas like higher science.

Just as we have seen Sharad Pawar, a politician from Maharashtra becoming as fluent in English over the years, we have also seen Chandrababu Naidu from Andhra Pradesh receiving Hindi lessons in a hurry just before the parliamentary elections. The debates in the two issues of *Vaak* mainly concerned the changing relationship between Hindi and English. But one wonders if in its new found confidence, Hindi is also capable of looking benignly at the growth of its dialects, many of which have been in a frozen state, single-mindedly lending all their energies to Hindi. One wonders if Hindi’s poor vassals may now be relieved to build their own little outhouses once the edifice of Hindi is ready.
This question requires at least a provisional answer and will be taken up towards the end of the article. After all, when the Bihari heart spontaneously breaks into a song, Bhojpuri or Maithili or Magahi is what slips naturally over the tongue!

**High and low identities: The many Bhojpurs**

Apart from the above approaches, it is possible to focus more sharply on the present predicament of Bhojpuri through a phenomenological, or if preferred, an existential approach. It is indeed possible to schematise the presence of Bhojpuri in our everyday lives through a few ideal types, which may be applicable to other languages/dialects such as Maithili, Vajjika, Angika and Magahi. To begin with, let me elaborate on a typical middle-class ideal type — it could be a family where Hindi comes with a mixture of Bhojpuri especially when the elders are around. In this family, conversations with servants are carried out in Bhojpuri. Let us assume that intimate conversations in the family not involving the outer world are also conducted in Bhojpuri, although there are families where only the grandparents speak Bhojpuri among themselves. This is also a family that can with some difficulty stutter in English when cornered, even though reading English is not a problem at all. Typically, youngsters in such families will shy away from folk music and theatre even if they keenly follow the crudest native rituals. This is what an ideal type at one end of the spectrum may look like, even if we altogether forget those segments for whom Bhojpuri has become a matter of distant nostalgic remembrance.

At the other end you have an illiterate migrant who speaks a raw version of Bhojpuri, a sub-dialect of Bhojpuri in fact, with many unfamiliar words and phonetic idiosyncrasies. Speaking even halfway Hindi to him would mean the same thing as having to wear a full formal gear — trousers, vest, shirt and even shoes, since the workaday loincloth and wooden clogs will not do. Over time he would probably learn to distinguish between English and Kannada sounds in Bangalore. But he has to face street Hindi in its Mumbai version in the meantime, and well, the glossy Hindi of the urbane rich. Here is a man, whether at home or abroad, is steeped in his own music and is likely to enjoy Bollywood cinema...
with the same sense of distance as some of us may enjoy Hollywood films. He is able to speak Hindi a bit like Laloo Yadav, and prefers not to be laughed at. But herein lies the rub — notably, even if Bhojpuri may extend into some of his formal life, his informal life is unlikely to have much space for Hindi. Historically thus, the Hindi-speaking areas of India have actually been areas where only the educated speak Hindi all the time.

The two types depicted above may represent what may be called ‘drawing room’ Bhojpuri and ‘barnyard’ (khalihan) Bhojpuri and are one more way to approximate the linguistic predicament of Bihar. It may be debatable as to how ‘typical’ they are. But we believe that it is possible to arrive at a set of constructs which take us deeper into our linguistic reality. At any rate the point here is that while both the middle class and the illiterate peasant may use Bhojpuri in their intimate circle, the peasant is more likely to look at Hindi as a compulsion that sits heavily on the tongue, a bit like a vernacular student, however willing, who is suddenly placed in an English-medium school. But then he may also look at Hindi-English as an aspirant hoping to master them over time in spoken and written forms. In the process, there is a good likelihood of Hindi transforming itself to provide more space for the vernacular aspirant just as it patiently gave way to incursions from English in the past. Our concern here, however, is the predicament of Bhojpuri and the curious asymmetry between the way the educated and the illiterate relate to it.

**Ambivalent identities: Between Hindi and Bhojpuri**

Before we begin to draw far-reaching conclusions from the given asymmetry, however, there are a few important considerations to ponder over. It is important to remember that unlike Bhojpuri cinema, the Bhojpuri language as such may be said to have enjoyed continued patronage among tiny sections of the regional literary intelligentsia right since the early 20th century. The most visible form of this patronage, however, has traditionally been confined to small networks and literary associations in smaller urban and rural centres, even if they were spread over large regions. In Bihar
as in Uttar Pradesh these associations have traditionally made themselves visible through cheaply-produced magazines which functioned as their mouthpieces. ‘Akhil Bharatiya Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan’, Patna; ‘Vishwa Bhojpuri Sammelan’, Deoriya; ‘Purvanchal Ekta Manch’, Delhi; ‘Akhil Bharatiya Bhojpuri Manch’, Saran are some of the prominent constellations. The publications include Bhojpuri Sammelan Patrika, Patna; Bhojpuri Mati, Kolkata; Bhojpuri Akademi Patrika, Patna; Bhojpuri Sansar, Lucknow; Bhor, Muzaffarpur; Sursati, Sasaram; Purvankur, Delhi; and Samkalin Bhojpuri Sahitya, Deoria (by no means a comprehensive list). The story of the government-founded ‘Bhojpuri Sahitya Academy’ in Patna can in fact be taken as a case study. After a glorious inception and a prolific phase in the 1960s–70s it has now declined to virtual non-activity, with some hope of renewal. As opposed to these the two recent additions are entirely commercial attempts — Bhojpuri Sansar in its cyber and physical editions, and Sunday Indian, Bhojpuri edition — which aim to depend on circulation and advertising rather than just goodwill.

If one takes a cynical view of the literary efforts of the above networks entirely as an outsider, one may dismissively characterise them as the rather eccentric margins of the Hindi mainstream. The question an outsider may ask is — well-equipped with mainstream Hindi, where is the need for such groups to bother with Bhojpuri or Vajjika or Magahi, all of which unlike a Maithili are not even developed languages? But turn around and pretend to be an insider and you may see that with all the pride and shame it may carry, Bhojpuri has the appeal of intimacy that Hindi may not provide. The only problem is the moment you utter the language audibly in public, it proclaims your rural affiliations and a sense of shame follows in quick succession. In many ways the small literary groups thus may have been trying all along to transmogrify the shame of Bhojpuri into pride by writing short stories, poems, ghazals and even sonnets and Mahakvya (epics) in Bhojpuri. Some of these literary forms also have the ability to recast Bhojpuri into a language of urbanity. This is thus a case of whispered domestic intimacies trying to diffidently enter the public stage by adapting to urban/public contexts. It now turns out thus that it seems difficult to overlook the persistent devotion of these networks and their magazines to the language over the years, indeed decades.
We are very reluctant in presuming that this cultural stream will merge easily with the turbulent rush of Bhojpuri cinema and music. But just because such networks do not attract the milling throngs of a clamorous Bhojpuri cinema does not mean that we minimise their cultural significance. In one of the first gatherings of the revived Bhojpuri Academy this year, speaker after speaker harangued the audience over the vulgarity of cinema and music. This clearly brought out in the open the hostility felt by drawing room Bhojpuri towards *khalihan* Bhojpuri, and ‘print’ Bhojpuri towards unlettered Bhojpuri. These hostilities require political resolution and abstract discussions on aesthetics are unlikely to resolve it. And yet we feel constrained in ascribing fixed or frozen motives to the members of Bhojpuri literary networks who carry many voices just like Bhojpuri cinema. It requires an elaborate empirical survey to appreciate the variety, ambiguities and ambivalences of their linguistic aspirations and generalise only to an appropriate extent.

Having refrained from speculative extremes, we nevertheless feel the need to underline a fundamental ambivalence of the Bhojpuri middle class. This ambivalence between the rightful expression of intimacy and the embedded shame is related to the culturally and politically sensitive issue of relation between Hindi and Bhojpuri and is entirely symmetrical with the English-Hindi relations. As stated earlier, Hindi is fast turning into a self-respecting language having overcome its irrational fear of English. Perhaps Bhojpuri needs to go through the same process before it comes out shining with pride. With a significant amount of academic work analysing relation between Sanskrit and Prakrit, Persian and Urdu, English and Hindi, and Urdu and Hindi, already under way, it is perhaps time our sociologists and linguists gave attention to the Bhojpuri-Hindi relation.

Rising above the murky depths of dark emotions, we would now like to discuss here the case of Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, a prominent Hindi author and critic, by no means a marginal figure in the national scenario. The purpose is to highlight the strange ambivalence that has characterised the Bhojpuri speaking intelligentsia right since the dawn of the 20th century when Hindi began to consolidate itself as a national language. In their fierce loyalty to popularise Hindi, its proponents made use of every
possible means, fair or foul, including mobilisation of state power for near forcible imposition on the non-Hindi speaking states. Whether Hindi won this battle because of or despite the official measures is a different story. But in the process, the advocates of Hindi renounced their own dialect, including the rich literary traditions of Braj, Awadhi and Maithili. Abandoning a raw dialect like Bhojpuri or Magahi may thus seem a small sacrifice. However, the spectre of this small renunciation may have raised its head all over again after several decades in the shape of Bhojpuri cinema.

It is striking that in 1953, when Hazari Prasad Dwivedi agreed to deliver an inaugural lecture at the fifth Saran District Bhojpuri Sammelan in Siwan, he had the following to say:

'I do not see much advantage in detaching ourselves from a powerful and central language like Hindi. Of late, the tendency in smaller regions to have their separate language has been reaching levels of madness. When the whole world seems to be shrinking, it doesn't make sense to have separate languages for smaller states. By this I do not mean any disrespect for Bhojpuri. I feel that the glory of Bhojpuri is quite secure within the embrace of Hindi. (Dwivedi [1953] 2007)

If one takes Acharya Dwivedi’s point literally, there is little here that a proponent of Bhojpuri may object to, especially in 1953, when the triumph of Hindi was far from being a foregone conclusion and it was actually under siege from Tamil, Telugu and other languages. It is likely that it is the tone rather than his words that hurt and angered the audience, which had probably asked for a sentimental celebration of Bhojpuri and instead ended up listening to a stern warning from the rostrum. By 1976, when Acharya Dwivedi was again invited after considerable opposition to address the annual meet of the Akhil Bharatiya Bhojpuri Sahitya Sammelan, Dwivedi had the following to say:

in order to express one's emotional relations, one may write in any language. This is why the Sahitya Academy is now awarding prizes

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14 Attempts to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking areas perversely continue to this day even though every such attempt has met with dire resistance at times threatening the integrity of the country, e.g., Tamil Nadu. See ‘Introduction’ in Ramaswamy (1997).
for many languages which are not recognised by the constitution. In the beginning I did not like this. I feared that this may create political complications. Now that Sahitya Academy is freely giving awards for other languages, why should Bhojpuri and Awadhi be deprived of an opportunity?

Dwivedi then went on to give the example of Vidyapati who wrote in both the languages, Avahattha, a late form of Apbhransha as well as Maithili for the cultivated as well as the common folk (Sandhidut et al. 1976).

Manufactured and organic identities

The interesting thing about the above shift of position and ambivalence is that it is entirely driven and determined by purely political considerations and consciously formulated views on language. Acharya Dwivedi, a literary stalwart rather than a politician, chose to make an explicitly political intervention and did not hide his intent behind cultural niceties.

Contrast this with the spontaneous case of Bhojpuri cinema and the 'emerging identity' projected by it. Bhojpuri cinema or music turn out to be more aptly indicative of rising incomes, migration and technological growth, rather than organised political articulation. Clearly, the initiatives involved here are also more entrepreneurial and informal than political. Throughout this article, we have only spoken of dissonances, asymmetries and other broken bridges, but here we may have a singular likelihood of a confluence or rather a case of non-contradiction — possibly a coming together of the

15 'A recent parallel may be seen in the formation of the Maithili–Bhojpuri academy by the Delhi government — consider the news item — “The Sheila Dikshit-led Congress government in an urgent Cabinet meeting decided to establish a separate Maithili–Bhojpuri academy in Delhi under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister. This was done in reaction to the Bihar CM Nitish Kumar’s letter to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in which Kumar wrote that the I-card issue was aimed at to restrict the entry of Biharis into the Capital. According to sources in the Congress party, the party does not want to lose its base among Purvanchal community, which has a large presence of about 35-lakh in the city” in “With an eye on forthcoming Assembly polls in Delhi, CM Sheila Dikshit tries to woo Biharis as the govt. plans to establish a new Maithili–Bhojpuri academy in the city”' (Mid Day, 18 January 2008).
oral-cinematic popular tradition in both folk and modern forms patronised by the multitudes, and the literary stream thus far sustained by smaller networks of the regional intelligentsia.

But as pointed out earlier, a large section of the intelligentsia in the region does not even want to look the way of the Bhojpuri screen, plugging its ears to avoid Bhojpuri music in its new avatars. Worse still, there are those who are convinced that something like good or bad Bhojpuri cinema is largely irrelevant to our regional culture. But one is hopeful that with the mediation of a number of agencies, vested interests and mischief-makers such as politicians, researchers, critics, community leaders and even educationists, the high culture in its snootiest neo-Brahminical avatar will deign to start a dialogue with the popular forms however gross, kitschy or bawdy. There is good evidence that hardening of dividing lines between high and low culture is a phenomenon of the modern times, and a good old Kalidasa or a Bharatendu Harishchandra would more likely look at Bhojpuri cinema of today with gentle amusement and indulgence, before trying to figure out what in the world is going on under their very genteel noses. In the meantime, as part of a fast democratising society, one must not try to compensate for lost economic, political and ritual status by taking firm positions on lofty cultural pedestals and end up reducing the role of a critic to that of a censor board, volunteering to play a role that will increasingly have no takers in the age of MTV, Splitsvilla and Eminem.

**Conclusion**

Conclusions apart, Bhojpuri cinema and language are in a flux and it is too early to speak of consummations or culminations. Similarly, the process of Bihar discovering its identity within the expanse of Hindi-speaking states in India is still a fragile one. It would seem that without a sense of identity, it is difficult to acquire a sense of shared destiny, however partial. Yet, identity, by itself, is neither good nor bad. People write poems and plays, make songs and movies to affirm it, but they also kill and get killed to achieve a not dissimilar purpose. In our own global-parochial times, examples from India and the neighbourhood are quite adequate to learn these lessons. Indeed, Biharis have been beaten up and killed in Assam and Maharashtra, states which may seem
blessed with a much more lucid sense of identity, even though it is far from clear how the blood-letting helped their shared destiny or welfare or made their identities look sharper. This article has thus focused primarily on spontaneously-emergent identity rather than a politically-engineered one. We will now wind up by trying to pin down the main reasons behind the basic fracture lying at the heart of Bihari identity without prescribing remedies. The clues to this fracture lie in a question posed right at the outset of the article.

To go back to the earlier theme of its unduly hostile middle-class critics, let us unravel the story behind all the contempt heaped on Bhojpuri cinema and music, and a few answers may become visible on the horizon. We posit here, in a nutshell, what has seemed over time a very good answer to us for both the state of Bihar's identity and the status of Bhojpuri music and cinema.

A close analysis of the content of above 50 Bhojpuri films since 1995 indicates the rise of a new cultural challenge to the smug and secure middle class of the region. The Bihari middle class may have a core of professionals and the intelligentsia at the centre and yet it is a social formation known for its strong roots in its upper-caste feudal past. This is a middle class neither challenged by movements such as the anti-Brahmin movements in the south or in Maharashtra, nor reformed voluntarily through a 'renaissance' like Bengal's. Lackadaisical land reforms, too, left it largely unchastened. It has simply used both the political ideal of democracy and the economic idea of capitalism to revalorise the caste hierarchy and feudal values. Notably, chunks of this middle class for a number of decades have been migrating in hordes to urban centres like Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. The demographic scales involved allow us to describe this migration as 'abandonment' of Bihar by the most qualified and enterprising among the middle class, an efflux which continues to this day.

As against the above, Bihar has also seen a huge exodus of the rural poor to urban and rural centres in Punjab, Assam, Bengal, Maharashtra, Delhi, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Unlike the upper castes, however, this population has been sending remittances home, and some scholars argue that these provided the languid economy of Bihar with very critical economic inputs (Deshingkar et al. 2006). More important, these migrants have proved a lot more
desperately and authentically-nostalgic than the educated with their bewildered and bewildering sense of belonging. Results from the survey on vernacular music industry confirm this. Indeed, if one were to take migration as a measure of entrepreneurial energy, the lower sections with their continued investment in Bihar would seem to be the real middle class in the making. Or at least, they would seem to be creating an appropriate entrepreneurial milieu before moving up to join the ranks back home. At any rate, these are the sections that have kept alive the idea and the sentiment of Bihar.

Ever since the mid-1970s, with the upheaval symbolised by the JP movement led by Jayprakash Narayan, the upper caste-upper class crust in Bihar has been losing its legitimacy and power (Blair 1980).16 The process has continued at an accelerated pace during the chief ministership of Laloo Yadav and Nitish Kumar. Indeed, after several decades, it is possible to talk of a ‘new’ middle class led by the middle castes of Yadavs–Kurmis, who are now in a position to take a lead in an alliance with both upper castes and the Dalits, the lowest sections of the society.

Bhojpuri cinema and Bhojpuri music may be broadly said to represent the aspirations of the rising middle and lower castes. These aspirations ironically are not related mainly to land or land reforms. They do not overtly include caste slogans. There is no sense of peasant rebellion or movement there. Lack of these radical slogans disappoints the enlightened among the educated middle-class critics and they voice their sentiments openly and repeatedly. These issues ironically may be missing from the screen since these battles are now largely won by the lower castes through electoral politics and no longer belong to the realm of fantasy. On the other hand, Bhojpuri cinema squarely pits itself against the given forms of urbanism and modernisation though with a single-mindedness that will not fail to strike a viewer beyond a few films. In a very direct sense, Bhojpuri films place the old middle class at the receiving end, as the villains in the current crop of films. The

16 Despite the diffused and populist rhetoric of ‘Total Revolution’ promulgated by Jayprakash Narayan, the movement did open up fresh spaces in Bihar politics. This led to the emergence of the middle castes in the region. For more see Blair (1980).
old middle class represents the entrenched forms of urbanism and modernisation. Not surprisingly thus, Bihar is seeking a new face for modernisation.

Seen from this angle, it becomes easier to understand why the ‘old’ middle class dislikes Bhojpuri cinema — quite simply because a new social formation, milieu and mentality is trying to stake its claims as the ‘real’ middle class, with few feudal vestiges. Enlightened critics from the intelligentsia condemn Bhojpuri cinema because it is not radical enough. Others hate it for its obscenity and vulgarity, a very distinctively and traditionally middle-class way to express disapproval indeed — by condemning the sexual mores and the vulgar language of a group you do not like, and by posing such bias as profound aesthetic and moral principles.

What thus appeared to be a fault line within popular culture in Bihar would now seem to represent a fracture between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ middle classes. The political quarrel between these two streams extends to the arena of culture, language and cinema. As discussed in an earlier section, print and perhaps also television are two spaces where, these two opposing streams could come together in a situation of dialogue without which it is difficult to see a Bihari identity emerge. Perhaps at a later stage, cinema and music too may join the fray and Bihar unlike many other sub-national identities in the region may come to terms with its shared destiny without having to kill and get killed. Apart from an identity of an engineered or the ‘willed’ sort, there is also an identity that emanates spontaneously as a byproduct of sharing, compromise, negotiation and dialogue. Indeed, the best of cultures look more like bridges connecting distant neighbours than insular islands fortified with brittle boulders of identity.

An interesting corollary here would be the emergence of a number of identities within the Hindi heartland. In fact, this is the real political context for this extensive study on Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. There are clear signs that such a process may have begun already at both cultural and political levels. Delhi already forms a vibrant hub for a number of vernacular music industries ranging between Haryanvi, Kumaoni, Bundelkhandi to Chhattisgarhi. On the other hand, the chief ministers of both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have lately raised the slogan of ‘reorganisation of states’ in
the Hindi heartland. While the demand is not yet backed either by passion in the street or political determination, characteristic of a Telangana or Gorkhaland, this slow-burning fire may yet go a long way.

References


5

MMS Scandals and Challenges to the Authority of News Mediation

Angad Chowdhry

It seems clear that new technology and new forms of media have had a profound impact on the lives of many young, impressionable minds. In certain instances, this has resulted in a profound clash of cultures and values. For public schools in the country, it’s perhaps time for a reality check. Sexual promiscuity may only be one aspect of an evolving generation of youngsters at a time when the notion of love, lust and fun is being entirely redefined.

(‘MMS scandal sparks off debate’, NDTV, 28 November 2004)

This article investigates a practice that has been represented as signifying change in the contemporary history of urban India, and tries to untangle the web of morality, causality and dismissal that is activated in order to domesticate this practice. Indeed, while change might be a signifier that claims to describe social transformation, its deployment is often used to discipline, contain and limit said social transformation. Change, then, rather than describe a particular real-life situation is often used to contain and discipline it. This article takes the phenomenon that is described

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1 I will use as my primary source material the clips themselves, the English mass media commentary on them and discussions with crime reporters, bloggers, established ‘underground’ pornographers and police officers during the period when these clips were transformed into moral threats and signifiers of a dangerous change.
above (kids have sex and record and spread it through mobile phones and internet), untangles the explicit fears (moral corruption, Western contaminations, the wild and unruly lands of the internet) and ultimately tries to evaluate what was causing the fears in the first place. This chapter demonstrates that at the heart of these clips were embedded time bombs that threatened the very fabric of representation and institutional mediation.

Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) is a service provided by most Indian mobile operators, post 2000. It allows users to distribute, store and produce short audio/visual clips. In-built cameras in mobile phones have often been represented as a threat to the security of celebrities and have been banned in many public places where they might be inappropriately used (such as schools, colleges, swimming pools, hotels and public changing rooms). Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones allow users to transmit these clips amongst each other through infra-red without even having to pay for the mobile phone network charges and, as they are being transferred through infra-red, there is no record of the ‘transaction’ with the mobile phone-company. The producer can remain anonymous, and the distribution is always sous rature.

One day, in a famous Mumbai coffee shop I activated my infra-red and had 40 per cent of the mobile phones in the coffee shop registered on it as active, waiting for a signal, a new clip or a new mp3 from someone else. It is on these bluetooth networks that clips from pornographic movies, or trailers of films, or even rap music are distributed. Some people download data from the Internet and transmit it from their computer straight onto their phones.

There is an easy slippage between sting operations and MMS clips, one that journalists and editors themselves make which I now demonstrate. Mumbai has ‘dance bars’, rooms and bars where girls dance to Bollywood music while patrons give them money. The chief minister tried to shut them down on the grounds that they were affecting the morality of society at large and encouraging

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2 This was brought to my attention when I was looking at Dance with Shadows http://www.dancewithshadows.com/ (accessed August/September 2005) the Internet website that comments on the Indian mass media, with special reference to Mumbai.
prostitution. The argument against shutting them down was similar as well — girls will be made jobless, and turn to prostitution. The selling of one’s body is both the cause and the effect of the ban. In two stories that were printed in *Mid Day*, Mumbai (‘So much for morality, Mr Patil’ and ‘Bar girls strip at Bihar election parties’) these accusations of stripping for money and potential prostitution were made. The second story carried photographs, describing it thus: ‘As the 45-minute dance began, notes started to litter the floor like confetti. The women proceeded to undress, walking seductively up to one gleeful guest after another and sitting in their laps.’

The photographs used for the story however were taken from three grainy clips which were easily available on the Internet on websites dedicated to distributing MMS clips (such as www.debonairblog.com/blog). The first is ‘a clip known as the Andhra Nude Dance or the Sonpur video [the name Andhra is sometimes replaced by the names of some cities, no one knows exactly where it is from], which has been available on the internet at least since 9 June 2005’ (Mathew 2005) and the second is ‘called the Chandigarh MMS clip, and the girls in the video were dancing to the tune of Dum Maro Dum’ (ibid.). MMS clips and sting operations were made indistinguishable (by the journalist). The ‘medium’ was a possible hidden camera, producing grainy footage, that was shot by an unsteady hand and without the subjects of the shoot (naked girls) acknowledging the presence of the camera. This transformation from an ‘MMS scandal’ which was available on an Internet website as well as mobile phones all over the country to a ‘surveillance’ operation is quite dramatic. There is a supposed distinction between the private and the public sphere, and this distinction collapses (or the private is represented as public, through the hidden camera) with both the MMS enabled camera service and the sting operation. It is this ‘collapsing’ that confers on the hidden camera an aura of truth, authenticity and non-mediation. The implications of this are quite broad. Media-houses lead ‘sting operations’ have had the distinction of setting the co-ordinates of public debate far beyond conventional media stories. The grainy

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footage, mumbled voices, terrible camera angles suggest to us an authenticity that cuts through the mediated clutter of our media channels. The realism of the hidden-camera footage is seen as more potent than mediated footage because of its seemingly unfinished and imprecise nature, but it is of course just one representation amongst many. The difference is in the fact that the ‘truth value’ of such clips remain unquestioned and therefore, its usefulness as a political object increases manifold.

Spread clips and spreading breaches

Figure 5.1
Accelerating shame

Web of horror: Delhi school sex video now on internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobile phone clip of schoolgirl is available on pornsites</th>
<th>Both the girl and the boy were expelled from Delhi Public School, but the video has already passed through hundreds of students in the capital. With it now posted on the web, this Delhi schoolgirl is now infamous.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>catching on in India now.</td>
<td>According to the Asian School of Cyberlaws in Pune, it is because of this that mobile phone videos posted on pornsites is a new phenomenon. In this case, as the girl is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. The Times of India, 13 June 2005.

However, there does remain a crucial distinction between MMS clips and sting operations, and that is the discursive limitations on their ownership and distribution. Sting operations, run by websites, television channels or newspapers have control over the distribution of the content to audiences. MMS scandals are very different in this regard and The Times of India (TOI) on 13 June 2005 illustrated how an MMS clip can spread. This uncontrollable status that threatens the very fragile co-ordinates of institutionalised discourse is terrifying. The spread, rather than the content or the theme, is sometimes seen as the manifestation of negative-change.

The distribution networks that exist for MMS clips now are far more sophisticated than they were when the first clips became available. In November 2004, a few months after I had begun my field work, I heard rumours that clips featuring teenagers from the prestigious Delhi Public School were available. The spread
of these clips was mentioned daily in the news media, yet I could not get my hands on them. Eventually I made contact with some teenagers at St Xavier’s College, Mumbai, all of whom were young techno-savvy undergraduates. Late one evening in November, just before the college hostels were shutting down for the day, I got to meet someone who was willing to share them. He was a friend of a friend and with that morning the newspapers having carried stories of how the CEO of a major Internet website (www.bazee.com, the Indian branch of www.ebay.com) had been arrested for possession of pornographic clips, he was understandably a bit concerned, nervous and jumpy. Arriving late, he took me down a small street off Marine Drive and taught me how to activate my mobile phone’s blue-tooth. Then he transferred the clip and was about to run back to his hostel, as the gates shut by 10 PM, when he asked me if I wanted anything else. He had music MP3s (the Karaoke version of ‘Yesterday’ by the Beatles) and pornographic clips with Caucasian women.

As the year progressed and MMS clips became more and more popular, the organisation of the distribution networks changed. These now even included pirated video compact disks (VCDs) available at places like Delhi’s Palika Bazaar. Short clips were uploaded onto file-sharing websites such as www.rapidshare.de and linked by websites such as www.debonairblog.com. During the course of my fieldwork, I however, never found it easy to access clips. Whenever I asked for the same from people who were in possession of the clips, there was a feeling of discomfort involved.5

5 The spread of MMS clips through millions of mobile phones in India and they becoming the primary source of terror for celebrities, women and children, actually made it difficult to view them — they were always spreading somewhere else, away from me. I was then working as a trainee editor at the magazine Man’s World in Mumbai. One day the resident computer designer whispered to me on a rain-drenched balcony that there was a new Mallika Sherawat — an Indian film actress — MMS clip. There was some discussion about whether it was real or not, but he offered to bring it to me in the next few days. The next day, I walked into the office to witness a strange scene — one of the senior editors was livid with this excited young man,
Later on, as MMS clips became more and more popular, they were discussed amongst polite company. By the middle of 2005, I was aware of hundreds of such clips, from Pakistan, Bengal, Punjab, Delhi and Chandigarh. There were recordings of sexuality taking place in universities, hostels, parks, restaurants, cyber-cafes and dimly-lit stages. However, apart from the sites mentioned above, and the occasional spread amongst college students (doubtless encouraged by the news media), these other clips did not get much mass media attention. Those ‘in the know’ thought they were part of some underground network, as suggested to me by another young person who told me that he would get me a clip that ‘even the journalists in the Times of India hadn’t seen …’.

The few times I mentioned these clips to friends who were filmmakers, journalists, therapists, or actors based in Mumbai, their awareness was limited to two or three major ones, those that were represented as scandals by the English news media. The news media’s judgement of the MMS clips that were considered scandalous and those that were not, were made by its own selection processes. I do not know what specific processes governed this selection but from the major representations in the news media we get an idea of what they considered newsworthy: upper-middle-class children; celebrities; consumerism (advertisements disguised as MMS scandals) and crime (rape, police complaints). Either news journalists spend their time selecting these clips from all that are available, or these are the ones that are discussed the most in the circles that they frequent.

The clip that has been diagnosed as the first scandal by the news media was the DPS-MMS clip, from Delhi. This clip, involving a young boy and a girl from the Delhi Public School, caused the
boy to face legal action and the girl to leave the country. The clip found its way to the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, where a student put it on his computer and uploaded it for auction on www.bazee.com, the Indian wing of www.ebay.com, an international website. This caused the police to arrest the CEO of www.bazee.com, and the United States Government (represented by Ms Condolezza Rice) had to intervene. This was followed by a series of clips featuring movie stars in situations where the ‘theme’ was either kissing, hardcore sex, exploitation or drugs. All of them denied that they were real and accused mischief makers of ‘morphing’ their images onto bodies. To my knowledge three films (Dev-D, Kalyug and Teesri Ankh [Third Eye]) have been based on these MMS scandals. Some producers in Bollywood understood the marketing potential of such clips and spread a clip from a movie which showed two actors in ‘steamy scenes’. These clips were trailers for the film, but they were represented as another MMS scandal involving celebrities. As a result, with this supplementary and imagined dimension of violation, the clip spread through the networks (mobile to mobile, via e-mail, Internet to mobile). Very quickly people realised that they were fake, but continued to distribute them anyway, not despite this disclosure, but because of it.

Celebrities are a constant presence in the print media, particularly the Times of India, as are allusions to their sexualities and decadence. It is implicit that ‘true sexualities’ can never be represented, and these are alluded to through a cluster of representations suggesting a beyond. This ‘beyond’ is the ‘truth’ of the celebrity’s life, beyond the public relation hypes, rumours and myths that surround them. However, this relationship between the representation and the truth is sustained by an implicit lack of access, which, paradoxically, and it is this lack that causes the production of more and more stories. We can say that when celebrities say the ‘clips are fake’, they do this not only to protect their own modesty (people can tell which ones are fake and which ones are not) but to re-articulate, and therefore sustain, the distance between the public and the private (an articulation, being a linkage, is also a separation between the two elements). When the clips are judged as fake, something is

restored: a ‘beyond’, a hidden kernel (one is reminded of Alcibiades agalma\footnote{[Lacan 1991]} that the 
*Times of India* requires to continue its production of stories about celebrities. Anything that seems to come from a seemingly un-mediated and non-commercial channel is a threat, because it ‘short circuits’ that distance between the public and private.

The MMS clip is often dismissed as not being real because it was ‘morphed’. Morphing is a technique with the use of which one represented object can become another. It is the process by which particular points are flagged within an image, and a secondary image is used into which the flags from the first image are translated. Suppose I wish to morph an image of a flower into an image of a cat. In order to do this I would have to flag key pixels on the first image, such as around petals and stems, and then suggest that the top left pixel flagging the stamen move to the top left pixel flagging the tip of the cat’s whisker. When these re-mapping has been suggested to the software, it moves the rest of the pixels around with it. The process of transformation is called morphing and is demonstrated well by calling to attention the popular movie genre involving werewolves. To put it another way, the sequential and represented transformation is a crucial part of the content, and therefore calling an MMS clip ‘morphed’ is completely inaccurate. However, this phrase has been used to question the represented realism of the clip through the filter of truth.\footnote{While the broader philosophical point about truth being an immanent and unfolding process might be made here, the rhetoric of morphing suggests more that producers and public relation agencies are unfamiliar with the meaning of the word, rather than being anti-essentialist philosophers of becoming.}

Internet websites are often run and frequented by people who have the resources, patience and contacts to see whether these clips are true or not. Whenever a clip of a celebrity is posted on these sites, sometimes there are qualifications (‘this might not be her’) and sometimes calls for clarification (‘if anybody knows the truth, then e-mail us’). There is continuous commentary about these clips, mostly around the issue of truth and falsity.

\footnote{http://archive.nosubject.com/seminaires/seminaire_v/1957.11.06.pdf (accessed 8 November 2010)}
Newspapers, however, are quite distinct from websites in their representations and framings of these clips as their own daily practice of breaching the borders between public and private are now being performed by the masses.

**Figure 5.2**
An MMS clip named ‘Mallika.3gp’ was widely available in India but was ultimately found to be that of a look alike — a Mexican adult entertainer


Saul Kripke (1980) demonstrates that the difference between descriptivism and anti-descriptivism, both of which try and produce a general theory of reference, lies in the different relationship between ‘discursivity’ and ‘external’ objects. For descriptivists the ‘word’ (signifier) has a ‘meaning’ (signified), ‘which is defined by a cluster of descriptive features’ (Torfing 1999: 48). The word, therefore, refers to all objects that share this cluster of descriptive features. The anti-descriptivist would argue that, on the contrary, an ‘act of primal baptism that establishes a connection between the
object and its name’ (ibid.: 49; see also Zizek 1989: 89–95). This connection would exist even if the original description proved to be false (or morphed!) (Kripke 1980: 83–85). In what is perhaps his most subtle work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek takes the surplus produced by Kripke himself to its conclusion: ‘it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object’ (Zizek 1989: 95). It is the retroactive act of naming itself that supports the identity of the object (Zizek 1989: 95).

According to Zizek, the surplus in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is ‘something in itself more than itself’, that is to say the Lacanian objet petit a: we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency — because it is an objectification of the void, of a discontinuity opened up in reality by the emergence of the signifier’. (Zizek 1989: 95)

Within this nominalist reduction of identity to naming, resides one of the greatest threats in a mediated world. The universe of the MMS clip does not carry with it any markers of identification beyond the grainy visuals, the guesses within blogs, the rumours in social networks, and, of course, the imagination or fantasy of the viewing public itself. However, as has been discussed, this radical ambiguity is difficult to sustain, hence the frantic searches for closure on the identities or contexts of these clips. There is, however, one marker of identification that comes with a MMS clip that somehow anchors debate in unexpected ways — the file name.

Mallika Sherawat was played/performed by a porn star, but this performance was only attributed to it retroactively. The clip was from a movie that had been downloaded onto someone’s computer, named as Mallika1.3gp, sent by MMS to someone’s phone, and accompanied, perhaps, in every act of transfer between mobile phones with the remark — ‘This is the Mallika Sherawat clip’. Meaning was attributed to the clip through the retroactive act of naming itself, except the first thing named was the video clip itself. This naming of the clip as Mallika1.3gp, could make people believe — or say they believe — that the clip in question is true. This act of naming is imagined, by the primal baptiser (cf. Kripke), as capable of short circuiting any ambiguity that the viewer might have when seeing the clip, and in many cases this is indeed true.9

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9 While on the field, the clips in question were debated by some people who hadn’t seen them (or said they had not seen them). In conversations...
Camera as director, script writer and participant

Salman: For god’s sake man, this is my girlfriend, she is a really nice girl, please remove this immediately.

Editor’s Reply: Dear Salmanbhai, we won’t mind deleting the clip as long as you can prove that the clip indeed belongs to your GF. Please send us a clean picture of your GF to us at debonairblog@gmail.com and I guarantee that I will remove the clip immediately. Thanks in advance.

Endless Echo: These girls are morons, especially if they record themselves on camera. But I love muslim stuff!

Debonair Lover: When you made this clip as a pro Photographer and Directed your GF to give you a nice view I think you enjoyed it at that time, you created the thing on your own will so you have to suffer, boy. And as you said you deleted it, but you created the clip to show your friends that you are real hot guy like Salman Khan! It’s damn funny!

It has already been suggested that the identity of the clip (both its ‘truth value’ and its ‘content’) are supported by technology. The camera-phone suggests that what is happening is true, the encoded file name points us in the general direction of clarity and closure. However, the ‘camera’ of the camera-phone is not just an ordinary recording device. The range of meanings, terrors, ambiguities that it manages to generate are immense, when contrasted with the ‘realist’ rhetoric that surrounds it. What I would like to demonstrate now is that the camera-phone, unlike the cameras in news channels or cinema, is clearly understood as both an ‘objective and dispassionate

with police officers, while I was on the crime beat, other journalists, advertisers and editors — none of whom had seen the clip — the clip was referred to as the ‘Mallika Sherawat MMS’ or, in other cases, the ‘Riya Sen Clip’ or the ‘Kareena Kapoor MMS’ even when the clips were clearly fake (June–August 2005).

gaze’, as well as an ‘active participatory gaze’. This dual nature, as is understood by users, creators and performers in the MMS clip, transforms the very reality that it innocently captures. The clip is a participant in the clip itself.

Under the camera, with a phantom audience that is not defined in any conventional way, the clip is created. We do know that, far from being spontaneous, the practice of sexuality is heavily coded, most obviously by the implicit assumption that what is taking place is ‘sexual’. In the MMS universe, sex is a private and protected act, but it is also, at the very same time, a very public act, in the sense that there is a camera in the room. This dual existence is cued by the presence of the camera. Audiences, whether phantom and unpredictable, as in this case, or real and tabulated, in the case of formalised production, determine the creation of content. Beyond signifying an audience, the presence of the camera also demands that a series of rules be followed. Far from being an unmediated representation of reality, the MMS clip is an exemplary case of how presuppositions, super addressee and repeated behaviours that are always beyond our own immediate control, structure our reality.

Voices in cameras: Degree zero of sexual training

The clips often carry a voice-over that gives direction, and goads the women to do certain things. The women are interpellated through directions, commands and order-words; the women then perform these. The relationship between voice and interpellation has been explored in detail in a recent book by Mladen Dolar A Voice and Nothing More:

It is a voice tacitly implied not only in the law, but also in the wide social-symbolic texture, the symbolic fabric stored in tradition and mores, something we can never simply assume by compliance and submission, but something which demands an act, a political subjectification which can take many different forms ... [Althusser’s] mechanism of interpellation ... is but another name for that voice, the call which sustains social injunctions and symbolic mandates.
Althusser saw very clearly that the assumption of the symbolic implies a response to a call, and he provided it with an excellent name, but there is a divide, a precarious shifting line, in the interpellating voice: on the one hand there is the process of becoming a subject by recognizing oneself as address of that call ... on the other hand there is at the same time a voice which interpellates without any positive content – something one would perhaps rather escape by obeying the sonorous voice of statements and commands; nevertheless this pure excess of the voice is compelling, although it does not tell us what to do and does not offer a handle for recognition and identification. If one wants to become a subject, recognition and obedience are never quite enough; in addition to and apart from these, one has to respond to the ‘mere voice’ which is just an opening, a pure enunciation, compelling a response, an act, a dislocation of the imposing voices of domination. (2006: 122)

This long extract suggests that Althusser’s imagined and ideal command ‘Hey you!’ (1977), was not without a strong reference to the medium of the call: the voice. The voice, that forces one to become a subject by recognising the interpellating call, performs a complex function in the MMS clips. With striking regularity, every clip has a voice — the voice of the person holding the camera. This voice not only expresses ‘pleasure’, but also gives orders and commands so that this ‘pleasure’ may be realised. These commands are not only meant for the man in question, but are meant for the audience he imagines as watching as well; he performs sexuality as if it were natural, but this excessive realism also contains the shadow of commands, orders and injunctions. Mandates and injunctions that are far from spontaneous expressions of social transformation.

The original clip, the one that started it all, is the DPS MMS clips that was referred to earlier. In order to extract its sound from the clip, I used video editing software. Some parts were inaudible.

00:06 Boy: Isme ... i just got like ... uhhh ... [In this I have got — referring perhaps to the video camera and the space he has got left in it for storing video clips]

00:21 Girl: Can we go now

[The camera is then shut down, and then started again. This gap is only visible if the clip has been slowed down considerably.]
00:28 B: [take it] In na
00:33 G: I did … not going [afterthought] too big [laughs] i knew 
you were big [laughs]
00:40 G: Can we go
00:40 B: I got the point
[inaudible]
00:46 G: Karna [do it]
[inaudible/girl laughs]
01:03 B: Pura andar dalna, moon [put it in fully, mouth … ]
01:05 G: Arey, how can it go that far
01:09 B: Please yaar
01:10 G: [steps away and points] it’ll go till here.
01:14 B: Arram se kuar, moon to khol [relax and do it, at least open 
your mouth]
[she sticks out her tongue cheekily]
01:18 B: Ab dal ley [now put it in]
01:20 B: Porn dekhke aise karne me maaza aa raha hai … just leave it 
[doing this is a lot of fun after watching a porn film]
01:24 G: I’ll just suck you and leave you?
B: Huh?
G: I’ll just put it in and stay like that?
01:28 B: Yeah …
G: Yeah?
1:31 G: I shouldn’t move?
1:33 B: You should move, but move up and down, pura upar sey 
nechay yehan sein yehan sain to sirf upar upar karey ja rahi hai [all of 
it from up to down, from here to there — points — you are just 
doing up here only]
[girl giggles]
1:40 G: Yeah?
1:41 B: YEAH
[inaudible]
1:47 B: Aaur neecha aur neecha daal [take it lower/deeper]
1:53 G: Chalo… [all right, time to go etc.]
[inaudible]
1:56 B: Stay with it na
2:00 G: I’m going to miss my bus
2:03 B: No yaar, I’ll, I’ll drop you back home if you do that
2:07 G: No no i want to go now
2:08 B: No baby
2:09 G: Yes Hemant
2:10 B: No sweetheart
   [No, Yeah,] No etc.
2:18 B: Teri ek up skirt picture loon? [can i take an up-skirt picture?]
   [Shakes her head]
   G: No
2:20 B: Mujhe bahut acha lagta hai [I like that a lot]
2:21 G: Please, are you mad!! Please, no way
2:28 [inaudible]
2:30 B: Acha rook to sahi ... (OK, wait for a moment)
   [sound stops, clip stops]

Every newspaper, TV channel and Internet web-log said that the clips showed a girl performing oral sex on a boy, or ‘making him happy’ or doing something inappropriate with him. However, what no one has mentioned is that she is being taught how to perform oral sex on the boy. This has not been said, as it interferes with the fear of the irrational and stupid child (see Chowdhry 2009: 125). This is a pedagogical exercise, in many ways, and is not represented (by the mass media) as one. This clip shows us the entry of a girl into a symbolic order that is structured through a man’s fantasy — she is learning how to perform her sexuality, directed by the young man.

A lot of the conversation that takes place concerns ‘yes’s and ‘no’s. He hails her — asks her to do something — and she responds by saying no. In Althusser’s terms, this negation is as much a part of becoming a subject, because she has recognised the call. Obedience/lack of obedience is factored into the call — that is to say, when someone says ‘Hey you’, there is a possibility that you will say, ‘Not me’ or ignore the call. But the call has entered the ear, and part of the call is the presence of the addressee (whether she recognises her self as one, or not), because without this imagined addressee we would have a powerless scream. The ‘yes’s and ‘no’s are crucial to this dialogue above.

The presence of something else, something that has already been coded, takes place in three significant moments in the clip above. The first (00:28–00:40) is when she says that he is big. As we know from the surveys, size is a crucial discursive point in conversations about sexuality in the Indian mass media. However, this reference to size is used strategically, as the girl is not doing it
‘properly’, and uses it as an excuse for not doing it properly. The boy does not accept this excuse, or perhaps he feels encouraged by it, and continues to goad her. The second moment (1:03–1:47) is when he is training her. He tells her to relax her mouth (1:14), to put it fully inside (1:03) and then says that he is having a lot of fun by doing this after watching a pornographic film (1:20). Then he suggests that she should ‘leave it’, which suggests that she should either move her head away, or drop the whole issue (said sulkily) or dismissing her earlier remarks (1:10) when she says it can only go so far. However, this call is interpreted by her as suggesting that he wants her to not do anything and just keep her mouth still. However, this is not quite a strategic interpretation because he mumbles that this is exactly what he wants her to do, which should suit her fine. However, as this is pedagogy, and she does wish to learn how to perform this act, she asks him thrice (1:24–1:31) if this is what she should do. He gives her precise directions as to what to do (1:33–153), but she ‘gets it right’ only in one moment (1:41). The third moment is the reference to ‘up-skirt’ photographs, which emerged from Japan and have photographs of women taken from underneath their skirts by mobile phones.

So we have three references — ‘symbolic mandates’ — that are piercing this event. The first is the reference to the size, the second is pornographic films and the third to Japanese up-skirt pornography. The boy has articulated pornography with enjoyment (1:20 and 2:20), and this grammar guides his sexual training. So the girl is being interpellated not in the man’s fantasy, but in a very specific performance that is guided by the boy’s encounter with pornography and the Internet. The camera signifies not only ‘recording’ (00:06) but something that expects a desire that is coded in a very specific way.

Conclusion

So what does all this tell us about the relationship the Indian mass media has towards change? Sometimes it heralds positive change, and sometimes acts as a discursive policeman commenting on the moral and sociological consequences of something it understands as change. In both cases, what remain unquestioned
are its own basic epistemological foundations. In the MMS-clip explosion, a stain and a dissonance that cut to the heart of the mass media’s own ideological foundations, needed to be contained. The fact that ‘falsity’ does in no way damage the ‘truth’ value of a representation, signalled another shift — ‘Just because it is not the person who I thought it was, I can still go on believing it is her’. The implication being that ‘truth value’ is no longer driven by an institutional guarantee of realism, but by an active and subjective belief, or a contingent act of naming. The change here being that ‘truth’ is that something I chose to buy into, only to increase my enjoyment, rather than for any broader ‘reality principle’ or rationality. The notion of truth that lies beyond the edited and slick play of appearances beyond the TV studio, and is used as an absent reference point, is critical to the mass media’s sustainable epistemic value. In the case of sting operations, audiences were reminded that this truth does indeed exist and always echoes in the background in conventional reportage. The radical ambiguity that MMS clips generate seems to threaten this absent, yet critical, referent. It unleashes commentary that even ‘real reality’ needs an anchor, and that this anchor is never obvious.

However, beyond these broader meditations on truth and signification, lies a very pragmatic concern. While the newspaper’s reach is defined by its truth content, the MMS clip is consumed without any such institutional authority. Its spread is founded on an extremely individualistic and non-profitable principle, and its reach is far greater. Our citizens now communicate on a large scale without the drivers of consumption, public participation, kinship or urban citizenship. Into the circuits of social exchange, we now have avowed simulacra, proscription, shame, enjoyment and digital viruses. There is a great danger if creation, proliferation and consumption of such things are done without purpose, profit or institutional control. While the consumer economy might appreciate the new subject, it is highly dangerous when the consumer consumes, and is satisfied, by something so bereft of obvious profitability. The news media’s authority resides in publically demonstrating its capacity to cross into a private sphere. An emerging practice that does this for fun and with ease transforms the very validity of these boundaries. The MMS clip, with its breach
between the private and the public, a movement that is radical in
the way it transforms audiences into consumers, producers and
‘spreaders’ of media content, heralds a break in the way Indians
engage with news. We have come a long way from Doordarshan
and state-controlled television and we hear much about how
the explosion of choice in our media universe has transformed
the news landscape. Nevertheless, we should not forget that a
more significant shift took place with two kids, a mobile phone,
bit torrent and some hormones — a marker in the history of the
Indian media that will, in the future, be ignored because it cannot
become a part of the nation’s ‘pride story’.

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Circulating Intimacies: Sex Surveys, Marriage and Other Facts of Life in Urban India*

Kriti Kapila

In June 2003, KamaSutra, a leading condom manufacturer in India made public the results of what it claimed was the first-ever all-India sex survey. The results of the survey were reported widely by the media and generated much public interest (e.g., Sawhney 2003a; 2003b; Kuriakose 2003; Fernandez 2003). Interpreting the survey's figures, journalists and commentators unanimously concluded that the sexual habits of Indians, especially those of women, were undergoing a massive change. This was curious, given that there was little by way of previous baselines from which such a perception of change could be compared and assessed. In this article I attend to the nature and the consequences of the information made available through the publication of these sex surveys, and seek to understand why and how public perceptions of social change emerge. I discuss the processes entailed in the (re)constitution of public discourses on sexual intimacies in India. Examining the curious configuration, where the media was both an initiator of a certain kind of information about sexual habits, as well as the provider

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of a meta-commentary on that information, I assess how an emerging public discourse might shape people’s understanding of sexual intimacy, both in terms of its categories and in terms of its language. In order to do so, I examine two different articulations by middle-class Indians of their own sexuality: first, media reports of all-India sex-surveys, and second, women’s narratives of their sexual histories posted on a popular India-based website and collected in an ethnographic context.

Any understanding of intimacy first requires an analytical separation between the experience of sexual intimacy and public discourses on sex and sexuality. In the context of India, this poses a special challenge because of the ways in which monogamous heterosexual conjugality has successively gained pre-eminence in the public mind (Chakrabarty 1994; Chaterjee 1994; Bhattacharjee 1992; Patel 2004), so that the changing nature of marriage has become a barometer for the changing nature of sexual intimacy (Kapila 2004). In other words, sex and marriage in India are linked inextricably, at least in the public mind. In trying to understand the extent to which this is so, this article is a conversation with Elizabeth Povinelli’s work on gridlocked intimacies and the reading of Jurgen Habermas (1989) on which it depends (Povinelli 2002). Povinelli discusses the concept of the ‘intimacy grid’ as a way of understanding ‘the power of generative grammar(s)’ in characterising and representing the subject of intimacy (ibid.: 223). According to Povinelli, not all intimate worlds gain public recognition. In examining the centrality of the concept of intimacy and its links to legitimate sexual activity in two seemingly different politics of recognition — one around the erasing of intimate histories of aboriginal populations in contemporary Australia, and another around the recognition of intimacy within gay families in Euro-America — she suggests that intimacy is itself gridlocked within heterosexual and genealogical models (ibid.: 217). Following Povinelli, I explore the hemming in of public recognition of certain kinds of intimacies. But in departure from her analysis, I locate the gridlocking of contemporary urban Indian intimacies not just within the code of genealogy (or, descent), but equally within the code of conjugality (or, alliance). This, I argue has repercussions for the way in which intimate worlds are articulated, claimed and recognised in the public domain.
Part of Povinelli’s analysis is concerned with the degree to which certain social forms and relations fall off established grid(s) of intimacy and genealogy and become literally ‘un-recognisable’ and/or de-legitimised (Povinelli 2002: 224). She draws on Habermas’s well-known thesis of the relation between textuality and new forms of interiorised relations with self and others, or what he terms ‘experiments in subjectivity’ (Habermas 1989: 49). Povinelli makes the clear point that the extent to which love emerges as a rejection of social utility, and the degree to which the intimate subject of sexuality develops in relation to an emancipation from social bonds is not something that can simply be generalised globally. The imposition of this particular grid of intimacy is necessarily, of course, a function of power (Povinelli 2002: 232), but in this article, I develop Povinelli’s insight in an alternative direction demonstrating that the very assumption that the intimate subject develops in the context of an emancipation from kinship and the social bonds of marriage is itself another example of ‘grid-lock’.

Of lies, damn lies and statistics

The KamaSutra Survey results were published in leading English-language dailies in India and generated a great deal of enthusiasm and consternation alike. The 5,213 participants in this online survey came from the urban centres of Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Pune, Lucknow and Chandigarh. The survey tabulated frequency, modes and/or objects of sexual arousal, foreplay, preferred sexual positions, modes of contraception, preferred fantasies, and views on homosexuality, fidelity, pre-marital sex, masturbation and sex education (Sawhney 2003a). It also presented in the form of league tables rates of sexual activity across the 10 cities. Reactions to the survey, therefore, were often as much about the sex-life of places as they were about people (see Fernandez 2003 for Bangalore; Sawhney 2003a for Delhi; Kuriaakose 2003 for Hyderabad; Mitra 2003 for Kolkata).

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1 There is an extensive literature in both history and popular culture on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere in India, see for example Chakrabarty (1992); Dwyer and Pinney (2001); Frietag (1989); Mankekar (1999).
Topping the survey on ‘having sex’ was the City of Hyderabad with 17.1 times a month. Even more astonishing is that Hyderabad leads the world in this hot pursuit. As per the Durex Global Survey, the nation of lovers, France, used to be accorded top position for having sex 167 times a year (13.1 times a month). But now Hyderabad has far overtaken France in terms of numbers. (Kuriakose 2003)

Whilst a Bangalore daily wrote:

Consider this, only 68 per cent of the city [Bangalore] is satisfied with the amount of sex it gets every month — an average of 12.5 days totally, well ahead of the national average of once every four days, or about eight times a month. 32 per cent (31 pc nationally) however feel that this isn’t enough and would like more. (Fernandez 2003)

The Delhi Times (a section of the Times of India), the newspaper that had first published the survey results, reported that it had been inundated with readers responses, and thus claimed that it felt compelled to publish a long successor piece in the form of a collection of unedited readers’ responses to Delhi’s sexual profile as presented in the survey (Sawhney 2003b). Regardless of their approbation or disapproval for sex surveys in general, most readers commended the newspaper for taking what they considered was a ‘bold initiative’.

Though it is disturbing to know that such a large number of teenagers are aware of their sexuality, perhaps earlier than their time, as parents, we would be naive to wish it away. Perhaps, we need to come to terms with it and deal with it in as sensitive a manner as possible. We can only hope that our set of values, on which we nurture them, makes them more responsible as young adults. Rajat (Sawhney 2003b)

I must compliment you on the article ‘More sex please, we’re Indian’. Considering that ‘sex’ was a taboo topic till not too long ago, it is heartening to see that society has started accepting it as a reality and a fact of life. I hope Delhi Times continues publishing informative pieces reflecting the changing face of our times. R. Raman (Sawhney 2003b)

Prakash Kothari, a prominent sexologist and a well-recognised media talking-head was quoted as saying: ‘One can easily kiss
that crummy era goodbye. A nation of one billion is getting sexy and kicking the guilt.’ Another familiar name, psychiatrist and part-time agony uncle Sanjay Chugh added, ‘In today’s India, there has never been a better time to find answers, action and fulfilment. Expect the unexpected: Finally, ‘it’ is happening in India’. (Sawhney 2003a).

Unsurprisingly, not all reactions were so laudatory. One reader wrote in to convey the discomfort he felt as a parent explaining the term ‘oral sex’ to his 12-year-old daughter. Another, a left-wing student leader, was concerned not only about the validity of the survey, but also about the commodification of women as sex-objects that both the survey and the original news report portrayed (ibid.).

In these first reports, a majority of the ‘experts’ rolled in to interpret the results were interestingly, but not surprisingly, marriage counsellors. Some of them pointed out the skewed nature of the survey (e.g., Kavitha 2003). For example, they drew attention to the fact that only 12 per cent of the respondents were women. Since this had been a self-administered and partly online survey, they wondered why women had been reluctant to participate. Some reasoned that since some of the participants in the survey had answered the questionnaire online, the skewed sex ratio of the sample may well have to do with the differential online accessibility for men and women.2 But beyond the occasional doubt cast by an expert, the statistical imbalances of the sample did not seem to cause much concern in the popular press. What did concern everybody, and came out loud and clear in almost every report, was that the survey provided evidence for a perceptible change in attitudes to sex, especially in women.

[W]omen respondents [are] playing a far more active role in sexual encounters in general […] Being less bound by old gender role stereotypes means many women now feel freer to show their partners what they like and dislike sexually. (Fernandez 2003)

2 Despite these serious drawbacks, the internet is becoming a favoured tool for sex research. For a detailed discussion of its advantages and drawbacks, see Ross et al. (2005). Such a bias in internet surveys is common and systematic, and has much to do with the inability to control or indeed to know the sample frame in such surveys (cf. ibid.: 251).
The KamaSutra Survey caught the imagination of the media and the middle classes in urban India. In addition to opinion pieces in newspapers and magazines, and the inevitable yours-disgustedly letters to the editor, it also launched the age of sex-surveys in India. In particular, two leading news magazines have since 2003 conducted annual surveys devoted to particular aspects of the nation’s sexual habits. In this article, I restrict myself to the first to take the lead on this issue, India Today, the English-language periodical with the highest circulation figures in its group, and an integral part of middle-class reading habits. It shifted the lens away from territorial sexual profiles, and as if by way of a corrective to the male bias of the KamaSutra Survey, carried a cover story in September 2003 entitled, ‘On the Intimate Desires of the Indian Woman: The Sex Report’ (Vasudev 2003). Based on a survey carried out by the magazine’s research team in conjunction with a prominent market-research group, amongst 2,305 middle- and upper-middle class women across 10 cities, it claimed to be the first ever all-India survey conducted exclusively on women’s views of their sexuality (ibid.: 34).

This survey enumerated women’s awareness of their bodies, age of sexual discovery, division of sexual labour and pleasure, etc., and claimed to make available a wide range of ‘facts’ in the public domain for the first time. So, for example, according to the survey, 42 per cent of women knew where their ‘G-spot’ was, 32 per cent felt satisfied after a sexual encounter; 85 per cent first had sex only after marriage; but 52 per cent thought that their own pleasure was as important as their partner’s while having sex (Vasudev 2003). Interestingly, the authors of the story too reported a popular perception that times were changing with regard to intimate lives of urban Indians, but they dismissed as an illusion the claim that there was ‘a sexual revolution breathing fire in India’ (ibid.: 36). They did, however, conclude that women in India were slowly emerging as sexually confident, if not assertive, beings. This change, according to them, was not an even or unidirectional one.

The conflict is deep and searing, in the boiler room that is the Indian woman’s mind, Vatsayana, Buddha, Freud, Foucault, Rajneesh, Shere Hite and Germaine Greer seem to be having a relentless screaming match. Sita and Kali pick up a fight. Sita, in her ever-relenting passive form, and Kali, intoxicated with power, blinded by rage, and voraciously sexual. It is too early on the rolls
of India-in-transition to expect the women to resolve this literary-historical-traditional mess entirely and say, ‘Yes, we want sex and how’. (Ibid.: 37)

The same magazine conducted another survey with the same team a year later, this time focusing on the ‘libido of the Indian man’ (Vasudev 2004a). This survey of 2,499 men similarly measured an array of sexual habits and preferences of Indian men, ranging from their favourite sexual fantasy to their favoured sexual position. The authors concluded that the results of the men’s sexual habits seemed to be in agreement with the previous survey of women’s sexuality, in that ‘conflict defined their sexual freedom’ (ibid.: 26). According to them, just like the previous women’s survey, the results of the men’s survey produced a picture of contradictions. ‘In 2004 when freedom is a buzzword, Indian men seemed to be shackled by [the] myths of manhood’ (ibid.: 28). They claimed that the results proved that Indian men had a very circumscribed idea of women’s sexuality, in that they aspired for sex with ‘coy, virginal, beautiful, sari-clad women, who should then become their wives. And once wedded, these women should neither fantasise in bed, nor ask for oral sex or deny sex to their husbands, whether they like sex or not’ (ibid.: 26). They further remarked, ‘[i]ronic that in the land of the virile Shiva, the flirtatious Krishna and the incorrigible Vatsayana, today’s Indian man willingly suffers the label of the prude’ (ibid: 29). Indian men were seen to have a very narrow view of women’s sexuality and considered it to lie primarily within the conjugal relationship. The authors based this conclusion on the survey’s finding that both men and women expected and preferred men to be sexually experienced at the time of marriage, and women to be virgins. Yet, at the same time, the authors and their respondents were convinced that the bottom-line in people’s intimate lives was change (Vasudev 2004b). What had changed was not the inextricability of sex and marriage — for both men and women — but the ways men and women negotiated these demands and expectations of sexual intimacy within the context of marriage.

Experts for the India Today surveys were drawn from a more varied background and included psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, writers, film-makers and artists, that is, those who
understood, recorded and/or described patterns of social change. They in turn pointed out that no matter how emancipated urban Indian women had become, or were in the process of becoming, they continued to experience varying degrees of conflict between their new desires and social expectations. The evidence for this according to them was the great preponderance of the ‘Don’t Know’ or ‘Won’t Say’ as a majority response to questions relating to what may have been considered as controversial or uncomfortable issues. But in fact, the range of issues covered by the survey was vast and therefore, the ‘Don’t Know/Won’t Say’ responses across the questions were not exactly comparable. For instance, to the question, ‘In which of the following places have you had sex? (outside the bedroom, in front of the mirror, in car/train/on beach, on the dining table)’, 42 per cent or the ‘Don’t Know/Won’t Say’ option. Compared to ‘Have you had extra-marital sex with any of the following (husband’s friends, relatives, office colleagues, casual acquaintances)’, when once again the majority (38 per cent) responded with a ‘Don’t Know/Won’t Say’. These two sets of ‘Don’t Know/Won’t Say’ responses I believe belong to different registers of inhibition.

Men, on the other hand, provided clues to their inhibition by giving contradictory answers to questions relating to sex outside the conjugal relationship, according to the commentators. For example, 19 per cent of men admitted to having had a homosexual experience (73 per cent responded in the negative). But in response to a subsequent question ‘Have you talked to your wife/girlfriend about your homosexual experiences?’, 19 per cent said Yes, 35 per cent said No, and only 36 per cent said that they had not had a homosexual experience (Vasudev 2004b: 36). These contradictory and/or inhibitory responses according to the authors, were triggered by the lack of fit between ‘traditional’ sexual roles and the demands of the changing times. As a psychiatrist noted for a similar high-level of ‘Don’t Know/Won’t Say’ responses in a subsequent survey focused on the sexual habits of the single Indian women,

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3 Non-commensurate data are recognised as commonplace in sex-surveys for a variety of reasons and are largely attributed to the lack of sample control, participation and recall bias, etc. For a detailed discussion of related methodological issues see, e.g., Touleman and Leridon (1998).
[This dichotomy exists, because while she [the Indian woman] has been brought up to believe in traditional Indian values, she now has to contend with a quickly changing world. There is a definite improvement, but a woman still can’t flaunt a relationship the way she can flaunt a husband. (India Today, 26 September 2005: 52)]

The surveys and their accompanying commentaries sometimes reinforced received notions of the meaning of sexual intimacy for men and women. Confirming a popular perception that men and women are different kinds of sexual beings, for example, one wrote

There is one indisputable fact, however, and that is that men have polygamous tendencies while women tend to be monogamous. In surveys conducted around the world in the past 25 years, men have consistently reported more sexual partners than women did. That is perhaps explained by the general perception that women invest more of themselves in sexual relationships than men do. (Bobb 2004: 50)

The magazine further examined the changing Indian woman and in a nod to an emerging lack of fit between marriage and sexual activity in urban India, it commissioned its third survey, in 2005, on Sex and the Single Woman.

Free from the burden of her barren sexual history, [the single woman] is looking fearlessly into a future teeming with sensual possibilities. Armed with a curious mix of homely family values and liberal feminist notions, she is carving out her sexual persona, telescoping that change with her emergence as a social, not just domestic, being. (Bamzai 2005: 33)

Nevertheless, it claimed that whilst 33 per cent of women interviewed in 11 cities, had had pre-marital sex, a good 65 per cent of them thought that both women and men should remain virgins till they are married (Bamzai 2005: 34). Most of those who approved of pre-marital sex preferred that this was either in the context of long-term relationships and/or romantic love. In any case, pre-marital sex did not obviate the possibility of marriage. It was precisely that, pre the fact of marriage: ‘Everything conspires to ensure that a woman weds’ (ibid.: 38). Thus, even for a good
number of those who had experimented with sex outside marriage, the conjugal bond was the inevitable context for sexual intimacy, if not the most sacred, then the most legitimate.

The KamaSutra and the India Today surveys partially managed to pare apart sexual intimacy from conjugality in the public domain by making people think of sex in its own terms, in terms of its constituent acts and its anatomical and other geographies. But for the moment I want to attend to the conjugal imperative and its significance in understanding the peculiarities of the urban Indian intimacy grid. In the following section I turn to the way in which women narrate their understanding and experience of sexual intimacy and examine the extent to which the conjugal imperative informs the language and experience of intimacy.

What the body remembers

Geetan Batra, an independent journalist, began collecting women’s narratives of their sexual histories in the early 1990s, most of which are now available on Tehelka, a popular, if not uncontroversial web portal, as part of its Erotic channel within its Lifestyle section. Collated under the title What the Body Remembers, some of these sexual histories are also available on the Sex Education section of KamaSutra’s own website. As in the case of the KamaSutra and the India Today sex-surveys, Batra’s respondents were middle-class urban Indians. In distinction from the earlier surveys, the respondents were exclusively women and had not been questioned according to an interview schedule. There are therefore no statistics, no results. Instead, there are 80 narratives of sexual histories of middle- to upper-class, educated, married, single divorced, women, some of them professionals and others housewives.

If the sex-surveys claimed to provide cross-sectional snapshots of attitudes to sexual intimacy in India, then these narratives were meant to be a full-blooded and embodied account of women’s experiences of sexual intimacy in their own words. Batra’s own

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4 www.tehelka.com/lifestyle/erotic/wtbr.htm. The Tehelka portal was a pioneer in its early days being the first independent news portal in India, and was associated with serious investigative journalism.

commentary in the form of an accompanying post on the history and the methodology of this collection emphasises the ‘non-fragmentary’ nature of this material. According to her, once she had collected this material she did not want to convert it into a book because she did not want to render yet another Hite Report or a Nancy Friday. In choosing not to present the material as bite-sized truths about women’s understanding of their sexuality, the aim of this exercise seemed to be exactly the opposite to that of the surveys. There were to be no generalisations, comparisons, commonalities and differences offered for these 80 narratives, but just first person accounts.

Yes, my sex life has changed in the past few years. For a couple of years after I moved away from my husband there was nothing — oh, it was because we were basically incompatible, no dramatic beatings or fights. I just moved away. We were too different. I have a daughter; she was my greatest worry. Sex doesn’t even count when you are making decisions like that. So I guess sex isn’t that important to me in the long run because I did have good sex with my husband, but it didn’t matter. When I realised that there was nothing between us except sex, it was easy to move out […]. I had been working before that [i.e., marriage] and the hollowness of the city boys had gotten to me. I thought a small town person will have more time to think and will be a more sensitive soul — I was wrong. But no, we are talking sex — so okay — once we got engaged, I still couldn’t go the full way, I used to want it but just couldn’t do it.

[…] Then we got married. By then I had begun to have some doubts — I don’t know why I went through with it […] It started to go bad once I became pregnant which was within two months of getting married. He still wanted to carry on with the same lifestyle, eating out, boozing, sleeping late — but I couldn’t cope. Sex became a chore. Anyway, once my kid was born I tried for sometime to tolerate him. The only time I was at peace with him was when we were making out […] but after a time it didn’t matter. I just left one day — it was a trial but I just didn’t go back. (Yashika, 34, media person)

Research interview by Batra, 30 January 2003, New Delhi.
Or a slightly different one

It’s strange to be talking of sex at this age, especially since I haven’t thought about it in the past 3 or 4 years. So when you ask me whether my sex life has changed, well, it has become non-existent. There is no sense of loss where just sex is concerned, I don’t think of it, so I don’t need it. I miss a person. It’s a whole being I miss. The physical aspect of our relationship had declined some time ago — about 6 years ago — because he had started keeping very ill. (Shivangi, 48, IT professional – What the Body Remembers)

In a study of middle-class Indian women’s understanding of their own sexuality, Jyoti Puri collected 54 sexual histories from a similar urban social strata (Puri 1999). Puri places these narratives within the context of the demands of nationalism and postcoloniality on gendered identities and sexual subjectivities. In Puri’s understanding, the cultural valorisation of virginity and the conjugal imperative have the effect of eroticising marital life and romanticising marital sexuality (ibid.: 119). According to her, despite being the primary (in the sense of the first as well as in the sense of the foremost) space for experiencing sexual intimacy, marriage itself is attached with differing rationales and valence (ibid.: 133). Because legitimate sexual intimacy is confined within the conjugal relationship for women, its experience oscillates between pleasure and duty. This oscillation is reflected sometimes in the denial of pleasure altogether and at others in inflecting the language of romance, or the more acceptable cultural language of duty and companionship.

It was a total new feeling about sex after marriage. I think a woman experiencing it after marriage will be more satisfied, and she will feel more good if she has not done anything before marriage. […]

I think a husband and wife come closer with sex, become closer, and the love bond also increases. Physical is a part of our marriage, it is a must and is compulsory […] for me sexual satisfaction is to satisfy my husband […]

I like watching romantic scenes in Indian films, I daydream and place myself and my husband in a dance sequence, kissing sequence, or even a bed scene […]
Before marriage I was closest to my mother, after marriage, of course my husband […] we both share everything with each other […] that way we have an excellent relationship. (Puri 1999: 106–07)

At first I thought that [sex] has a very large role [in marriage], but when I look at my personal life, then it does not appear to me that it has any role at all. In my relations it has a very minor, minor role. In effect, major role is sentimental attachment, how much we care for each other. (Puri 1999: 129, emphasis added)

I think for a person like me mental happiness is very important. I need to be mentally relaxed. So I never wanted it [sex]. It is my duty to please him, and so I do it. Otherwise, given a choice, I don’t mind living without it so far. I am not saying I have never enjoyed it at all or enjoyed it ever. Maybe when I am happy. Then of course when we come closer, it’s fine. But not otherwise and not very frequently. (Puri 1999: 120, emphasis added)

In some ways Batra’s admitted failure to convert her research into a book of an unknown desired shape is testimony to the argument of the article regarding language. That is to say, there remain several difficulties within expressive as well as explanatory genres that inhibit the ability to think about intimate lives by and of urban Indians outside certain prescribed formats. Puri notes that stereotypical connections between gender role and sexuality in India, within scholarship as well as ordinary language-use, pose the biggest stumbling block in re-conceptualising these connections (Puri 1999: 4–6). In consonance with Batra’s observations (and in some ways with the surveys’ findings), she too notes that despite the handicap of the paucity of language, women’s own narratives belie traditional understandings of the connections between Indian women’s role in family and kinship and their ability to experience and define sexual intimacies (ibid.: 103–33). This explanation is important although as I argue later in the article, not the sole and adequate explanation. But what is striking about these narratives is that even though the women who were interviewed were asked to reflect on what they thought about sexuality and to narrate their sexual histories, most of them ended up talking about their ideals
and expectations of conjugal intimacy. This finds agreement with Puri’s narratives, which are either elicited to speak of intimate life-history in the conjugal frame or indeed the narrators themselves develop their histories of sexual intimacy mostly within the experience of marital relationships. The dominance of marriage as the frame for recognising sexual intimacy, in personal narrative, popular imagination, or indeed scholarship, remains unassailable, and it is this inextricability that frames popular ideals and expectations of intimacy.

I do have frequent sexual urges and since I read somewhere marriage provides the highest opportunity for sex, guess I often feel dissatisfied with myself or perhaps it’s my aging hormones that are going haywire. Desire is the root cause of life. As long as my desire lives within me, there is hope for sexuality in my life. (Madhavi, 33, single, engineer – What the Body Remembers)

I think sex in India should be more open, we should be more experimental about gay or lesbian love, even try out some affairs before marrying. We lack the strength to try it, out of fear. Fear puts a wet cloth on pre-marital sex and after marriage, it is boredom. (Sumana, 28, housewife – What the Body Remembers)

The encapsulation of sexuality within the conjugal relationship is further intensified with an accompanied expectation of romance in marriage. The romantic ideal defines women’s expectations of

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7 This is a different strategy of eliciting these narratives, say from the one reported by Puri, where she asked women to reflect on their identities as women and experiences of womanhood around culturally recognised life-stage landmarks such as menarche, menstruation, loss of virginity, marriage, etc., (Puri 1999: 20). See Kakar (1989) for a sustained discussion of the relationship between mythological and popular narratives of love, desire and intimacy and how these frame individual narratives and expectations.

8 Puri herself ascribes bias in her material to the relatively small number of women (12/50) who had had pre-marital sexual relationships, and even then this was mostly with the person they were engaged to be married to (Puri 1999: Chapter 5). In any case, one does not get any direct and pointed discussion of this slippage, either from the women interviewed, or indeed from Puri herself.
conjugality and intimacy, since not only sex but romance too is meant to be located primarily within marriage — at least for women. These narratives reveal the overextended conjugal complex, and lay bare what has often been called the gender division of emotion and ‘emotion work’ (Duncombe and Marsden 1993).

But with Varun it (sexual intercourse) became just an exercise, there was no romance, while I lived with a whole lot of romantic notions and wanted a display of emotion. He wasn’t an emotional person, he’d giggle and talk in a very dispassionate way [...] I think men are completely insensitive sexually. Most of them can’t understand the baggage most of us women come with. Most men look at me as a sexual object [...] They have to learn to be friends. My last boyfriend, he thinks he is on the same wavelength that I am on because he gets turned on by me. If I am not turned on by him, he thinks I have a problem, they’ll never take a no — it makes them insecure. For men sex is just sex. (Teesta, 27, researcher – What the Body Remembers)

Men in general are very insensitive. They don’t think emotionally about the future, they will make investments financially but they won’t think of their women during the day and what life is for them when they aren’t around. (Rachana, 34, housewife – What the Body Remembers)

Socially, we are both compatible, but sexually and mentally we are different. If you are different in ideas and thoughts, you are bound to not make very good love together. But we are like a pair of old shoes now, comfortable to live in with each other. It took him fairly long to understand me, but now it is easy to live with him. I don’t have to make anymore compromises.

I can’t ever blame anyone for affecting our sex lives. From the beginning, we have had different expectations and needs [...] I would have loved an affair. I have fantasised about it. It’s just the need to feel wanted and understood. (Tina, 50, secretary – What the Body Remembers)

Whilst popular culture codifies the distinction between marriage and pleasure for men in the distinct roles played by the figures of the wife and the courtesan, there is no such experiential or
explanatory template for women. It is therefore not surprising that urban Indian women believe that women and men have very different expectations from an intimate relationship. Importantly, if not unsurprisingly, these narratives signal the presence of other aesthetics of attachment outside the framework of heterosexual conjugality, sometimes revealed as fantasy and/or desire. This dissonance gestures a lack of fit between expectations and experience of intimate life, which is further compounded by the paucity of the language of expression for articulating the experience and/or expectations of sexual intimacy in urban India.

In the discussion of intimacy in India, the question of language gains a second-order significance as well, and that is to do with the choice of language. The narratives of sexual histories, like the surveys discussed above, have been elicited in the English language. Whilst Batra does not elaborate on the significance of the language, Puri attributes the use of English to a broader invocation of ‘transnational discourses of sex and romantic love and spoken English to accommodate and challenge the constraints on erotic sexuality’ (Puri 1999: 133). This is in keeping with what has been noted elsewhere in scholarship.

Indian languages have a wide range of ways to express love […] Yet, in cinema, where the expression or declaration of love is demanded, it is often the three English words which are used rather than their Hindi-Urdu equivalents. This may be due to the language of love having been influenced by the English idiom, or could be simply a fashion in popular culture, showing the use of the global language. A likely cause is also that this is part of the prohibition of the display of the private […], in that saying something in the formal register of English is less intimate than an expression in one’s mother tongue. (Dwyer 2000: 112)

Given the educational background of the majority of these individuals, women and men, a defining feature of middle-class status is language and (English) language-use. The roots of this

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contradiction go back to the status of English as a language of rule during colonialism, and today take on diverse manifestations.\textsuperscript{10} It has been long acknowledged that there is something about sex and the Indian bourgeoisie that does not translate well into the vernacular, or in other words, bourgeois India talk of the erotic and the amorous in English (Dwyer 2000). ‘Middle-class behaviour is figured symptomatic of the social contradictions that beset Indian modernity. The severity of the diagnosis is only heightened by the implication that precisely the middle classes should know better’ (Mazzarella 2005: 5).

The question of the language of expression is important not only because of the public declaration of intimate emotion that Dwyer is concerned with, but because of the way language shapes people’s experiences and conceptualisations of intimacy, sex and love. Ken Plummer has argued that sexual story-telling brings about an imagining, articulating and inventing of sexual identities, ultimately creating a culture of public concern around these issues (Plummer 1996). Lest we think that this is a world of endless possibilities, and boundless creativity, we must also remind ourselves that narratives of sexual histories, as those collected by Batra and Puri, are framed within familiar sociological anchors. Their particular language, form and shape is determined by the conversational constraints placed by these very sociological anchors. So, whilst the public presentation of the surveys and narratives afforded new spaces for the re-negotiation of meanings, making new things say-able, imaginable, possibly do-able, these new grids of intimacy were constrained by, made sense of and contained within already familiar grids of intimacy. It is therefore no surprise that not only is the narration of sexuality cast within and around conjugality, but that even the statistical expression of sexuality meanders around it.

\textsuperscript{10} Bernard Cohn (1996) alerted us to the hegemonic structures that underpinned code-switching between the vernacular and English in his most aptly entitled ‘The command of language and the language of command’. See also, Nandy (1988).
The measure of intimacy

Certainly, it seems that the idea of the sex survey has caught on in the imagination of the Indian middle classes. This in itself is not surprising. For example, in the United States, post-Kinsey, the growing interest in the measurement of sexuality led to development of the commercial sex survey, becoming a regular feature in the popular press (Ericksen 1999), and post-Little Kinsey in the United Kingdom (Stanley 1995), to name only two contexts. This is not least because it helps to sell the relevant publication. It has been argued for the United States that the very popularity of the sex survey leads to its transformation as ultimately frivolous entertainment (Ericksen 1999: 156). In the case of the India Today surveys, however, the purported aim has been far from frivolous. In his editorial to the 2005 survey, Aroone Purie notes:

In 2003 when INDIA TODAY commissioned the first-ever survey of sexual attitudes of women […], it set off a firestorm of protest. While researchers were roughed up by brothers and husbands of those who were being interviewed, many readers apparently wanted to do the same to us — everyone, it seemed, had a secret life which they didn’t want out in the open.

[…] Don’t shoot the messenger. Read the message instead.

In the case of India thus, the situation was slightly different. The magazines believed that they were not only following their brief in reporting that something new was happening in society, but that they thought it to be their responsibility of outing sex to society, so to speak, to reveal ‘the secret life’ everyone seems to have, and make it public. But the significant question is why have the last few years seen an immense surge in the popularity of such lifestyle based surveys and polls in the popular media.

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11 Ericksen is referring to magazines such as Cosmopolitan, etc., producing self-administered mini surveys that become part of the self-help culture propagated in and through the popular press.
12 India Today, September 2005: 3.
It is notable that in the case of India, the ‘original’ sex survey was itself a commercial survey, in that it was carried out by a condom manufacturer, and thus bore a brand name, as opposed to that of the researchers. Not only that, it was part of the parent brand’s (Durex) ‘global’ sex survey. That this survey presented its findings in the form of a league table of frequency distributed over locations is therefore not surprising. Nevertheless, the KamaSutra survey was a landmark — not for what it measured, not for its accuracy or its reliability, but it was a landmark because it allowed for a public delinking of sexual activity from its relational context of conjugality. It spoke of sex in its own terms, on a global scale (Paris and Hyderabad, Pune and Osaka, New Delhi and Mexico City). It therefore allowed for an understanding of conjugal intimacy through a measure of sexual practice, rather than the convention of the other way round. It was this reversal that gave an appearance that the nature of sexual intimacy had changed in India, whereas what had happened was that an altogether new baseline had been forged. This was the way in which a new intimacy grid was attempted in public discourse in India. In the following passages I explore the ways in which these surveys were set within a particular intimate grid, and why that particular intimate grid found resonance amongst urban Indians at the time that it did.

One reason for the growing popularity of sex surveys is of course the growth of consumerism and consumer culture in the last decade in India. The phenomenon of lifestyles themselves becoming part of consumption patterns has received some sociological and anthropological attention (Featherstone 1990; Mazzarella 2003; Miller 2001). But could there be another explanation? I believe that an important purpose served by these opinion polls is to provide an occasion to talk about social phenomenon in the language of ‘change’. It is not important whether or not the change that is being talked about has taken place or not or whether it has been accurately comprehended by the poll or survey. What these surveys do is feed into the rhetoric of change that is part of the larger discourse of modernity. Statements like ‘India is changing’, ‘Indian society is changing’, ‘Indian values are changing’ are commonplace in popular imagination. They are not just imbued with clunky reifications, but also provide the grid within which survey numbers
come alive and make sense, even though those figures may be the first of their kind and hence without any comparative baseline (as in the case of the India Today surveys).

I argue that there is yet another (and perhaps a more important) reason why these surveys form an important source for anthropologists despite the obvious question mark over their representativeness, accuracy and methodological rigour (Poovey 1998). The sociological import of any survey lies in not what the survey actually measures, whether people answer truthfully, and what those results are, but what happens once such material is presented as enumerated data and circulated in the public sphere. In the context of my research this provides a cue to raise two separate yet linked methodological issues. The first is the way these surveys enumerate the activities of a certain section of the urban Indian population and how their results get circulated. The second is the micro processes through which popular culture gets transformed.

I was looking forward to it. I didn’t read any books or see a blue movie to excite me. That’s what one of my family members said. She said you will feel more excited. I said, ‘Sorry, I don’t feel it necessary to excite me through those media. My husband will be enough to excite me.’ He was very nice to know what I would feel like. He read it for me. He knew that I didn’t have any serious boyfriends so I was basically ignorant about these things […] It was just the fact that it was new for me, I had never been through it […]. (Puri 1999: 117)

In 2006, of course, such a narrator would have read a few cover-stories in the popular press that gave her information on not just her own sexual anatomy, but also provided benchmarks to assess whether or not her marital sexuality was shaping up in any ‘normal’ sort of way. What the sex surveys have done in urban India is to dislodge the knowing-aunt and the telling older-cousin from their erstwhile nodal positions in the routes of the circulation of information on sexuality. This is not to say that such significant others have been made redundant but that alternate routes have been forged, that necessarily speak of sex in a new language as discussed above.
My interest here is in raising a methodological issue on how information in the public sphere circulates. Hacking (1994) and Taylor (1987) have alerted us in different ways to the constitutive significance of categories in the public domain, or what Hacking has called the ‘looping effect’. While Taylor points out the importance of shared language and of knowing that it is shared in the context of understanding how texts become sources of objectification, Hacking employs the term ‘looping effect’ to connote the process by which categories — when inserted in the public domain — become constitutive of future behaviour, whether or not such behaviour conformed to those categories before their introduction (Hacking 1994).

One of the things statistics does is to introduce imagined norms. This normalising aesthetic provides people with mental images of whether their own behaviour conforms or not. The results of the KamaSutra and India Today surveys therefore introduced benchmarks of various kinds, howsoever inaccurate, through which and in terms of which people in urban India can judge their own sex lives. Crucially, these surveys projected information about sex and sexual behaviour into the public domain as if it was a kind of information or knowledge that had never existed before (see Purie’s editorial comments on page 157). Thus, those who read the reports were perhaps introduced to a new way of relating to their sexuality, i.e., where it fitted in terms of their friends’, neighbours’, or indeed their countrymen’s.

Zygmunt Bauman has argued that:

Eroticism […] has become a sort of Jack-of-all-trades, desperately seeking a secure abode and steady job yet fearing the prospect of finding them […] This circumstance makes it available for new kinds of social uses, sharply different from the ones known from most of modern history […] The first is the deployment of eroticism in the postmodern construction of identity. The second is the role played by eroticism in servicing the network of interpersonal bonds on the one hand, and the separatist battles of individualisation on the other. (Bauman 1998)

Women interviewed by Batra and Puri seem to be doing precisely both these things. They may appear to be caught out by
the paucity of language in which to express their expectations and experiences of desire outside a framework of conjugal expectations. Their narratives can be seen as a careful rendition or articulation of their sexual subjectivities. The language that is deployed therefore often depends on the idiom available in popular magazines, fiction or romantic novels, as reported by the women themselves. The narratives may thus have little aesthetic embellishment and sometimes sound stilted. What is expressed therefore is not just the actualities of the encounter, but importantly how these actualities are refracted through sociological anchors or reference points, such as virginity, motherhood, homosexuality, etc. Desire and pleasure assume a language that is more easily acceptable and perhaps better understood, that is one of romantic love. Romantic love thus works to make sex a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to aspirational forms of intimacy (Giddens 1992).

But when I had intercourse a couple of years later, while in college, I saw no stars. It was an extremely messy affair. I don’t know why such a fuss is made of sex. I thought it would be so wonderful the first time. But yes, it got better with time and I try to warn some of my friends who are on the verge of getting married that sex is not a romantic affair. I still long for that tobacco kiss […] (Ishika, 23, student, single – What The Body Remembers)

The transformations of intimacy

Pleasure, attachment and subjectivity are the axes around which ideals of intimacy are chased and judged. These aspirations and judgements are internalised as part of the inner life, the most private aspect of oneself. However, as we have seen, this inner world is anchored in the discursive and the public. Ideals and expectations of pleasure and desire in urban India are framed by the discourse on conjugality, which in turn is shaped by not just the cultural and the social, but the national and indeed the global. Hence people articulate the awareness of their intimate selves both in terms

13 In fact, according to a vast number of these narratives, these were also the sources from which women get a preliminary insight into sex and sexuality.
of the experienced as well as the aspired. The imagined norms too operate simultaneously at the level of the personal (‘Am I getting enough sex?’, ‘Why don’t men think emotionally?’, ‘Why do women confuse sex with love?’) and at the level of the social (‘Ahmedabad sexy chhe’. ‘Hyderabad is more happening than Paris’. ‘We Indians are like that only’).

The reason that these surveys come rolling in one after another at the time they do has equally to do with the specificities of the time. The popular image of India amongst the middle classes is one of an emerging global power, within which the middle classes are themselves positioned as drivers of change. There is a thin form of nationalism that gets refracted in these surveys and commentaries, which has to do with a ‘keeping up with the times’. It is in this context that commentators admonish the Indian Man for being conservative, for not keeping up, for not being global enough. At the same time, the sexual subject that is constituted through these exercises is the unitary global Indian, where class, caste, ethnicity, community seem to have little bearing.

The language may not be precise, but as Hacking has argued the ‘looping effect’ of language, cognition and agency is a complex one (Hacking 1994: 358). Surveys, whether accurate or not, provide data about ‘kinds of people’. These ‘kinds of people’ enter popular discussions and private narratives in a way that allows for the evaluation of one’s own actions and the actions of others. The fact that in contemporary India certain ‘kinds of people’ in the realms of sex, love, intimacy and desire are said to be changing is a fascinating anthropological problem. This is partly because we cannot evaluate from a social science perspective exactly what the nature of the change is, even though the individuals surveyed, and the experts consulted all agreed that change is indeed taking place. The reason for this is that it is impossible to establish with any clarity what the baseline is against which such change should be judged. This is not just because sex surveys and the collection of sexual histories by social scientists is something new in the context of India, but because such surveys and narratives can only ever exist within their own terms. That is, within the linguistic, conceptual and agentic forms in which they are currently available.
to us. In the absence of detailed historiography the baseline remains a fictionalised ‘before’ that we cannot establish as an empirical entity or even deconstruct effectively.

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Indian Haunting: Representing Failure as ‘Change’ in Contemporary Mumbai*

Angad Chowdhry and Aditya Sarkar

This is what we do, or what we believe we do: we make the dead speak, we rescue the handloom-weavers of Tipton and Freshitt from the enormous indifference of the present. We have always, then, written in the mode of magical realism. In strictly formal and stylistic terms, a text of social history is very closely connected to those novels in which a girl flies, a mountain moves, the clocks run backwards, and where (this is our particular contribution) the dead walk among the living. If the Archive is a place of dreams, it permits this one, above all others, the one that Michelet dreamed first, of making the dead walk and talk.

Dust, Carolyn Steedman, (2002: 150)

‘Change’ always presupposes a history, and while those that talk about change are not necessarily historians, they require a phantom history1 as a vanishing mediator against which to express themselves. For example, the shift that occurred in 1991 when India opened its markets and embraced consumer capitalism is often articulated in mainstream public discourse against a

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* Some of the paragraphs in this chapter were first published on Aditya Sarkar’s blog www.randomscribbler.blogspot.com (2008).

1 It is a vexed issue in India — we had, in Maharashtra, a ban imposed on a book that was accused of not sufficiently respecting Shivaji, and the Hindutva rewriting of school textbooks when the BJP was in power was based on the rhetoric that the older textbooks were ‘disrespectful’ of certain sacred cows. If you make that demand of history, you kill it.
notionally static, cloistered pre-1991 era, posited as threatening to
development. To see evidence of a 'shift' and to recognise its positive
dimensions requires a conceptual framework of past develop-
ment run aground with inertia. To ignore the ultimately rhetorical
nature of change requires the same framework, as the absence
of any large-scale and immediate manifestation of this evidence
is seen as just another symptom of the inertia of the past. Which is
why free market pundits claim that the increasing social divisions
and economic disparities after 1991 are a remnant of this very past
(bureaucracy, corruption), while at the same time suggesting that
its own continued relevance is demonstrated by the persistence of
these remnants. This article attempts to untangle the dimensions
of this past that never seems to go away.

Just as a truly potent and disturbing joke shatters the co-ordinates
of what we assume to be true and posits its own truth from an
apparently random location, historical traces can emerge from
unexpected places, as Lucien Febvre (1973) recognised. Road-signs
and street-names, in a hypothetical universe where all 'proper'
archival evidence has been lost, can illuminate pasts that we never
suspected to exist. Here, then, is a strange connection between the
imaginative freedoms of the comedian and the ethically-binding
injunction ('do not ignore me!') of every historical trace we retrieve,
and/or stumble across accidentally. In both cases, something
compels commitment to the production of truth. We will use
these connections to explore the co-ordinates of the present and
its 'changes' — from election campaigns that promise to change
the nature of the Nation, to urban debates that promise to change
the nature of the City.

One evening, trapped in a tiny room in Kings Cross, with the
sirens we will forever associate with London's acoustic geography,
the two of us watched a clip from Ken McMullen's 1983 film Ghost
Dance. Derrida sat behind his desk and spoke to a young girl who
asked him about 'ghosts', and whether 'he believed in them'. While
none of us had seen the complete film, the one minute clip seemed
blasphemous — asking Derrida to occupy the role of a theist, a
priest? How impertinent! We laughed, waiting for his response,
because we had just seen him decimate one of the interviewers
in Derrida (2002) when asked about love. Derrida’s answer was
surprising given the context, but not so, given his body of work. Rather than get trapped in the ‘before’ and ‘after’, questions, or about the changes from life to death that the question seemed to presume, he said that the ghost was the memory of something that has never been present, and he saw ghosts even in the body of the person interviewing him. Gestures, words, movements, all familiar yet absolutely unique to the individual … we are all haunted, he seemed to say, by things that have never happened. Captain Jack Sparrow, from Pirates of the Caribbean (Verbinski 2003), seemed like a great example — Johnny Depp’s performance reminded us of Keith Richards, and a little of Pepe Le Pew. In the third film, when Keith Richards actually did a cameo, the similarities disappeared. Familiarity, against which we make our articulations of change, is often just a memory of something that has never been present.

Memory, then, is one of the key conceptual tools used when articulations of normality are made. Articulations of normality therefore are purely discursive in their nature, being products of material practices of representation and repetition. Recall the first page of Foucault’s Order of Things:

this book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought — our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography — breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the places with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things. (Foucault 1994: vi)

Laughter is demanding, and comedy bullies you. Watching really effective comedy, both of us have felt bruised, an effect one might normally — but mistakenly — associate more with Ingmar Bergman than with Monty Python.2 It is also the form that is

2 Not bruised because the jokes cut ‘too close to home’, but because the absence of anything sacred, ranging from content choices to the very ego of the enunciator, functions as a perfect illustration of the absence of Lacan’s point de capiton (1981), that point of suture that, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), guarantees consistency to any discursive field. In the absurdist worlds created by the Pythons, on the other hand, there is no ‘quilting point’, no suture, and this is why watching the succession of sketches in the Flying Circus series can have such a traumatic effect. Comedy, at its most effective, threatens you with psychosis.
most relentless in its universality. At its purest, it substitutes the multicultural credo — ‘everyone is worthy of respect’ — for the far more politically profound and radical ‘everyone deserves to be laughed at’. If you refuse to laugh at something or someone, comedy, by definition, fails. And this leads us to a strange, if crude analogy: with history. History, too, fails if it chooses to ‘respect’ anything or anyone. Of course historians have their heroes and admirations and faiths, even — but in its own way, it is a discipline that crumbles when you make the demand that it should respect ‘sentiments’ or ‘cultures’.

**Shining through digital dust**

Obama’s Success

Let us take a longish detour through one of the most powerful, and recent, global articulations of change — the recently-concluded United States presidential elections. Let us, for the moment, not read it through the lens of political rhetoric, or political economy, and be faithful to the filters of the industries that created and sustained it. As we do not have recourse to any ‘behind the scenes’ accounts, let us try and creatively reconstruct the impulses, and induce the broader strategy. It is important to remember that no one wakes up one morning and decides to communicate to the world at large through the platform of change. We would assume that President Obama’s brand strategists tried to understand their competition’s ‘public image’, which would be their repeated framings in the news media, and public commentary, by documenting the signifiers that had clustered around these ‘public images’. This would be called ‘brand equity’. Then, they would have performed a similar activity on what the arena of politics had come to represent for the voting and international public, the commentary around the American political process, international interventions, domestic politics, current administration, etc. This would be called a ‘category understanding’. They then probably understood that stagnation, elitism, stubborn dependence and polarisation were the mood of the hour. In order to ‘differentiate’ brand Obama, they would have to position him against all of these variables, and do so in such a way that any ‘real political contingencies’ would be overridden by the force of his differentiation.
‘Change’, then, became what Ernesto Laclau would call an ‘empty signifier’ (1996: 36–46), capable of being bundled with a range of meanings that would treat all deviations from Obama’s promise of it as aberrations that were beyond his control or responsibility. Furthermore, the referent was Obama himself, not any broader political process, but the power of the strategy ensured that everyone, from political commentators, to experts and talking heads, assumed the truth of a broader political process because they could see it in the figure of Obama. The forms of inertia this ‘change’ fought against, such as the polarisation of the political process by two parties, lobby groups or corporate control, were seen as impediments to the glorious future. So powerful was the articulation, that rather than see the absence of this ‘glorious future’ as a magnificent demonstration of the simulacra of the democratic process, commentators still continue to refer to these impediments.

The democratic promise of the transformation of political realities, through promises, manifestos and speeches, which is contingent on a popular vote can only be represented by a singular individual. The fears of the Cold War and the propaganda about the authoritarian despots behind the Iron Curtain pointed to more profound truths about the structure of mediated democracy. The signifier ‘President’ brings the idea of democracy and authority in a state of suspended tension. It empties the elevated figure of the President from any interiority (he is, in line with Stalinist figures from the past, merely the vessel into which his subjects’ wishes are poured) and at the same time, his own idiosyncrasies, quirks, apparent vulnerabilities and weaknesses, traits of character, personal history — all become deeply signifying themes (for example, Obama’s ‘international childhood’).

The BJP’s Failure

If cost is the criterion, ads must be regarded as among the most important elements in the economy. Ads are also in central structural position in the economy, overlapping the means and relations of production. The major problem of the capitalist economy since the 1920s shifted from production to consumption. ‘When an individual watches a TV ad the health of the economy is at stake.’ (Poster 1990: 47)
The most successful articulations of change in India come from advertising agencies. Selling mountains of products is not easy. More people purchase products than vote, transcending barriers of financial limitations, moving to grey markets, scouring online for second-hand purchases in order to purchase pens, baseball caps, iPods and face creams. In the contemporary product landscape, the ‘change’ story is not new. It is one of the simplest and most common ways of ensuring large numbers of people factor certain variables at the moment of purchase. Sometimes this change is built on the failure of other products, at other times the change promises a transformation, or it promises belonging. However, the contemporary advertising landscape also recognises that merely signalling difference and promising change is not enough. You have to give the potential owner a reason to believe your promised transformation. This reason does not have to be compelling enough not to pass the owners ‘truth’ filter or reality principle, but must pass through his barriers (whatever they might be, ranging from irrational financial equations and axioms that he regards as rational and financially sound, to what his colleagues would think of him if he did/did not purchase this product). You then have to explicitly enter into a contractual relationship with his images, promising a number of non-material pleasures upon the purchase of this product (Chowdhry 2009: 123–37). And finally, this has to be all done in such a potent way, with so many codes communicated, so many excuses addressed, so many contingencies represented as destiny, that the purchaser feels that they indeed bought this of their own free volition, that the decision to buy has passed through their strict and rational filtering mechanisms, and that the product has generated some promised and some extra effects, and finally positively transformed their lives.3

Now, let us take some of these lessons and look at the BJP’s election campaigns in 2004 and 2009. Buoyant and arrogant in the first election, exhausted and bruised in the second, they tacitly assumed, both times, that the American electorate was setting the standards for the Indian youth. Implicit in this first move was their

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3 For a detailed analysis into the nature of such effects see Chowdhry (2009: 136–37).
own ideological paranoia that overemphasised the psychological imperialism actually exerted by the United States. They also forgot that the ‘brand message’ of Obama did not only represent an excellent strategy for the underdog and the outsider, but also contained addresses to the youth, race, the existing political system, the digital economy, youth activism. Did Advani’s ‘Yes We Can’, the ludicrous appropriation of Obama’s electoral rhetoric on his campaign website, fail because it was lazily borrowed, and did not reflect the contemporary desires of the nation? Perhaps, but to say this is not enough. The Indian voter and consumer, far subtler at reading mediated information, rejected it because it reminded him that he was being lied to, without providing him with a successful and rational reason to accept the lie.

Seeing the buoyancy and growth in the financial, commodities, conventional trading and investment markets in 2004, it was the central government’s (then led by the BJP) way of communicating to active participants that their contribution had created an engine of growth and optimism. It also gave an ‘official’ perspective on the shifts taking place in the massive economic climate for concerned citizens and connected this transformation to an active alliance between the government and a network of traders, brokers and other capitalists. In order to ensure that they could communicate this ‘optimism’ from a national perspective, they spoke about the 2003 monsoon and how it had transformed the landowners’ and agriculturists’ economic reality. Finally, they spoke to what they understood (and correctly so) was the institutional exemplification of the younger generation’s (students, first-jobbers) fantasy of success and power — the information technology revolution. In this they showed that they were ‘global’ and ‘savvy’ in their imaginations, and had covered three contrary dimensions of new India — farming (land, rural India, reality, honest labour, essential India, pure India), speculative and not so speculative capital (global, growing, interconnected, accelerating and innovative and vibrant India) as well as information technology (IT) (victorious, world class, a new standard in the entire space of production, coding and maintenance of IT India). What’s more, they united all these three dimensions under the realm of ‘optimism’ demonstrating the connectivity of trade and parallel growth and hoped that the government could absorb some of the credit.
What we must not do in this process is confuse scale with ritual. The India Shining campaign was still a pre-election campaign, though done on a large scale with an advertising agency. In a conventional product-focused advertising campaign, the strategic dimensions, the execution, the evocations and rhetoric are left to a core team of brand custodians (who understand institutional, product and technological limitations), advertising planners (who understand the overall historical perspective of the competitive landscape), creative departments (who have a feel for visual codes and narrative) and research agencies (who provide a perspective on the discursive matrix within which the contemporary audience understands their lives, and relationships to products). We assume that in the India Shining campaign, the brand custodians were party members with complex political agendas that were rarely communicated to the advertising planners. At the same time, these planners were attempting to create a coherent ‘national brand’ which would erase the memory of the communal pogroms that punctuated the BJP’s history and its related associations with base, undemocratic and fascistic tendencies, whilst simultaneously communicating (and inventing) the positive impact of its rule, all the while creating a catchy slogan that would be understandable by all. What the India Shining campaign managed to conceal was the party’s alienation from the reality of India, though it did demonstrate the impossibility of confining major decisions to one core team of experts. Rather than revealing their ‘glossing over’ of national problems, and attempts to ‘manipulate’ the public, the campaign showed that the BJP was a little too democratic (in that it wanted to get multiple opinions, energies, involved in the crafting of its public image) and was rife with internal politics and mistrust.4

One cannot blame the BJP for trying to create a new ‘myth of origin’ (see Barthes [1972] on the ‘Privation of History’). The ‘myth of origin’, a chain of links that stretches back into the dawn

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of time, has been critical to Indian politics, frequently recurring as an abundance of anxious, retroactive claims to a past in which ‘Indian values’ nourished the soil from which democracy grew. Riots and communalism had to be kept away from the global and national news media, whilst the BJP had somehow to link with the ‘new India’ that might see such potent communal strategies as out of sync with their own ideas of the future, formed now through the influx of global capital and increasing disposable incomes in urban environments. ‘Hindutva’, in other words, needed to be married to a perceived politics of ‘aspiration’, (see Kant [2008] for an ‘insiders account’ of this process) one of the relatively new buzz-words that lays claim upon the ‘truth’ of Indian identities in today’s world. The rewards of hard work, effort and the nation pulling together as one were all old Congress themes. What was significant was how the BJP chose to articulate them in a pretty much revolutionary manner with an open endorsement of wealth and dizzying success. In that moment, the BJP tried to present itself, much like Obama, as the exemplification of change, through a ‘organic’ party of the aspirant, of the successful, of ‘those that made it’ and ‘changed’.

The critical mistake made here by the BJP was not understanding that the representation of change cannot merely speak about change, but must communicate the dimensions that are not changing and then blame this failure on the complexity of ground realities. This then lends their argument a dimension of truth and creates a compelling case for the existence of an ‘objective referent’ (as Laclau and Mouffe [1985] argue, practice is the inability of structure to fully complete itself and account for its contingencies).

‘India Shining’ attributed a positive evaluation to a general set of contingencies and implied the BJP as cause (or perhaps arena in which all this took place). After the 1990s in India, the party, or the state, cannot represent itself as ‘arena’ through which the nation unfolds (a Cold-War trick played most blatantly in the ‘socialist’ Eastern bloc). ‘Change’ was a variable owned by liberal economic policies, and for a party to stake claims on it was seen as inappropriate (by the 1990s the rhetoric of transformation was owned by trade/markets/commodity circulation and not by the portentous, senile, corrupt, uncouth and populist party members...
elected by the 'dirty masses'). The 'idea of India' has historically been framed through the state-run electronic news media (who reinforced the value of the ideological closure of the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting a contained and coherent idea of nation, destabilised by particular events). This is now continued by the private news channels, with their narrow, market-driven, hyper-frenetic framing of events as news (see also Somnath Batabyal's article). In this contemporary scenario, democratic activity is always moving, power is always contingent, and the state cannot perform any real closure on reality, as reality is live and changing all the time. The state cannot articulate change, as reality is changing and unbounded. However, in representing a hyper movement and transformation, but through disciplined and filtered mediation, the fight over the change that has happened (India Shining), or the change that is to come (Obama–Advani), the mass media cannot but cue a successful theology. Both these narratives are readings of time, a discursive astrology that is recognised only when they fail to close the positive and negative evocations of their narrative strategy.

The Congress's recent Incredible India campaign, by contrast, displayed due reverence to the essentially timeless nature of 'India'. Unlike 'India Shining', it did not suggest the State Ministry's agentive control over transforming the essence of the nation. The nation is supposedly 'described' ('Incredible') and not 'evaluated', ('Shining'), and in Congress's innocent, and passive, description, the active evaluations of political astrology ('change') are absent. The politics of change, then, should track how evaluations become descriptions and not evaluate the validity of descriptions.

Speculations

So we have, on the one hand, the obvious success of a highly mediatised electoral campaign in one of the world's two 'largest democracies', and the equally obvious failure of another in the second. Beyond the obvious and banal differences between Obama, Bush, Advani and Manmohan Singh, however, we need to be able to discern a speculative identity. The media campaigns run by each of these camps — as opposed to the concrete political work that different parties and politicians did on the ground — amounted,
in each case, to a bag of carefully chosen and performed tricks. A glance at the histories of the relevant actors lays this bare: Obama promised his free-floating ‘change’ on the back of a Democratic Party complicit with some of the most brutal acts of geopolitical violence in living memory, the BJP tried to reap the benefits of social changes that his party — and the national media — had neither the patience nor the intelligence to grasp, let alone evaluate, and the Congress strategically batted on an existing field of social-progressivist rhetoric that it patently had no claim to.

The movement of historical forces, whatever these might be at any given moment, lays bare such pretensions, but it does more than that — it lays them bare as comedy, as a colossal bag of jokes. In each electoral campaign, lies and half-truths are masqueraded, portentously, as the emblems of a profound historical break whose time had come. Obama’s regime exemplifies this most dramatically: his own party enthusiastically helped shoot down the attempt to close the gulag at Guantanamo, a pitifully minimal act that, if enforced, might have been the first of a million necessary steps to transform the United States into something that could plausibly pretend to be the ‘great democracy’ that both Republicans and Democrats claimed it was.

Accusations of hypocrisy as a legitimate critique of power are akin to bringing soap suds to a gun fight. It never ceases to amaze us that a state which has over half a century practiced torture and genocide, institutionalised racial segregation, practiced witch hunts, flouted international regulation time and again, while being held up as an exemplar of democracy and freedom never triggers the laughter it deserves. Other regimes, such as the Iran of the Ayatollahs, Pinochet’s Chile, Fujimori’s Peru, the Taliban’s Afghanistan, apartheid South Africa, Suharto’s Indonesia, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, are indefensible. If anyone were to systematically argue that Pol Pot or Pinochet were benevolent democratic heads of state, they’d be hooted out of the hall. The same does not happen when Condoleezza Rice or Donald Rumsfeld make speeches about the United States’s role in making this a freer world.

The same point applies (though of course on a smaller scale) to the Indian state and media’s routine condemnations of
‘Maoist terror’ (see Zizek 2010), or any kind of terror for that matter, the most odious examples of which should turn green with envy when confronted with the horrific brutality of ‘counter-terrorist’ operations financed and armed by the government of the day (whether Congress or BJP). Such earnest fulminations, from a state and media complicit in the execution and cover-up of far more extensive acts of state terror should have one effect alone: through our tears of loss and fear, they should make us laugh. For anyone truly horrified by the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008, there could have only been two appropriate responses while watching Times Now, CNN-IBN, NDTV, or any of the other news channels that strategically deployed a shrill uber-patriotism in their revenue-boosting coverage of the events. First, a historical appreciation of the colossal nature of the lies and myths being spun in the guise of righteous patriotic rage. Second, a side-splitting laughter at the absurdity of such media practices.

**The past is a zombie**

The media counts on the past to always be there, and in many ways creates a coherence around it. On a practical level, this is critical because something can be ‘news’, and hence new, only when judged against something that is ‘old’. It is like an auto-affirming ontology, where past is presumed, and present created, by the same systematic deployment of representations. However, there are always zombies:

From within the symbolic order, specters, apparitions, the ‘living dead’, and so on, signal the unsettled (symbolic) accounts; as such, they disappear the moments these accounts are settled by way of symbolisation. There is, however, a debt that can never be honoured, since it sustains the very system of exchange-indemnification. At this more radical level, ‘ghost’; and other forms of revenants bear witness to the virtual, fictional character of the symbolic order as such, to the fact that this order exists ‘on credit’; that, by definitions, its accounts are never fully settled. (Zizek 2005: 193)

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There is the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything, and then there is its tiny flotsam that has landed up in the office you are at work at. Your craft is to conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater, and your competence in that was established long ago. Your anxiety is more precise, and more prosaic. It’s about PT S2/1/1, which only arrived from the stacks that afternoon, and which you will never get through tomorrow. (Steedman 2002: 18)

The mythology of Mumbai: the porosity of social boundaries, where blue-collar and white-collar bump collars on crowded streets; tea and paan shops, tiny cheap restaurants and permit rooms jostle with large shopping centres and expensive eateries; working-class neighbourhoods weave through the shadows of looming residential skyscrapers and towering office blocks; narrow alleys stuffed with pedestrian life seep into broad boulevards crammed with slow-moving car traffic; flyovers where cars whizz by overlook messy junction points of humming, throbbing pedestrian roads. This is not Delhi, with its zoned-off territories, its industrial units banished to the city’s edges, its gated communities and malls designed exclusively for the super-rich. Lower Parel, to take a paradigmatic case, is a messy junction of interchanges, an exhibition of classes, communities and histories passing each other on the street, unsmilingly but also, on the whole, unthreateningly.

Try to imagine that you are sitting alone one night in Phoenix Mills reading Borges’s remarkable selection of short stories, Ficciones. A strange, though not surprising sight in contemporary Mumbai, where you can sip lattes and marvel at the intricate structure of ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ (Borges 1994). Imagine that in this situation you look up, recognise something — or someone — and then die. Detectives, forensic scientists, crime reporters and family members talk, think and imagine the moment of your death. This is done by imagining motives, causes, effects, conversations, etc. If you are especially lucky, the tabloid Mid Day will illustrate the entire event in the format of a comic strip, which has visual stock characters and a unique grammar, different from the newsprint. Imagination is key in making the truth come out; one animates it and then pretends that it was always already there. As Zizek puts it, the fictions (the reconstruction of your death by Mid Day, the forensic truth seekers, mourners) ‘determine the
structure of what we experience as reality’, while ‘spectres belong to the Real; their appearance is the price we pay for the gap that forever separates reality from the Real … No spirit … without spirits (‘ghosts’, revenants, living dead)’ (2005: 194).

The forensics will establish some sort of truth: either you died of a heart attack or someone jabbed you with a poisonous needle. From then, through the movement of information between journalists, police officers and detectives the process of ‘creating the truth’ about your death will begin. There will be character witnesses, enemies with motives will be imagined, a nightmare without limits will begin for your near and dear ones; if you are a celebrity, or your death has been particularly fantastic, not a single rumour about your life will remain unrepresented.

Phoenix Mills in Lower Parel, the theatre of your last act, used to be part of Girangaon, the ‘mill village’. When the strike of 1982 ended in unqualified defeat,6 productive technology shifted from mills to power looms, and the market demands shifted from cotton to polyester and other synthetic fibres. For several years the mill lands lay vacant and unused; the communities built around them began to float apart. However, the city continued to grow. Real estate agents and builders, with the state and money on their side, argued that this was the chance the city had, finally, to become ‘world-class’, to become Shanghai, to become Manhattan. What a marvellous place to die, a site of great political debate and the site of tremendous inauguration. Eventually the side with the guns and the money won: acres and acres of mill land were turned over, largely illegally, to builders and investors for ‘new development’. The buildings that made up the old mill were preserved, but a new world sprang up within their walls. No spirit … without spirits.

Meanwhile, the streets outside are the same as they ever were: local grocers, tobacconists, engineering and car repairing workshops, fruit and vegetable sellers, assorted mechanical blue-collar skills, surrounding this weirdly unsure, wavering, swaying

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6The strikes, called by trade union leader Dutta Samant, for wage increases among mill workers in Mumbai, 1982, caused over 200,000 workers to go on strike. This ended with the closure of nearly 80 mills and mass unemployment. See Menon and Adarkar (2005).
circus of the local patriciate and gentry, small and large, modest and rich. This circus is contained within the space of the mall: step outside and you enter a totally different world. The surrounding streets still belong, temporarily, to the proletarians and plebeians. But they in turn are surrounded. The corporate patriciate and white-collar gentry inhabit the oases of calm, the high-rise buildings that survey this landscape and the rest of the city. Their meeting point is here, in Phoenix Mills, where they stock up for the week, and demonstrate the essential unity of the community they belong to; separated from them, the others, the mass of people who spit on the roads, the dirty faces of children who stare hungrily into shop-front windows from the outside, the men and women living around the mall who have no idea how long their occupancy of these roads and alleys will last, how long before they are cleansed, and we have, finally, our Shanghai or our Manhattan. This is the slow, contested, but inexorable dynamic of segregation in the city, into which your own death will intangibly flow.

The legally articulated pretext for the acquisition of these mill lands was for workers' recreation. But the compound that surveys this back-breaking labour, the compound where you died, does not appear to be built for this purpose. In one sense it is: recreation in the literal sense of the word: to re-create, to create afresh. A new economy and new forms of work. This may be a space of consumption, but it remains a factory nonetheless. Tangible goods and intangible services are produced each moment. Men and women smile plastic smiles at you from behind food counters as they wrap your sandwiches and rolls. McDonald's gives you the assembly line in miniaturised and perfect form: the young workers who hand you burgers and fries never stop for a moment, never sit, their hands and bodies move in a pre-synchronised manner. Ford and Taylor are recreated in the juxtapositions and rhythms of their work. Security guards, many of whom may have worked in the old mill, or others around it, move around sleeplessly, watching you for signs of transgression, stifling yawns but unable to hide the tiredness in their eyes, behind their dull blue suits. Waiters and shop assistants scurry to your service, always ready to be of use, fortunate if you speak to them with courtesy. A complex, dynamic economy of labour persists within the walls of the old factory.
This is an economy with new codes, new hierarchies, but an economy of labour nonetheless, where dead and living labour mingle. History is lived. All that was solid has melted into air, but air has crystallised as real estate, has taken shape, again, in this new economy of exchanges, services, and construction.

**Immortality: An incomplete death**

In the United Kingdom in 1984, coal miners and mining were killed. Margaret Thatcher crushed the militant centre of British working-class life and politics, and changed the face of Northern England. The pits emptied out; men were made redundant. The jobs would not come back. Something flowered, though, in the midst of this defeat. A boy from a family of striking miners began to dance. He achieved his dream against his family, his community, the childhood he’s been given, and the boundaries within which he has been taught to leash his talent. He left the dying for the new; he became a professional ballet dancer. This is the story told by Stephen Daldry’s 1997 runaway blockbuster, *Billy Elliot* (2000). In Ken Loach’s *Kes* (1969), another Billy, a boy from a mining family befriended a kestrel, masters it, teaches it to fly back to him and perch on his wrist. For a brief while, assisted by a caring school teacher, Billy’s pleasures in the bird bring fulfilment: he discovers there can be more to life than the mining pit he’s destined for. But soon his brother, brutalised by the drudgery of his work and life, kills the bird to punish the boy for a small misdemeanour, and this destroys the dream. The film ends with the boy sobbing, controlling his tears, and burying his beloved bird. ‘Not going down t’pit’, he yells defiantly at his brother at the start of the film, but he almost certainly will, and he’ll stay there through his life.

Both deaths are reanimated in different ways. In 1969, there was persistent fatalism; in 1997, we could tell stories of the individual emerging from the rubble of destruction. In an almost precise historical mid-point between Loach and Daldry’s works, is the screen of the miners’ strike, its brutal suppression by Thatcher, and the death of coal-mining communities across the UK. The former movie was made at a time when coal mining was a world too real, too alive, to be romanticised into fantasies of
individual achievement. The latter movie, made over a decade after the destruction of the world depicted by the former, is able to confer upon it the resigned, nostalgic and benevolent aura of posterity. Despite the immense tragedy of this historical shift — indeed, precisely because of this tragedy — there is something ironic, and funny, about the circumstances that made *Billy Elliot* possible.

Death can make you immortal, capable of being animated in many forms and guises, with many lessons, only because you have not completed your own story, given it any violent closure. The more we try to claim to have broken with a past, whether through Death, or Obama, or Shanghai, the more it reminds us that it will always be there, persisting on and on, not aware that it is dead, and acting out of turn. Articulations of change exist only to foreclose this uncontrollable, persistent and inexhaustible supply of spectres that can never be forgotten, which always walk by our doors, windows, archives, and through our streets triggering uncontrollable laughter. The mass media then, especially the change-oriented Indian one, is a comedian — terribly naïve yet occasionally brilliant. Media studies and historians need to focus not on the ‘repressed’, but on the way it ‘returns’ in our mass mediums.

References

Theory and Practice in Emerging Digital Cultures in India

Matti Pohjonen and Soumyadeep Paul

The two of us wrote [this] together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd. Here we have made use of everything that came within range, what was closest as well as farthest away. Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit. To make ourselves unrecognizable in turn. To render imperceptible, not ourselves but what make us act, feel, and think. Also because it is nice to talk like everybody else, to say the sun rises, when everybody knows it’s only a manner or speaking. To reach, not a point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.

*A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 3–4)

This article begins at a chance encounter at a party. This was sometime early 2005 in a small flat at the dusty outskirts of Andheri East, Mumbai. One of ‘us’, Matti, had just recovered from a serious illness and was getting slowly back into his fledgling Ph.D. research. The other of us, Soumyadeep, had recently left his technological job in the Silicon Valley and was now back in India trying to work on more creative things than writing code for industrial printers. As both of us worked on documentaries at the time, we found quite a lot to talk about. And as the evening progressed, the topics became increasingly eclectic and interesting: experimental film merged with new developments at the fringes of...
digital culture; topological mathematics with the imagined spaces of Mumbai and the demolition of its slums.

This was an exciting time to live in Mumbai. Especially amongst the tech-savvy media practitioners, there was a lot of creative energy in the air. Blogs had recently arrived as a new way of sharing content with the rest of the world — perhaps for the first time with such ease and speed. The host of the party, Indian writer/artist Rohit Gupta, had been a centrifugal force behind some of the more interesting experiments that had explored this new medium. *The Great Mahakali Write-a-Thon*¹ had already amassed a group of 50 writers from across the world to write a novel in one weekend marathon online session. *Cloakroom*² had been the first SMS — blog-novel to emerge out of India. And more recently, Rohit had launched *Desimediabitch*,³ a collective blog for journalists with a self-proclaimed mission of revolutionising the news environment in India. Its high profile coverage of the Asian Tsunami has been widely cited as some of the best citizen journalism to emerge out of the tragedy by *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and the BBC. He had also been one of the masterminds behind *Tsunamihelp*,⁴ a collectively-edited website that emerged as the key node for emergency news during the Asian Tsunami. The site had received millions of page views and worldwide recognition for the help it provided during the events.

Both of us knew Rohit quite well. Soumyadeep had already collaborated with him on many online experiments including the first ‘vlogs’, or video blogs, to come out of India. He and Rohit also shared a background of having studied at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) but — unlike many of their peers — both had decided to pursue more creative interests rather than high salaries in the commercial sector. Matti had been introduced to Rohit through his Ph.D. research that looked at, among other things, the

¹ The event took place in May 2004. The website for the festival does not exist anymore.
² While the website can be found at http://cloakroom.blogspot.com it is no longer active since 2005 (accessed 15 July 2010).
³ The website was shut down by its founder Rohit Gupta in June 2005.
impact of new digital technology on international news delivery in India. Yet, after six months, the theories of global media he had read seemed out of touch with what was going on, surrounded by this flurry of activity of the people gathered at this party. Was this not exactly what research was about? Not merely regurgitating the obvious but finding something new, something different, something unexpected …?

Life, of course, moved on since that impromptu gathering that one typical Mumbai evening. Matti eventually moved back to London to work on his thesis inspired (and confused) by these turbulent few months. Soumyadeep became the founding member of a technological start-up in which he could continue experimenting with the emerging online video platforms he was interested in. Yet, the discussions that began this one evening kept on popping up on chance encounters, on long-winded instant messaging (IM) chats, at after hours of friends’ weddings and over a few beers in Goa. Eventually, this background murmur crystallised into a more formal attempt to explore the uneasy intersection between the artistic, the theoretical and the technological that both of us were interested in. This collaboration culminated in a co-authored paper presented at the conference on Indian Mass Media and the politics of Change at SOAS, University of London. The presentation, titled ‘A Dialogue on the Indian Software Revolution and Practice-based Research’, looked at the complex issues researchers and practitioners face when trying to understand the rapid changes that are happening to digital technologies in India and elsewhere.

The article you read here is an outcome of the discussions that began at that chance encounter many years ago. It is a more sustained reflection on the presentation we gave at the conference and the collaborative work we have done since. It specifically tries to outline some of the key issues we believe are central to engendering such creative collaboration between theory and practice and some broader implications this might have for both research and practice.

**Theory and practice — A double bind?**

What exactly is then the problem? Why not carry on business as usual and leave each to his/her own: theoreticians to explaining
the broader social and political implications of the changes that are taking place; practitioners to the day-to-day grind of coming up with innovative and commercially-viable solutions to technological problems? Why the need for such collaboration in the first place between the more philosophically-inflected cultural studies approaches and the development of these new technologies and applications? We like to use the phrase ‘double bind’ to describe some of the (often humorous) issues that get raised when these two perspectives are tangled. This ‘generative metaphor’\(^5\), we believe, also allows us to tease out some of the issues this kind of collaboration needs to address and why, in the first place, may it be necessary.

In its colloquial use, a double bind refers to a

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\text{dilemma in communication in which the individual (or group) received two of more conflicting messages, with one negating the other; a situation in which successfully responding to one message means failing with the other and vice versa, so that the person will be automatically be wrong regardless of response. (Wikipedia)}^6
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By shifting between these frames of reference needed to understand the conflicting messages, the other perspective becomes always displaced, distorted and impossible.\(^7\) And because of this impossibility, there can never be a happy ending of a shared

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\(^5\) In contemporary art, ‘generative art’ refers to the kind of art that has been created by using algorithms in a computer. One key characteristic of generative art, therefore, is that it works with new unpredictable forms that may have not been possible using devices such as the random function and creating autonomous systems that are quasi-independent from the artists influence. By generative metaphors, therefore, we refer to the kind of metaphor here whose purpose is not to reflect on some underlying state of affairs (reality in the vulgar sense) but rather create new connections and unpredictable perspectives towards the topic that we are both interested in.


\(^7\) In a somewhat different context, Zizek talks about this incommensurability of viewpoints in his book the \textit{Parallax View}, where he develops the theory of the ‘parallax gap’ — a gap that separates two points of view between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. While our perspective is somewhat different from Zizek, for similarities see Zizek (2006).
‘meta-communicative understanding’ towards these conflicting perspectives. A theoretically-trained researcher sees things from his or her tunnel vision shared by his or her peers; a practitioner does the same. The object speaks to us in radically different ways.

What is even more interesting about the metaphor of the double bind are its other uses. Bateson (1956), for instance, has argued that one consequence of such double binds in communication is the pathological responses we have to it. This is because, when the meta-communicative level breaks down

a person is likely to choose one of several alternatives in response to his or her inability to judge what the other person ‘really’ means … Most of the responses to this failure Bateson claims are pathological: for example, paranoia, when the person assumes that what is ‘really’ meant is ultimately harmful; hebephrenia, when the person gives up on attempting to distinguish between levels of meaning and hence either takes everything literally or takes nothing seriously; catatonia, when the person detaches from external communication and withdraws into internal processes; and even schizophrenia where hallucinations and delusions are created to resolve the double bind. (Bell 2006: 98)

All consequences of this double bind, however, do not have to be negative. We can always respond to it in creative ways; in fact, it is one precondition for creativity to emerge. So, stretching this provocative metaphor just a bit further, when faced with this incommensurability of differing viewpoints, a theoretician or a practitioner can very well become paranoid, schizophrenic, hebephrenic or catatonic; yet, this can as well engender creative responses to the impossibility of resolving these differences. The object can open up new ways of communicating.⁸

Not all consequences of a double bind, however, are pathological. Bateson notes that just as the schizophrenic responds to the double bind by creating hallucinations, delusions, etc., so too, he claims,

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⁸ There has been quite a lot of new work recently in theorising the object and how we could philosophically understand it. While this is not the point of the article here, for more of this new philosophical trend that aims to go beyond the social constructivism in social sciences. See Harman (2002).
can this creativity be used as a means of resisting pathological consequences. Thus, although the double bind can result in the failure of communicative interaction, wherein either it collapses into being nothing other than a self-refering threat (paranoia), or it disrupts conventional forms of communication to the point where it no longer refers (schizophrenia); it can also be circumvented with the creation of new forms of communication, new conventions, that can re-open the lines of communication. (Bell 2006: 99, emphasis added)

Thus, instead of retreating into the shadowy enclaves of our mutual disciplines’ monadic and distrustful ways of seeing the world, such conflicting frames of reference can also create new unconventional ways of communicating and acting.\(^9\)

Yet, somehow, we feel we have not convinced anybody without specific examples. However, we will have to diverge a bit, bifurcate and talk about the object from the two different perspectives underlying this article. As we will see later, this division itself is perhaps problematic. However, until then, we will have to shift away from the safe anonymity of the ‘we’ or ‘us’ to the perspective of ‘I’ of the two of us behind this article.

A theorist cries out …

This ‘I’ has a problem. I am interested in what I loosely define as ‘emerging’ digital cultures. By emerging I mean here of course new digital technologies that are under rapid change and development. Even at the risk of adopting some of the techno-capitalist jargon here, these are the kinds of technological developments that are at the forefront of innovation and will only be — if ever — adopted widely by the mainstream in the future.\(^{10}\) The problem, therefore,

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9 Some interesting similar work is currently being done in the relatively new sub-field of media studies called Software Studies. These also try to combine both theoretically- and practically-informed approaches to understanding new digital technology. See, for instance, Fuller (2008).

10 My use of the term ‘emergent’ has some background in the philosophy of complex systems where systems and patterns only emerge out of the multiplicity of local interactions. For more elaborate details of theories of emergence and complexity in contemporary cultural studies, see for instance DeLanda (2002).
with understanding such an amorphous and fleeting object of research is that it is difficult to know something that, by definition, cannot be too known about. The moment these technologies become widely used and mainstream they stop being emergent. Take blogs as an example. Around 2002–04, blogs were still relatively known. A small group of technologically-savvy early adopters were experimenting with the different ways one could use what technologically accounts to a simple innovation in reverse-chronological publishing on the Internet. Today, however, blogs are mainstream. Viral marketing companies, institutions, newspapers, politicians, academics, pundits (and even retired family members) now have blogs. One consequence of this popularity is that, as The Wired\(^\text{12}\) put it:

the blogosphere, once a freshwater oasis of folksy self-expression and clever thought, has been flooded by a tsunami of paid bilge. Cut-rate journalists and underground marketing campaigns now drown out the authentic voices of amateur wordsmiths. It’s almost impossible to get noticed, except by hecklers. And why bother? The time it takes to craft sharp, witty blog prose is better spent expressing yourself on Flickr, Facebook, or Twitter

[...] When blogging was young, enthusiasts rode high, with posts quickly skyrocketing to the top of Google’s search results for any given topic, fueled by generous links from fellow bloggers … No more. Today, a search for, say, Barack Obama’s latest speech will deliver a Wikipedia page, a Fox News article, and a few entries from professionally run sites like Politico.com. The odds of your clever entry appearing high on the list? Basically zero. (Boutin 2008)

In other words, the unpredictability and possibility that existed when a technology was still nascent is therefore no longer there. So what I am interested in these ‘emergent’ technologies is exactly this ‘Bracket of change’ between creative experimentation and development of these technologies and the moment they lose their creative potential.

\(^{11}\) There are of course geographical differences here. I am mostly talking about the US and India, which tend to be a bit ahead of some other parts of the world in terms of news digital developments.

\(^{12}\) See www.wired.com.
Gilles Deleuze once remarked that research should address two things. The first is that the abstract does not explain anything; it, instead, must be explained. The second is that it should not aim to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find ‘conditions under which something new is produced (creativeness)’ (Deleuze 1987b: vii, emphasis added). In a broader sense, therefore, what I am interested here are the conditions under which something new, the future, is being produced and the social, political and philosophical implications of this. What then is wrong with the existing approaches? Why not just focus on tested methods — ethnography perhaps — and conduct meticulous research of the people who work with developing these technologies? There has already been a lot of good research that has looked at similar topic from cyber-cultures, software developers to virtual reality platforms (see Raymond 1999, Boelstroff 2008). Why then the stress for collaboration and experimentation?

There are two specific reasons why I think such collaborative work is needed. The first reason has to do with how academic/theoretical knowledge is produced. Or rather, said differently, it has to with the ‘speed’ of how this happens. This is to say, there is usually at least a two-year delay between doing research and its formalisation into a published work of knowledge in seminars, journal articles, books etc. For instance, the rite of passage of academic life, Ph.D. research, usually takes between three to five years to enter the public domain from the time the results have been gathered, analysed and the arduous process of writing into academic format completed. There is of course nothing inherently wrong with such slow meticulous reflection; most topics and subjects require it. However, with what I am interested in, such long periods of gestation are simply not possible. For instance, when I was doing my Ph.D. fieldwork in India, there was a lot of interesting experiments around...
citizen journalism going on, especially around the Asian Tsunami. Yet, when I returned to write about what I had seen, blogs were a relatively unknown topic in theories of international news. It was only about two to three years after that that blogs emerged as a popular subject and started to be widely discussed in seminars, journals and eventually books (see McNair 2006). The irony of this was, of course, that by this time, the practitioners that I had worked with during my research about the Asian Tsunami had already moved on to other interests. The bracket on unpredictability, but also of possibility to innovate that characterised early blogs during my stay in Mumbai, was not there anymore.

So I faced a problem. What I was doing theoretically was asynchronous with what I was doing practically. The classical methods of research were not suitable for researching the 'emergent' characteristics of the digital cultures I was interested in. By the time it would take to produce research from the safety of critical reflection, the object would have already changed beyond recognition. So instead of resolving to remaining a few years behind practical work (that is, ultimately changing my research topic to something more static), I needed to find another approach that would be better suited to this time difference. Then how could I remain critically reflective but, as importantly, also be able to adapt to the rapid changes that are taking place? What kinds of creative responses could this double bind between theory and practice then engender?

The second reason was more theoretical. This had to do with the broader philosophical problems in understanding change how something new comes about in the world. When I had been researching blogs in India during my Ph.D. fieldwork, the people involved seldom had any idea what the outcomes of their practices would be. Rather, as happened during the Asian Tsunami, the outcomes emerged out of contingent practices of improvising with the resources available at any given time. So the question that

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15 A good example was a widely-circulated SMS text message by a Sri Lankan blogger Morquendi during the Asian Tsunami. He started sending text messages from the Tsunami-struck areas when he was visiting a hospital.
I became interested in was — when faced with such contingency and unpredictability — how do we understand the conditions under which something new and unexpected takes place? Moreover, how do we ever recognise this in the first place; that is, phrased differently: how do we know something that we do not know already?

This deceptively simple question hides nuanced philosophical problems that I cannot fully get into here. It deals roughly with the broader philosophical problem of how things change and how we can think differently from what came before. The classic ‘image of thought’ in especially Western philosophical traditions has privileged structure over process, familiarity over the unknown, permanence over change and identity over difference. In other words, we know things because we can compare them to the categories we already have in place through which to give them meaning and significance. We understand things because we recognise them in the first place; and without these a priori categories through which this happens, knowledge would be impossible in the chaotic world. The problem with such an image, however, is that it is conservative by nature: it makes it impossible to recognise anything new or unfamiliar.16 ‘It depends on identifying something new by comparing it with what is already known or what has been experienced. This conservatism is philosophical in the sense that philosophy refers the form of the new back on the form of the already known’ (Williams 2003: 119). So the problem I faced when looking at the potentially ‘emergent’ qualities of these technologies was: how could I then best understand the changes that were taking place without reverting back to what I already knew or had read?

and found that phones did not work. Text messages did work so it was the only way he could communicate the horrors of what he was seeing to his friends. These messages were then later disseminated and distributed widely via a Mumbai-based blog to another blog in California and finally to the mainstream newspapers such as The Guardian. When I interviewed the people involved, everybody involved was surprised about what had happened and the popularity of these messages.

16 The technical problem here has to do with the more broader question of how we understand difference and criticism of modes of representation as a way of understanding difference. One of the best elaboration and criticism of this image of thought can be found in Deleuze (1994).
Some of the most popular applications in use today — Google, Facebook, Twitter — are not the product of careful planning and strategy. Rather, they developed out of experimentation with smaller technological problems, and their popularity came later often surprising even the founders of these companies. So how could I, in turn, maintain a level of openness towards the emergent and unpredictable in my research? What method would be best suited for this?

In contemporary philosophy, one response to the problem of change has been to emphasise ‘creative experimentation’ as a method of understanding change. Deleuze, for instance, has argued that thought itself should always be experimental and creative (see Deleuze 1994). This is because the only way we can sense or encounter something ‘different’ is by experimenting with what are the immanent limits of our existing frameworks of knowledge through which we make sense of the world. A less conservative image of thought, therefore, would consist of not recognising what already exists but rather being as open as possible towards the events and changes that occur around us.17

The deep meaning of search, creation and experiment must … change from verification or falsification to innovation; neither the establishment of truths nor their rejection, but rather an affirmation of new transitory ones … it is to be radically critical with respect to intellectual and emotional obstacles to creativity in order to be worthy of the novelty of events. (Williams 2008: 204)

Such a less conservative image of thought (and thus of research) would therefore not be based on the retroactive recognition of facts already out there in the world (thus incapable of capturing change, difference or novelty) but rather would consist of active experimentation with what is possible and what is new.18 ‘To learn

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17 In What is Philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari argue that ‘Philosophy’s sole aim is to become worthy of the event’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). See also Deleuze (1990).
18 This would be called the ‘virtual’ in Deleuze’s philosophy. It is not to be confused with potential in the colloquial sense but is rather a more nuanced philosophical concept looking at the necessary conditions that make the actual possible and that form an intrinsic part of it. For a more detailed understanding of this, see Massumi (2002).
is to go beyond what is known and what can be done in a given situation. This sensitivity and creativity are linked: no sensitivity without creation — thus learning is necessarily experimental' (Williams 2003: 136).

These difficult philosophical problems are of course beyond this article. However, when I became interested in theory/practice-based collaboration, this experimental approach was best suited to the specific problems I was interested in. Not only does it allow me to keep pace the rapid changes that are taking place, it also allows me to remain as open as possible towards what is uncertain, contingent, emerging — the pragmatics of the possible.

A practitioner cries out ...

I work as an architect in the web-based media technologies, mostly in the backdrop of emerging digital cultures like India. My role requires me to understand the current trends, the rapidly-changing, their effects and applications, and come up with innovations that might be useful in the future. The quintessential problem that I deal with on a daily basis, therefore, is the problem of creativity and change. On one hand, I try to understand cultural and technological shifts and its effects; on the other hand, I have to innovate on this ever-slippery ground where nothing is predictable, create an idea that is the next logical evolution.

One of our larger quest is to understand the conditions under which something new is created, and try to create those conditions so that optimal conditions exist for the idea to be realised. While the exact process has been constantly evolving and is always under debate, most technology ventures tend to take the idea through a few loosely connected stages — initial conception of the idea (seed idea and research), its first implementation (prototyping), an early launch (alpha or beta launch) and experimentation by a community of practitioners (also known as early adopters), and its eventual acceptance as a useful tool that generally seeds a surge of activity around the venture trying to understand and extend its applications in the real world. All through these stages, the idea itself morphs and adapts to the conditions under which it is exposed, once opened out to the world the innovation often takes a life of its own, the users helping shape it as much or more as the creators.
A case in point is Twitter, a microblogging tool that allows networked conversations to emerge. Few years ago, when twitter was conceived and built, the founders only had a miniscule idea of its potential. Twitter founder Biz Stone says in an interview:

"What we did was we had this concept in 2006, which we took two weeks to build out, and introduced to some of our friends, who are of course the geeky, techie types who are compelled to try a new form of communication just because. And they invited their like similar-minded friends. And we positioned the product as such: As this cool new way to stay hyper-connected with friends, family or organizations that you care about and thus we've become sort of the pulse for those things'.

Even as it slowly grew into a communication tool early last year, no one had any idea that it would be used massively for covering the 2007 Mumbai terrorist attacks, with real time updates from the ground and a stream of photographs.

On Wednesday night, Mumbai resident Asfaq Tapia heard two blasts. Before turning in, he sleepily noted it on his Twitter account, a Web site that lets users broadcast short messages about what they are doing.

"Later, I started receiving phone calls saying, "Are you ok? Where are you?" At that point I realized something major has happened," said Mr. Tapia, 24, who then started broadcasting on-the-ground updates, including from a hospital near one of the attacked hotels.

The Mumbai attacks have unleashed a storm of live updates from residents, swelling traffic and content on sites such as Twitter and Yahoo Inc.'s photo Web site Flickr. A Googlemap on the attack sites was swiftly put up. A lengthy entry about the attacks on user-generated online encyclopedia Wikipedia surfaced in less than an hour. (Wall Street Journal, 28 November 2008).

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In the recent years, most technology ventures have started the process of launching their ideas at premature stages so that the early adopters help in forging it. Google Labs is a prime example of such a process, where the company tends to function in a open laboratory model, allowing the creators and developers to directly interact with the early users. It is becoming largely obvious, therefore, that for an innovation to function in the real world, it would in fact have to be created in collaboration with it.

This shift in the creation process happened around 2004, when the users of a system started voicing their individual opinions, ideas, through blogs, or in their social networks, and it became imperative for the creators to meet up to their expectations. A number of interesting challenges have since cropped up for the innovators. In the blinding pace of change, how do we create newness? How do we ascertain that by the time the idea is launched, it wouldn’t become irrelevant? How do we even find the time to step back, take an objective look, and extrapolate into the future, when we do not even completely understand the chaos as it currently exists? Since the digital world must necessarily intermingle with the real, how do we achieve true synchronicity with the emergent behaviour of rapidly changing cultures?

In other words, this multi-faceted process of creation, adaptation, adoption and change has to necessarily unfold in the backdrop of a constantly shifting and chaotic canvas. If the idea does not constantly adapt, it becomes irrelevant by the time it is implemented, and dies a premature death. It is in an attempt to deal with these pertinent challenges that we started delving into models that inherently marry research and practice in a collaborative model. If it became possible to perform creative experimentation in parallel to the existing models of innovation, it would perhaps lead us to a way in solving some of the challenges that we face. Specifically, the following three reasons highlight why I think a collaborative model might help.

The first reason is to alleviate the problem of speed-blindness, where the pace of innovation, adoption and usage often makes the innovators blind to the larger implications of an idea. Due to the sheer lack of time and space, and the extreme urgency to create and stay relevant, it often becomes impossible to take an objective
look at the idea, and find the time to reflect on its larger model in conjunction with the real world and understand the nuances. The problem of speed blindness affects a venture from its very inception, often leading to ideas that are simple restructurings of existing ones. For example, during the time (2003–05)\(^2\)\(^1\) when videoblogging emerged as an activity, more than 50 video-sharing sites cropped up at more or less the same time, offering the same functionalities, each one being a shade different from the other.

The second reason has to do with the inherently conservative models that innovations tend to follow due to the constraints that the creators have to face while working under rigorous performance-driven structures, such as revenue generation, launch deadlines, investor expectations, so on and so forth. While resources and time constraints help keep the ventures focused on their goals, they often also detract the creators from looking at the larger implications and the ripple effect that the emergent might have on the audience that it targets. Creative research-driven digressions, which often lead to creation of newness, detract from the original goals set forth, and therefore are not seen as productive.

The third reason is the questions around the future and its prediction, or futurology as we call it, and the insight into existing models of the real, and building that into the core model of the idea. At the forefront of the digital trends, the innovations are often reflections or extensions of the real world and its existing models, models of society, thought, communication, so on and so forth. Nearly all research attempts to understand the world we live in, and therefore, answers to its quests, lie in the intersection of disciplines, in the breach that exists between the various angles that we stare at it from. If we look at the current trends towards semantic web or semantic search, the challenge easily steps into the arena of human intelligence and natural language understanding. How do we understand the context, the semantics behind what is said online in simple sentences or tweets? There is intense activity taking place in this space, as we write this piece, for the one who finds the answer would bring forward a whole new set of innovations — a search that

allows users to query in natural language, communities that form just by the sheer act of them tweeting or messaging, much wider knowledge at the fingertips brought together because semantics of the sentence are understood.

In order to deal with the above challenges we believe that structures which allow for seamless dialogue between the researchers and the practitioner can help create conditions under which newness can emerge, through the dual acts of collaborative research and active experimentation.

**Breaching the gap: Towards practice-based research**

In the ‘Question Concerning Technology’, Heidegger distinguished between two different kinds of knowledge. The first kind he called ‘episteme’, or what we commonly associate today with classical scientific research. This could be be seen as reflective knowledge about the nature of the world that claims to be universal, invariable and independent of context (Heidegger 1993). Heidegger, however, also argued that there is another form of knowledge that is quite distinct from the detached reflection that characterised episteme. He called this knowledge techne, a word that also forms the etymological root of the word technology. Techne, unlike episteme, is the knowledge of how we create things, of practical craftsmanship, of how we bring about change in the world through deliberate action.22

‘Techne refers to the art or craft, to human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world. Techne is not just knowledge about the world, what Greek thought termed episteme; it is intentional action that constitutes a gap between the world as it was before the actions, and the new world it calls into being. (Boellstrof 2008: 55)

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22 There would, in fact, technically speaking be three different types of knowledge in early Greek philosophy. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes three different approaches to knowledge: these are episteme, techne and phronesis, which would be closer to ethic, prudences and knowledge about policy and politics. See http://crab.rutgers.edu/~goertzel/threeapproaches.htm (accessed 1 June 2009).
So when we began our collaboration, it was this kind of practice-based research we wanted to develop as a method. That is, we thought that the best way to approach these ‘emerging’ digital cultures was not only to try to understand their social, political and cultural significance (knowledge as episteme) but also the creation of the conditions under which the future is being created through these technologies (knowledge as techne). And the best way to achieve this would be to become actively involved in the development of and experimentation with these technologies as a method of critical research.

Before concluding, therefore, one example of the kind of work we do (and will increasingly do) in developing ‘creative experimentation’ as a methodological tool for producing knowledge is given below.

**NewsVerse: The first ever newsroom on the web**

Already in 2005, during the turbulent events of the Asian Tsunami, we had seen a conversation emerge between the creators of grass-roots media in India and their potentially national and global audiences. Blogs, podcasts, videoblogs and other citizen journalism applications were quickly emerging as a new way of producing and sharing content on the Internet. Two of the high-profile experiments during the Asian Tsunami — Desimediabitch and Tsunamihelp — had demonstrated some of the possible powers citizen journalism could have, especially during global crises. We also realised that the news industry in India and elsewhere had to quickly start adapting to the changes brought about by the ‘power of the many’ to stay competitive in a rapidly-changing news environment. How could we then possibly combine and develop the best qualities of traditional journalistic practice (quality content, editorial control, professionalism) with the potential of citizen journalism that was rapidly emerging (speed, immediacy, eyewitness authenticity, access, etc.)?

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23 Once we stop seeing theory as reflecting reality, things get much more complex but also more interesting. See, for instance, the metaphor of theory as a toolbox to be used in Foucault and Deleuze (1972).
The idea for NewsVerse therefore emerged from these series of conversations between the theoretical and practical challenges that the news industry was facing with the advent of the Internet. These discussions focused on what we perceived to be the biggest problem facing the Indian news environment today: the homogeneity of content, despite an increasingly competitive and experimental market. While new newspapers and television channels were being launched at an unprecedented pace, the diversity of voices represented was nonetheless shrinking. With each news channel targeting the richer segments of the audience because of their spending power, the scope for a plurality was reducing. Ironically, this lack of diversity is taking place against the backdrop of the unprecedented possibilities offered by emerging new media technologies. At the time India had 190 million mobile phone users and the numbers were, according to some estimates, growing by more than a 100 million each year. Internet and broadband penetration rates were also rapidly growing and, for the first time, reaching beyond the old enclaves of metropolitan centres touching people previously not affected by the global information revolution. So the question that we were interested in was: how could these two parallel developments be reconciled — the shrinking space for public opinion amidst the possibilities of communication offered by new media forms and technologies? We found this to be one of the most important social challenges facing India, and, more broadly, all emerging economies in Asia and Africa today: that is, how to use new media technologies to democratise the production of knowledge as Internet and mobile use gains new users in previously unaffected areas and demographics.

NewsVerse, therefore, emerged out of desire to bridge these two: the need for a diversity of voices offered by citizen journalists and the increasing interest amongst the mainstream media and organisations for such activity. In specific, it aimed to do this by providing a novel structure for citizen journalists to produce news and communicate in a social network environment while collaborating with the mainstream media and organisations to

24 These statistics are from 2007. See for instance http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07_39/b4051058.htm (accessed 15 July 2010).
provide financial incentives to do so. Thus, its aim was to promote the formation of a more pluralistic news environment but, as importantly, also getting financially powerful mainstream news channels to actively promote and benefit such citizen journalist activity by forming close collaborations between citizen journalists and the more established mainstream media and organisations. The theoretical-technical problem we wanted to therefore solve was how to best maintain the traditional news workflow (with its interaction between journalists, sub-editors and editors) but adapt this model to the new and dynamic world of citizen journalism. How could we address the lack of editorial control and accountability brought about by multiple users without professional training with the possibilities and potential brought about by these new channels of communication from blogs to mobile phones to microblogs such as Twitter?

Our solution was to experiment with reproducing the classical newsroom model but translate it to the web in way that would combine old news practices with the more networked nature of the Internet and mobile phones. This would include a reputation-based system where each of the key functions present in newsroom would be reproduced for citizen journalists to develop and learn: managing editors, regional editors, sub-editors, journalists, photographers, etc. This way, the older structures of quality and content control would be allowed to emerge by rewarding quality news content online by a new generation of citizen journalists wanting to write about important topics. Two brief examples from our prototype through which we were experimenting and researching this problem follow.

![Figure 8.1](image)

The state of citizen journalism in India 2005–2006

*Source:* The authors’ business power point presentation.
Despite the fact that NewsVerse never made it beyond the prototype/proof of concept stage, what was interesting about this experiment was that we learned more about the state of the news industry, its future trends and the challenges brought about by changes in digital technology that we could have ever learned by doing classical research. Our hybrid framework of research/development, therefore, allowed us understand not only the ongoing trends in India (and elsewhere) but also the potential future directions (with their social and cultural implications). Let us take the media coverage of the recent terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 as an example. Similar to the model we had been developing, during these events, citizen journalists kept sending reports from the streets through text messages, blog posts and Flickr pictures. And as the events unfolded, news networks, such as CNN-IBN, Indian Express, started actively interacting with especially Twitter users in Mumbai who were covering the event. So, not only were these users creating news, some were even responding to direct requests from the networks and other users. Yet, despite the massive number of eyewitness accounts being produced, only a few of them were considered reliable or provided online links to by the mainstream news media in India and elsewhere. There was no mechanisms in place that would either encourage quality content or assert editorial control or accountability over this power of citizen journalists. The technology was in place but there was not system which could use this technology more effectively during
such crises. All these themes were present during our work with prototyping NewsVerse and its potential uses.

We realised that the best way to understand such emergent digital technologies was to be involved in active experimentations with them. Such experiments of course should only be targeted towards a specific focused problem — in our case, this was the changes taking place in the Indian news environment, brought about by the changes in digital technologies that we were both interested in from theoretical and practical perspectives.

Open conclusions

This article began four years ago at a chance encounter. Since then, Soumyadeep has become the founding member of yet another start-up developing the next generation application working with the semantic web. Matti, in turn, has worked two years teaching the philosophical foundations of media and cultural studies while working with especially the more artistic applications of these

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25 In fact, there was quite a lot of criticism of the way the mainstream media, especially in the UK, relied on the citizen journalists who, as a friend of mine said, were mostly sitting on the couch, watching television and eating popcorn. The BBC, especially, was criticised for directly linking to these tweets as authoritative sources of information. This just shows that the relationship between citizen journalists and mainstream media is still changing and evolving, though there is much less room for experimentation than there was in the early days of blogs and, more recently, Twitter. See, for instance, the following Guardian article talking about this: http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2008/dec/05/bbc-twitter (accessed 15 July 2010).

26 Unfortunately, despite making the final round of a major social venture bid, we never made NewsVerse public. Without funding, by the time we would have created the application, it would have already been too late as similar services were emerging at the time. As of current, in addition to all major news providers providing ‘eyewitness accounts’, etc., there are a couple of other similar platforms that have emerged that have tried to combine citizen journalism with more classical news models. See for instance, http://www.nowpublic.com/, http://www.ohmynews.com/, http://www.groundreport.com (accessed 15 July 2010).

technologies. Our collaborative work still continues, finding unexpected directions from data-based generative art projects to new ways of combining theory and practice. Emerging digital technologies keep on changing, perhaps even more rapidly than before.

During these years, however, what has been even more important than understanding the changes taking place, is the process of collaboration itself; the sometimes clumsy and humorous process of responding to the double bind of theory and practice that anybody wishing to research media today needs to take seriously. Incidentally, the word *techne* we have used to describe some of our work has another relevant meaning: it refers not only to the creative practical work we have described, but also to the method of changing ourselves in the process of doing so — what Foucault called the technology of the self.

This *techne* created the possibility of forming oneself as a subject of control of his conduct; that is, the possibility of making oneself like the doctor treating sickness, the pilot steering between the rock of the statesman governing the city — a skillful and prudent guide of himself, one who had a sense of the right time and the right measure. (Foucault 1985: 62 in Boelsstroff 2008: 57)

Therefore, in other words, what such collaboration between theory and practice ultimately forces us to do is to understand the problems and limitations of our frames of reference — theoretical and practical. It is about going beyond them, becoming something beyond ourselves and changing ourselves in the process of doing so: of theory-becoming-practice; and practice-becoming-theory. 28 Therefore, while this article has been a dialogue from two different perspectives, in the end, it is as much about responding creatively to the limits of seeing the world from one perspective and changing ourselves in the process. ‘To reach a point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether

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28 For an interesting take on the theory of becoming, see the chapter ‘1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible’ in Deleuze and Parnet (1987).
one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 1).

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The Uncomfortable Truth behind the Corporate Media’s Imagination of India*

Naresh Fernandes

One evening, a couple of summers ago, *The Times of India* organised a free classical music concert at an amphitheatre cut into a hill along Bombay’s coast. It was a stunning locale, with the sea in the distance and twinkling stars overhead. All around the stage, giant canvasses depicted idyllic scenes of a futuristic Bombay — a city whose contemporary counterpart is an urban nightmare so disturbing, it is the object of intense study by planners and social scientists from around the world. More than 55 per cent of the city’s 13 million residents live in slums, while poorly-built drainage systems leave even newly-constructed office districts flooded after heavy rains. But in *The Times of India*’s utopian vision, Bombay was bathed in the colours of sunset, as birds swooped amid glass-and-steel buildings. To the immediate right of the musicians, for instance, was an enormous image of the then yet to be completed Bandra Worli Sea Link, a bridge built across an inlet of the Arabian Sea. The city administrators hope that the Sea Link will speed the crawl from the suburbs to the southern office districts of Bombay where the rush-hour traffic moves at less than 12 kilometres an hour.

Before the musicians could really get going, the marketing manager of *The Times* — which claims to be the best-selling

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*A version of this article was first published in *Columbia Journalism Review.*

1 I prefer ‘Bombay’ to the more official ‘Mumbai’ in use nowadays.
English-language broadsheet in the world\(^2\) — came out to rally the audience. 'Do you believe we have the potential to become a world-class city?' she shouted. The crowd of middle-class Bombay residents bellowed its assent, unmindful of the fact that the completion of the Bandra Worli Sea Link will conduct thousands of honking, roaring cars and trucks within 150 metres of the venue in which they were sitting, making music performances (and even lingering conversations) impossible. More alarming, environmentalists believe that the Sea Link was directly responsible for many of the 452 deaths that resulted from a freak cloudburst in 2005: the construction of the bridge narrowed the mouth of a vital drainage channel that flows into the bay, making it incapable of handling the heavy rain and causing a flood upstream that inundated several neighbourhoods along the banks of the channel (Jahagirdar n.d.).

The audience's enthusiastic approval of the dubious suggestion that Bombay stands on the brink of greatness was just another indication of the cocoon of wilful ignorance in which India's middle and upper classes have chosen to seclude themselves when it comes to their country's economic situation. This sliver of India's population — estimated at 200 million people — has disproportionately enjoyed the benefits of the country's 9 per cent surge of economic growth since 2007,\(^3\) and is now among the most courted groups of consumers on the planet. It has grabbed the attention of the producers of so-called 'fast-moving consumer goods' (FMCGs) from around the world. Even luxury brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton have set up shop in India, encouraged by the fact that the country is home to the world's fourth-largest number of billionaires.

All the cheerleading about India's future, though, ignores the reality that a full 77 per cent of the country's population of just over 1.1 billion is struggling on less than 50 cents a day. A tiny percentage of the population, mainly in the cities, enjoys a level of

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\(^3\) http://www.indexmundi.com/india/gdp_real_growth_rate.html (accessed 30 August 2010).
affluence unimaginable a generation ago. However, rural India — home to more than 70 per cent of the country’s population — is wracked by a man-made agricultural crisis that has driven nearly 150,000 farmers to commit suicide between 1997 and 2005, the latest year for which figures are available (Sainath n.d.). But such stories find relatively little space in most of India’s English-language newspapers and on television news shows, which are the primary sources of news and information for the country’s urban elite. While Hindi- and regional-language newspapers often cover stories about the countryside more intensely, their increasingly local focus, facilitated by new technology that allows editions with narrow zones, means that these issues are rarely seen from a national perspective.4

The journalist Palagummi Sainath says this growing economic gulf between India’s elite and the vast majority of its population has created a similar disconnect ‘between mass media and mass reality’ (2004). Sainath, now the rural affairs editor of The Hindu, one of the few remaining English-language broadsheets devoted to serious journalism, is the author of Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India’s Poorest Districts (1996), perhaps the most admired collection of reportage to have been published in India in the last two decades. His series of meticulously reported articles about the lives of India’s most underprivileged was written between May 1993 and June 1995 (the articles were collected in a book in 1996), soon after the country began to restructure its economy in accordance with the prescriptions of free-market advocates. But even that early in the so-called ‘liberalisation’ process, it was clear that the withdrawal of agricultural subsidies and ill-considered budget cuts were causing great distress in a country that is still overwhelmingly rural. Re-reading Everybody Loves a Good Drought today is a startling reminder of how much English-language journalism has changed in India — and how quickly. Today, it’s difficult to imagine most broadsheets investing so much money or devoting quite so much space to stories that do not directly relate to their ‘TG’, or target group, an ungainly piece of marketing jargon that is commonly used in many newsrooms as a synonym for ‘reader’.

4 Hindi is the national language, but most businessmen, senior bureaucrats, the higher courts and the best universities use English.
Though the crisis in the countryside has only grown worse since Sainath wrote his book, forcing millions of farmers to abandon their plots and seek employment in cities, many of India’s English-language newspapers are transforming themselves into halls of mirrors, focusing only on news that they believe will interest their elite readers. This metamorphosis is the product both of a perervid neo-liberal climate in which everything, including the news, has become a commodity that is up for sale, and of a generational shift in newspaper ownership. As in many parts of the world, India’s newspapers are family-owned and run. In the four decades after independence in 1947, many of the proprietors were content to let journalists make the decisions about editorial content. This relatively hands-off approach was a legacy of the freedom struggle, which nationalist newspapers had shaped and help to sustain. But since the 1990s, a new generation of newspaper owners has adopted a number-crunching approach to journalism. Many of them view the news merely as the stuff between the ads. In some cases, they’ve even attempted to ensure that the editorial content is designed to create an environment that’s conducive to attracting advertising. Taking this attitude to the extreme, The Times of India has set up a unit called Medianet that actually sells editorial space to advertisers. With uncharacteristic coyness, the unit’s website says that it provides ‘comprehensive media coverage and content solutions to clients’ (Anand 2007).

So while the readers of English-language newspapers are served supplements with titles like ‘Splurge’, in which they can learn all about holidays in Monaco and the latest yachts, they are denied the information they need to understand how projects like the Bandra Worli Sea Link or the upheaval on the country’s farms are affecting their lives. The Times of India, which claims a readership of approximately 1.7 million in Bombay and 6.8 million countrywide, has advocated the concept of ‘aspirational journalism’. The paper, for which I once worked, is now run by Samir Jain and his brother, Vineet. They have often told their journalists that the Times must help readers forget the mundane reality of their lives and show them the possibilities of what their new affluence can bring. Famously, Samir Jain once ordered his journalists in Bombay to stop reporting on the garbage that frequently is left uncollected in
the city’s streets because of inefficient city administrators. ‘Our readers have difficult lives’, he told me (in early 2002) at the only meeting I ever had with him. ‘We should put a smile to their faces every morning instead of reminding them of their problems’.

Jain’s enormously profitable publication has set an example that many other newspapers have followed. Many of India’s English-language newspapers have abandoned the responsibility of being the fourth pillar of democracy (a role that they had first begun to embrace during the struggle for independence against the British). Now, they claim that they are mere content providers devoted to delivering to advertisers the largest number of eyeballs possible. As a result, the increasing divide between rich and poor that is a consequence of new economic policies introduced in the early 1990s — which include a predilection for privatising even profitable public enterprises and slashing subsidies in several sectors, including health and education — is not really part of the public discourse. India ranks 128th on the United Nation’s human development index — which measures life expectancy, educational standards, and standard of living — below such economic tigers as the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Guatemala. Debt, health, education, displacement, irrigation remain the biggest problems India must tackle if it is to improve the lives of all its citizens. Yet despite the obvious problems, large sections of the country’s English-language press operate as though they are allies of the state in a national project to convince citizens that India is predestined to soar to global supremacy. This sentiment was highlighted in a recent Times of India advertising campaign that had as its punch line the phrase, ‘India Poised’, suggesting that the nation stood on the precipice of imminent greatness. Ironically, it was the Times that first published Sainath’s searing reportage that eventually became Everybody Loves a Good Drought. In fact, the newspaper gave him a fellowship to fund his research, when the father of the present owners was chairman of the company.

I first met Sainath in 1992, when he wrote a column called ‘The Last Page’ for Blitz, a left-wing tabloid that was then wavering in its

political principles. Each week, his column would tackle a wildly varying subject — the injustice of international patent law, the absurdity of the government’s agrarian policies, the hypocrisies of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party — with delicate wit and insight. I’d already heard about his legendary charisma: Sainath had taught journalism at a local women’s college in Bombay for several years, and after they graduated, his awestruck students would gush about his talent during tea breaks in newsrooms across the country. He won the ‘Times Fellowship’ and went out on the road shortly after I made his acquaintance, but by then he’d already encouraged me to expand the range of my reading (he introduced me to Gunnar Myrdal’s *Asian Drama* and later gifted me a copy of Graham Hancock’s *Lords of Poverty*), and left me with the realisation that poverty needed to be reported as a process, not as a series of glaring events, such as starvation deaths, or famine.

Magnitude is among India’s defining characteristics, and Indian journalists are often overwhelmed by and myopically focused on the statistics and those glaring events. Consider that half of all Indian children under four are malnourished; the number of illiterate Indians today is larger than the country’s total population when it won independence; and one of every three people in the world suffering from tuberculosis is Indian (Lak 1999). But in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, Sainath brings to life the tragedies that lurk in the grey print of official reports and shows us the structural reasons for poverty. Few Indian journalists had undertaken the kind of rigorous reporting trips that he had, even in the pre-liberalisation period, when journalism that sought out the view from society’s margins was a much more valued endeavour. Sainath travelled more than 80,000 bumpy kilometres through the country’s 10 poorest districts — the basic administrative units that comprise India’s states — to learn how the country’s poor survive during the 200–240 days after the spring and winter crops have been harvested, when there is no agricultural work to be had.

The coping strategies he found were astonishing. As he writes, ‘Some of them [are] quite ingenious, all of them back-breaking’ (Sainath 1996: 135). In Godda, in the northern state of Bihar, Sainath followed a man named Kishan Yadav on a 60-kilometre journey as the labourer pushed a reinforced bicycle piled with
250 kilogramme of low-grade coal scavenged from the waste dumps of mines all the way to the market. The three-day ordeal, repeated twice a week, was how 3,000 men in the district kept their families alive — a miracle, it would seem, because they earned only about ₹10 (about 25 cents at the time) a day. In Ramnad, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, Sainath spent time with 27-year-old Ratnapandi Nadar, who eked out a living by tapping palm trees for sap that could be boiled into a sweetener called ‘jaggery’. Nadar worked a 16-hour day that began at 3 in the morning, climbing at least 40 trees. ‘That is roughly equivalent to walking up and down a building of 250 floors daily, using the staircase’, notes Sainath (ibid.: 136).

In a country where poverty is depressingly visible all the time, many middle-class Indians have developed blinders to the distress around them. Sainath’s great achievement was to make readers start to pay attention to their poorer countrymen. His lucid writing, so evident in these powerful portraits, had much to do with this. Too often, reportage on poverty is unremittingly grim, weighed down by a severity that deters all but the most determined readers. But Everybody Loves a Good Drought, in addition to being marked by a profound empathy for its subjects, is leavened with black humour. That quality is especially on display when Sainath describes the absurd theatre of poverty-alleviation programmes and the industry that has sprung up to help ‘uplift’ the less fortunate, to use a verb frequently employed by Indian bureaucrats.

Among the pieces that best illustrate this tragicomedy is a story from Naupada in Orissa, in which Sainath tells of Mangal Sunani’s delight when the government gifted him a cow as part of a poverty-reduction scheme. Officials told Sunani that he and scores of others in the district (who were also given cows) would prosper after their animals were impregnated with the semen of a Jersey bull, thereby producing high-yield cows and other bulls. The officials even gave Sunani an acre of land for free, so that he could grow fodder for the cattle, and offered to pay him the minimum daily wage to work the plot. To ensure that the cows did not accidentally mate with a local bull, all the male cattle in the region were castrated.

Two years later, the community only had eight crossbred calves; many other calves had died shortly after they were born.
because the crossbred cows were susceptible to disease. By then, the local, hardier species of cattle had been wiped out because of the castration drive and the cow herders were forced to buy milk from the market. When they attempted to grow vegetables on the patches of land they had been given, officials were annoyed: they would not be paid their wage if they raised anything but fodder, the villagers were warned. Sainath dryly headlined the piece, ‘Very Few Specimens — But A Lot of Bull’ (1996:3).

The ludicrousness of the situation even creeps into the names of some of the places from which the dispatches have been filed. One report is from a region of Orissa that is officially called Cut-Off Area, home to the residents of 152 villages who are stranded on islands in a reservoir created by a dam built in the 1960s to generate hydroelectricity. Though these villagers saw their farms submerged when the power project was constructed, almost none of them actually have electricity at home. Sainath points out that between 1951 and 1990, more than 26 million Indians have been displaced by development projects. The rewards of these dams, canals and mines have rarely trickled down to the so-called beneficiaries. It is a section of the book that has special resonance today, given that the Indian government, in 2007, has approved the creation of close to 400 Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which has resulted in even more farmers being pressured to sell off their land cheaply. The government hopes to attract more investment by giving firms that open offices in the SEZs incentives such as tax holidays and flexible labour regulations. As of early October 2007, just over 500 square kilometres had been acquired for these zones. Sainath writes, ‘If the costs [the poor] bear are the price of development, then the rest of the nation is having a free lunch’ (1996:77).

Driven by the conviction that ‘the press can and does make a difference when it functions’ because ‘governments do react and respond’ (Sainath 1996:436) to reportage, Sainath’s commitment to telling the stories of the neglected was obvious from his enormous personal investment: his fellowship grant was too small to match his ambition, so he kicked in all his retirement savings.

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Ironically, by the time the pieces were finally collected as a book in 1996, the business managers who had wrested control of newsrooms from the journalists were not interested in supporting this kind of journalism. Though the book had fired the imaginations of young journalists across India, almost no publications have been willing to invest the resources necessary to allow lengthy investigations into the causes or processes of poverty and deprivation. Today, only *The Hindu*, its sister publication, *Frontline* magazine, and *Tehelka*, a weekly magazine, seem to regularly find the space for stories about the millions who have been left behind by India’s economic surge. Nonetheless, the book earned Sainath a string of awards both at home and abroad. He has used some of the money he’s received from these awards to establish fellowships for rural reporters, giving journalists in small towns who write in regional languages the opportunity and the training to more effectively tell the stories of the countryside. For his part, Sainath, now 50, continues to write for *The Hindu* about the economic forces that have pushed thousands of debt-ridden farmers to commit suicide in recent years.

In the last chapter of the book, Sainath considers the role the press could play in promoting genuine development in India. He notes that even when rural stories do find their way into the newspapers, journalists often tend to turn the non-governmental agencies that have proliferated across the subcontinent into heroes, even though their strategies are often suspect. Covering development ‘calls for placing people and their needs at the centre of the stories. Not any intermediaries, however saintly’, he stresses. He also suggests journalists must begin to pay more attention to rural ‘political action and class conflict’, even at the risk of being labelled leftist. ‘Evading reality helps no one’, he writes. ‘A society that does not know itself cannot cope’ (Sainath 1996: 434).

But that is unlikely to happen as newspapers devote their attention to providing infotainment to consumers, rather than news to citizens. Nonetheless, readers of *The Times of India* were pleasantly surprised a few months ago to wake up to a new advertising campaign for the newspaper featuring the subcontinent’s most famous film star, Amitabh Bachchan, admitting that the burst of economic growth had failed to benefit the country’s poorest. ‘There are two Indias in this country’, he declared in a television commercial shot on
the contentious Bandra Worli Sea Link. However, Bachchan’s scriptwriter had a novel take on the crisis: he blamed the poor for preventing India from realising its true potential. As he potters around the 5.6-kilometre bridge, Bachchan says, ‘One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us. The other India is the leash.’ At the end of the long spot (which runs two minutes, thirteen seconds), Bachchan declares, ‘The ride has brought us to the edge of time’s great precipice. And one India — a tiny little voice at the back of the head — is looking down at the bottom of the ravine and hesitating. The other India is looking up at the sky and saying, “It’s time to fly”’ (Youtube 2007). Bachchan then strides off purposefully across the bridge, even though the middle span has not been constructed yet. But the camera, as is often the case these days, does not follow him to the logical end.

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Epilogue
Thinking about India and Change: The BRICS and the Brats

Academics often talk about standing on the shoulders of giants, paying homage to the thinkers and analysts who have gone before us. But our work is most satisfactory when we produce student ‘children’ whose work goes on beyond ours and who dare to challenge our knowledge and approaches. The brats of the ‘Sacredmediacow’ collective have done just that, taken whatever we could offer them in our teaching within the Centre for Media and Film Studies at SOAS, wolfed it down and demanded more.

This fascinating collection of articles interrogates the nature and role of media in the broadest sense in India and the range of ways to think about what constitutes and how to think about social change. Media are both index of and the multipliers of change in all areas of the fabric of society, the economic, social, political and cultural arenas.

India is the ‘I’ of the BRICS which are the brats of the global environment, the new powerhouses of modernisation. It was evident from the mid-Noughties that we were witnessing a shift in the international balance of power, a tipping point in the decline of the now ageing West and the rise of the BRICS — Brazil, Russia, South Africa, but especially India and China leading the way.

Bush was still the US president, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still bloody and the US economy was beginning to teeter, suffering from too much sub-prime mortgage and hedge-fund speculation, the accumulated result being that the US status and reputation was weakened around the world. The subsequent
banking crisis and recession were evidence of the uncontrolled speculative turn in Western economics. The BRICS were the new white hope for the neo-liberal project in general and investment markets in particular. A BRICS investment strategy had been suggested already by the Goldman Sachs Group Inc. in 2003, in a paper entitled ‘Dreaming with BRICS: The Path to 2050’, which predicted that in less than 40 years, the combined economies of these high-growth countries would be larger than that of the top six nations today in US dollar terms. Their rapid economic growth, at least as measured in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) terms, continues to tempt investors, although the volatility too, is high. India has now become the world’s fourth-largest economy and an estimated 30 million Indians join the ranks of the middle class every year. It also has a very youthful demographic — by 2020 the average Indian will be 29-years-old or younger.

For India in particular, the broad sector of the cultural industries is a key player in the growth forecasts. The media and entertainment industries offer a market of 550 million consumers. In 2006 the combined television, radio, publishing, film, music and advertising industries were worth an estimated 353 billion rupees (USD 8 billion), while PricewaterhouseCoopers forecast more than a doubling of that combined worth to USD19 billion by the end of 2010.

India’s corporate sector has seen a flurry of deal making, with capital raising and overseas acquisitions being major trends. Many of the large Indian services and IT players have snapped up companies in the Americas and across Europe, while the media sector has seen deals with SONY, News International and many others. There is still considerable room for expansion in film/cinemas, radio and IT.

The year 2009 saw the political rise of the BRICS in the form of seats within the G20 and the confirmed economic power shift

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toward the developing South and the transnationalisation of global capitalism. *Slumdog Millionaire* won Oscars galore and the global credit crunch hit. This was nothing very new for India, which has been experiencing a profound social and economic shift for a decade or more.

The globalisation of capitalism requires better macro-economic models, probably mixed models, as even Eric Hobsbawm, that committed defender of a critical politics, recognises and especially a ‘return to the conviction that economic growth and the affluence it brings is a means and not an end. The end is what it does to the lives, life chances and hopes of people.’³ For India as it turns 60, the issue as Amartya Sen sees it is not only that

Money will continue to come very rapidly into the government’s hands if the fast economic growth continues. What is critically important is to use these generated resources to remedy India’s continuing deficiencies, in particular in basic health care, in school education and in rapidly expanding its physical infrastructure.⁴

Beyond these economic and political shifts, but implicated in them, India faces a range of social and cultural challenges that are exemplified in or exacerbated by the growing number of media channels, the range of content and the increased involvement with and use of media by urban and rural populations alike. Media are the agents of change, the spaces where value conflicts consequent on social change are played out and the vehicles of representation of change. However defined, India is experiencing profound change and the media are central to this.

The BRICS have changed the international environment while the brats provide the theoretical and empirical tools for thinking through the specifics of the contemporary Indian experience. They are both our future.

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