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Tracking utopias
*Technology, labour and secularism in Bombay
cinema (1930s–1940s)*

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In the decades immediately preceding independence, Bombay city witnessed immense political upheavals in the form of the Second World War, an intensified urgency in the final phase of the Indian freedom movement and the growing spectre of communalism. The late-colonial city elicited multifarious and paradoxical responses to urban modernity. Technology, science, a dynamic public sphere, and notions of civic equality made for dreams of individual and collective progress. At the same time, the imbrication of technological modernity with industrial capitalism proved treacherous, and these decades saw mass labour unrest due to poor working conditions and growing proletarian solidarity. While Gandhian nationalists tried to articulate a counter-modern essence for the nation, Bombay was able to accommodate a diversity of visions of modernity. Influenced by American and European cultures via films, books or physical travel, and witness to years of British society, young Bombayites struggled to forge their own meanings of the modern – a new, localized modern.

Time and again, through the body of cinema in the city, we are confronted by individual and community struggles between the local and the global, the old and the new. These cinematic contestations, frequently articulated in utopian terms, provide a much-needed lens for re-viewing Bombay's multiple modernities. Admittedly, the utopian impulse in popular cinema is a long-standing episteme, recurring with regularity across time and geographical location. Nevertheless, its arenas of negotiation, its concerns and priorities are always

historically and contextually nuanced. Therefore, this chapter looks for utopian logics across multiple sites not only in on-screen textual concerns and plot conflicts, but also in off-screen circuits of creative labour, industrial motivations and commercial concerns. Through such a method – by tracking utopias across cinema’s proliferating spaces – I hope to present a dense, embedded and heterogeneous account of pre-independence Bombay cinema.

The period under discussion, the 1930s–1940s, was perhaps the most self-consciously utopian conjuncture in the history of Indian cinema. The interwar years saw film practitioners seize upon cinema as the technology of the future, a technology with emancipatory possibilities. Leftist intellectuals of the Progressive Writers’ Movement and the Indian People’s Theatre Association sought to bring about social change through film screenplays and lyrics. Entrepreneur-producers like Himansu Rai, J. B. H. Wadia and Chandulal Shah used cinema to suggest diverse future realities such as political independence, inter-caste marriage and gender equality. Images of radicalized industrial workers and peasants, of college-educated ‘modern girls’ and love marriages, of inter-caste solidarity and active citizenship started to proliferate in cinema halls and on film posters.

To track some of these utopian visions, I follow the career trajectory of Sa’adat Hasan Manto, a prolific film writer during the last decades of colonial occupation. Manto, though not a utopic thinker in his independent, literary writings, crafted commercial film fictions that often had strong programmatic, future-oriented and optimistic logics. Between 1937 and 1948, Manto worked as a scenarist and dialogue writer for studios as diverse as Ardeshir Irani’s Imperial Film Company and Sashadhar Mukherjee’s Filmistan, a cross section that spanned the traditional to the self-consciously modern, the *bazaar* to the *bhadralok*. Manto’s personal, literary and political approach to these films also varied as his industrial status changed from the clerical scribe to the specialist screenwriter. This means that we must view these films not as idiosyncratic works of a unified subject but rather as emblems of contemporaneous trends in genre, thematics and social discourse. Manto’s Bombay films span a crucial 10 years in the history of South Asia, but to turn to them for a consistent creative vision would be a mistake. Film-making is an intrinsically collaborative craft, and the 1930s’ salaried film

writer was only one voice within a chorus of varying agentive power. Therefore, rather than adopt a biographical-authorial approach, I privilege contexts of cultural production in my effort to track the specific configuration of utopian logics in Manto’s Bombay films.

I will look at three of Manto’s films, *Kisan Kanya* (dir. Gunjal, 1938), *Apni Nagariya* (dir. M. B. Gidwani, 1940) and *Jhumke* (dir. J. K. Nanda, 1946), to analyse some prevailing modes and genres of utopian thought in Bombay cinema. The attempt will be to approach the terrain of anxieties and promises that make up a historical conjuncture by using these films as points of entry into larger debates. In this chapter I examine both the text and context, the filmic object and the catalyzing forces of its production, to argue that Bombay cinema imagined utopias in disparate modes and to varying ends. We will look at films whose production is governed by technological utopianism; film writers compelled to paint socialist utopias on the silver screen; audiences that had the collective power to write themselves into films as unlikely utopian protagonists; and prescriptive messages of utopian communities untouched by religious animosity. I hope to present cinema not as a reflective mirror to society but as an active historical agent, constantly attempting to remake fractured realities.



Note on method

How does one write about films one cannot watch? In all 2,126 Hindustani talkie films were made in Bombay between 1931 and 1950.² Of these approximately 110 films are listed in the digital catalogue of the National Film Archives of India (NFAI). In other words, less than 5 per cent of the Bombay film industry’s output from two decades is available to us for research and scholarship. Not a single film from Manto’s Bombay filmography is known to be extant today. Thus, I mobilize a wide spectrum of materials for this chapter including newspaper reviews, advertisements, autobiographies, short stories, interviews, fanzines, and trade journals to look at the varied meanings unleashed by the film event in ever-widening spheres of publicity. Crucial in this selection of evidentiary sources is the song booklet, a publicity document that carried miniaturized versions of the film poster on the cover, cast and crew credits, the film’s synopsis, and the lyrics of the songs.



Always already the future: technological utopias

It was the colour of the Apple that tempted Adam – and with colour the history of Man began. Imperial Makes New History with *Kisan Kanya*. 1st Colour Talkie of India.³

Kisan Kanya, produced by Imperial Film Company (1938)⁴ is commonly acknowledged to be India's first indigenously produced colour film. The song booklet for the film offers us a vital glimpse into the producers' understanding of its historical significance, especially in the foreword by Imperial boss, Seth Ardeshir Irani. Irani starts by reminding his readers of how the introduction of sound in Indian pictures was considered a 'crazy', risky idea at the time. The Talkies were even disparagingly called 'Noisies' in the initial days of technological scepticism. However,

The silent picture is buried completely down in forgotten earth. The talking picture did this. . . . And now what next? A year or so ago it would have been difficult to answer this question. Today, I give you what you have all silently waited for from long generations – Colour. . . . I give you *Kisan Kanya* as India's first all-process-coloured picture in Cinecolor. You now have it from me by right – the right of long association you have had with me through all the stages of development of what must be to you a national industry of no small advantages and what has been to me my humble life-work.⁵

Tracking the multiple circuits around the film object provides access to the rich resonances latent in 'peripheral' material such as this foreword. The song booklet functioned as a discursive realm used by producers to engineer specific reception contexts. It is interesting how Ardeshir Irani, a contemporary insider-practitioner, was able to use it to consciously historicize the technological changes taking place in the Indian film industry. This historicization was wrought within a discourse of progress, 'stages of development' and a mythology of firsts. Irani imagines cinema as an incipient technology which 'always-already' carried its future possibilities within it. Thus he is able to claim that from its moment of emergence, the moving picture promised its audiences sound and colour. Spectators also, apparently, intuited this promise and 'silently waited from long generations'.

This logic of technological determinism is firmly of a piece with utopian understandings of emergence and teleological fulfilment. It is a similar ontological certainty that is mobilized today to suggest that 3-D, digital imaging and virtual realities were all simply waiting to happen.

In his discussion of the transition to sound in Hollywood cinema, Donald Crafton cites an advertisement that is uncannily close to Ardeshir Irani's claims about *Kisan Kanya*: 'Sound Pictures – The product of the telephone. . . . Yesterday's dream is today's fact. And tomorrow? Here is an art now in the early stages of its development which is revolutionizing the field of motion picture entertainment.'⁶ Crafton goes on to observe that popular discourse about talkie films 'recast it as an industrial revolution, something new, yet determined by what had gone before'.⁷ Just like the telephone presaged the emergence of the talkie film, so did the talkie film contain within it the promise of colour. *Kisan Kanya*, for Ardeshir Irani, was a triumphant realization of this seemingly natural progression, significant because he was the first to seize the incipient potential and present it to a waiting public (Plate 1).

Nevertheless, the Bombay film industry took several years to wholly make the switch to colour films. It took as long as 1953 for the next wave of colour films to be commercially released. Two films were made in colour that year: Mehboob Khan's *Aan* and Sohrab Modi's *Jhansi ki Rani*. Despite this, it was only in the 1960s that colour films became the norm. In this light, Ardeshir Irani's attempts to write a grand history of the present for *Kisan Kanya* take on a new dimension. What is the significance of this writing?

The Bombay film industry, in the 1930s, was caught in a vortex of change. At least since 1931, the film industries of Calcutta, Madras, Lahore, and Bombay were competing to win the talkie race. Bombay, with its adoption of the widely understood Hindustani as the main language of film dialogue and lyrics, appeared to have won this race by the time *Kisan Kanya* (1938) was released. Concomitant with the shift to talkie films was the consolidation of capital-intensive film studios with large in-house, salaried workforces, such as Bombay Talkies Ltd, Ranjit Movietone and Sagar Film Company. These studios sought to make the shift from the bazaar model of film production to modern capitalist strategies such as joint stock ventures, horizontal integration and rationalized workflows. But older forms coexisted with newer ones. Even as the film industry strived to remake itself as

a more socially 'respectable' and modern form, its material practices and cultural workers embodied all the tensions of Bombay's multiple modernities. The popular press was full of concerns about the moral virtue of Bombay's actresses, while citizens' committees questioned cinema's representations of crime and lust (see Majumdar 2009). By aligning the colour film with the rhetoric of scientific progress, Irani hoped to leap forward into an imagined future, wherein cinema would inhabit the realm of technology rather than the messiness of culture. His address was to the burgeoning middle class, whose stakes in technological modernity and modernizing markets were perfectly compatible with the film industry's own aspirations for an ideal middle-class public. Much like the popular discursive apparatus around the talkie film in the United States, the all-process-coloured picture in Cinecolor also 'embodied a middle-class ideology: electrical entertainment is Progress made consumable'.⁸

Another key feature of Irani's foreword is the characterization of the film industry as a 'national industry'. Film practitioners of the time often tapped into prevailing nationalist and anticolonial sentiments. For the majority of the urban middle class, desiring freedom from colonial rule seemed synonymous with desiring a modern nation state with all its trappings. Such a new India was ostensibly possible through entrepreneurship and big industry. The key emerging indigenous industries of the time, like steel, iron and cement, were each perceived as crucial foundation stones towards a self-reliant and wealth-producing country. Ardeshir Irani was a prominent leader of the Bombay film industry and had just been elected president of the newly instituted Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association (IMPPA). Needless to say, Irani and other captains of the film industry understood the urgency of positioning cinema as an important indigenous industry. Significantly, on 19 December 1938, the Indian Motion Picture Congress invited members of the National Planning Committee to tea. Everyone present was aware of the significance of the timing – 1939 would mark 25 years of the Indian film industry. The main agenda of the meeting was to discuss the 'role the films would play in the industrialization of the country'.⁹ It was pointed out that the Indian film industry 'ranked 8th in importance as a key industry', that more than 17 crore rupees had been invested in the film industry and about 40,000 people were currently employed in various capacities.

Kisan Kanya was therefore envisioned at a moment when considerable power was being mobilized to alter the film industry's reputation and stakes in the national mainstream. Irani's optimistic assumption that the film industry was viewed as 'a national industry of no small advantages' rested on the hope that middle-class, educated viewers looked upon the film industry as a productive, *swadeshi* industry capable of generating revenue for the nation while representing its dreams and travails on the big screen.¹⁰

Irani tried to privilege his film as a definitive break with Indian cinema's past as a harbinger of the future. However, the specific historical conjuncture examined in this chapter reveals itself variously as a time of continuity, ambiguity and change rather than as a clearly contained stage in the history of cinema. We can further understand the political stakes of Irani's project by turning to the manner in which similar logics of 'forecast' are being mobilized today to understand the digital revolution. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck, the film historian Philip Rosen suggests that

the forecast, or rational extrapolation, is one of the progenitors of modern historicity. In its assumption of an irrevocable linear temporality already in operation, the disavowal of hybridity through the forecast characterizes a mode of historicity underlying a certain theorization of the digital. On this level, what is disavowed is temporal complexity and historical overlap.¹¹

Irani was responsible for what is considered the subcontinent's first talkie film in 1931, having produced and directed *Alam Ara*. This fact lent his subsequent technological experiments a credibility that was hard to compete with. And yet, *Kisan Kanya* did not result in a deafening clamour for colour amongst the silently waiting audiences, nor did it lead to a competitive scramble amongst producers and exhibitors to invest in new raw stock, laboratories and projection systems. The Second World War disrupted many a plan, and the free travel of goods and peoples across continents became restricted. Difficult as it was to import black-and-white raw stock, it seemed adventurous to invest in expensive colour technology.¹² And thereby hangs a tale. The transition to colour was gradual and the colour film was contemporaneous with other formats. However, Irani's experiment with colour had to be framed within the optimistic terms of an obvious future. The film industry, perhaps more than any other, is

fundamentally premised on the terrain of speculation. Labour, capital, talent, logic, and output – none of these variables can *guarantee* profit in any combination or permutation. Irani's experiment with colour was a huge gamble, but one that was taking place in a financially hopeful pre-war industry. The utopian faith in technology, thus, must also be seen within the broader optimistic logics of the late-colonial imagination of the local film entrepreneur-merchant. The rather 'bullish' attitude of this historical figure, in terms of market forecasting, paid off during the boom in production and spectatorship of the war years when the gross income of the film industry 'went from about Rs. 4 crores in 1940–41 to about Rs. 13 crores in 1945–46'.¹³

Kisan Kanya did not usher in the age of colour cinema, but in national cinema histories it has become a definitive signpost of progress, a 'watershed' moment routinely celebrated in popular commemorations of originary events such as the centenary of Indian cinema. If the logic of the forecast and scientific determinism is a key component of technological utopianism, then it becomes imperative for film historians to parse through available layers of popular discourse and apprehend the multiple agendas at play. The framework of technological inevitability de-historicizes moments of flux. Thus, the articulation of an industrial utopia is most appropriate for bypassing some of the main tensions of the 1930s and 1940s – between old and new film formats, models of financing, the varied demographic of film workers, and the contradiction between the mass spectatorial base that the film industry had versus the bourgeois audience it sought.



Mazdoor heroes and Memsahib heroines: classless utopias

Apni Nagariya, written by Manto, participated in a spate of working-class films of the 1940s that centrally raised questions about class struggle and the inequities of industrial capitalism. The representation of class conflict through the romance plot was hardly an invention of 1940s Bombay cinema; being a recurring trope in literature, theatre and films from the subcontinent and abroad. However, there is a particular activist zeal and programmatic impulse in the films from the 1940s that is worthy of attention. In this part I will discuss strains of utopian socialist thought evidenced in *Apni Nagariya* and

place them within the contexts of the Progressive Writers' Movement and the changing social landscape during the war years.

If the song booklet is any indication, *Apni Nagariya* is clearly about 'Capital versus Labour' (Plate 2).¹⁴ However, class struggle is dialectically played out via an improbable love story which points to a utopian vision of social justice. Seth Ramdas is the tyrannical owner of a brick factory, and his college-educated daughter, Sushila, is the embodiment of wealth and modern sophistication. During a plague epidemic, an honest worker, Prithvi, nurses Sushila back to health and falls in love with her in the process. But once the haze of illness clears, Sushila rejects the attentions of her scruffy employee. Disgusted by workers' agitations at the factory, Sushila plays the rich shrew to perfection and shuts down production. When she finally learns about Prithvi's selfless devotion for her, it is almost too late. The workers are starving and the union is raring for a fight. Sushila now has to win back the affections of Prithvi and settle the factory strife. Dramatically, the song booklet asks, 'The fire within her was rising. . . Did Sushila find her Utopia?'¹⁵

How did the figure of the urban wage-worker become a romantic film hero? The conflict of class and caste interests was a staple of popular literature and film in modern South Asia. Be it Devdas's tragic inability to defy economic hierarchies and claim Paro (*Devdas*, dir. P.C. Barua, 1935), or Pratap's impossible love for the Dalit Kasturi in *Achhut Kanya* (dir. Franz Osten, 1936), films often plotted their romance narratives around societal barriers to marriage. But many of these films ended in tragedy; with film-makers ultimately resigned to the inequities of society and content to simply critique them. The upper-caste, upper-class role was generally reserved for the hero, while the heroine performed the destitute, orphaned or Dalit character who was a helpless victim to hoary tradition. Why, then, would producers and writers reverse the romantic dynamic with a *mazdoor* hero?

The history of working-class struggle in the Bombay region through the 1920s and 1930s is well documented.¹⁶ Massive strikes in Bombay's textile sector expressed rage against capitalist extraction and demonstrated worker solidarity. Politically independent newspapers regularly covered stories about labour conditions, millworkers' wages and union activities. Social reformers wrote reports on the abysmal living conditions of the urban working classes. The 'mazdoor' had become a symbol of subaltern agency

and revolutionary potential. The contemporary romantic valorization of the urban worker can be seen in these lyrics from the song 'Mazdoor' in *Apni Nagariya*:

<i>Mazdoor, mazdoor (2)</i>	Worker, worker
<i>Jeevan hai tera pyaara (2)</i>	Yours is an honorable life
<i>Mazdoor mazdoor</i>	Worker, worker
<i>Jag naiyya khevanhaara</i>	The oarsman of the world
<i>Mazdoor mazdoor</i>	Worker, worker
<i>Dhan mehnat karke kamaayen</i>	Work hard to make your wealth
<i>Sone ke mahal banaayen</i>	Build castles of gold
<i>Aasha hai yeh hamaara</i>	This is our hope
<i>Mazdoor mazdoor</i>	Worker, worker
<i>Dhanvaan kamaaye daulat</i>	The rich amass riches
<i>Din raat kare tu mehnat</i>	You toil day and night
<i>Hai sar pe bojh karaara</i>	You carry a heavy load on your head
<i>Mazdoor mazdoor</i>	Worker, worker
<i>Duniya to sukh se soye</i>	The world sleeps in peace
<i>Tu dhoop mein eenth dhoye</i>	You carry bricks in the searing sun
<i>Anyay ye jag hai saara</i>	This world is an unjust place
<i>Mazdoor mazdoor</i>	Worker, worker ¹⁷

Could it be that the film industry had turned socialist? Manto echoes this question in a sketch of the composer Rafiq Ghaznavi:

I landed at Hindustan Movietone owned by Seth Nanoobhai Desai, who had set up and bankrupted many film companies in his time. . . . I had liked the story for a movie called *Keechad* [later renamed *Apni Nagariya*] . . . because it was based on socialist ideas. I never understood why the Seth, every inch a dirty capitalist, had taken a shine to it.¹⁸

Intoxicated by the 'brave air of socialism' many young intellectuals of the period saw literature as a means to critique existing social hierarchies, expose economic injustice and serve the nationalist cause.¹⁹ These young men and women perceived themselves as radically different from previous generations in their sense of individualism, and their sense of connectedness with the world around them. This notion of the engaged self compelled them to action, and literature was their weapon of choice. Sajjad Zaheer, one of the founders of the All India Progressive Writers' Association, said in retrospect,

Writing was probably the only avenue left open to us. Most of the members of our small group wanted to become writers. What else could they do? We were incapable of manual labour. We had not learnt any craft and our minds revolted against serving the imperialist Government. What other field was left?²⁰

Unarguably, one of the most dynamic cultural movements of modern India, the Progressive Writers' Movement was launched in 1936 with a view to bring together writers who shared a desire for change in society as well as in literature. For a time, Manto was firmly a part of this group. Writers like Krishan Chandar, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Kaifi Azmi, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ali Sardar Jafri, Majaz, Shahid Latif, Ismat Chughtai, and Manto were dedicated to not only writing a new social and linguistic idiom through literature but also engaging with cinema in serious ways. It is significant that most of these left-oriented writers decided to live and work in Bombay. Some, like Ali Sardar Jafri, 'were in Bombay because of its being the headquarters of the Communist Party of India', but most others were drawn by the film industry.²¹ While contemporary Hindi litterateurs took on the burden of creating a form – the Hindi novel – that would best represent the nation and its values, the Progressives embraced the short story form and distanced themselves from grand visions of nationhood and citizenship.²² Such an argument could well explain why the Progressives took to film writing with such gusto, minus the qualms felt by their Hindi peers. The literary and linguistic experiments of the Progressives matched the industry's need for an accessible and respectable form of film dialogue. It is against the backdrop of these cultural forces that one should read a film like *Apni Nagariya*. At the same time, it is crucial to also ask whether the popularity of the working-class hero was solely a result of Progressive writers' participation in commercial cinema.

The utopian cinema of the time did not reflect reality as much as promise an impossible resolution of contemporary, highly visible class contradictions. The figure of the heroine provides a second clue to understanding this situation. The heroine, in *Apni Nagariya*, takes the shape of 'Sushila, Miss Sushila to you, young, lovely, and carefree, a modern, high-society heart-throb . . . the 20th-century daughter of Seth Ramdas, just returned home from college!²³ The exclamation mark that ends this statement is not simply a dramatic flourish but indicates a contemporary excitement about the modern, educated, cosmopolitan woman, a '20th-century daughter' of

capitalist excess. The song booklet positions Sushila as the pivot of the conflict between the rich and the poor, prejudice and honest virtue. She negotiates the tricky terrain between the outright evil camp of her moneyed father and the good team of the workers. She also allows the film to make an affective investment in the idea of money. The synopsis spends several words describing Prithvi's enchantment with money: first when he falls in love with a wealthy heiress, and second, when he wants to acquire wealth to win her over. The 'high-society' woman evokes the romance of wealth and luxury, the 'castles of gold' that could be attractive if they were in the possession of the good and virtuous. In *Apni Nagariya*, the modern woman and her wealth are acceptable when aligned with the values of the honest working class. Heroes in films like *President* (dir. Nitin Bose, 1937), *Hamrahi* (dir. Bimal Roy, 1944) or *Mazdoor* (dir. Nitin Bose, 1945) are either educated, unemployed youth, or are forced to take up lowly positions in factories. All of them pursue the 'Sushila' prototype, symbolically chasing the promise of modernity itself. The heroines are projected as desirable women, freely traversing the city and empowered by the promise of wealth, their complete validation resting on a crucial 'change of heart' and not on a change of circumstance.

This, then, is the crux of the matter. Our new working-class heroes are not reformists, nor do they attempt to radically destroy private property. Rather, they seek to make productive alliances with capital in order to spearhead industry and employment along humane parameters. The utopian dream of an economy which celebrated private enterprise at the same time as it incorporated the monetarily marginalized into the national mainstream was only possible in this in-between historical moment, when 'India' was on the cusp of independence. That dream quickly dissipated, despite the euphoria of the early Nehruvian socialism, and cinema moved from the utopic to the dystopic, from optimism to poetic pessimism, with the varied social critiques seen in the films of Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand in the 1950s. The genre of the love story or romance, as Rita Felski suggests, is 'a form often considered to be regressive and anachronistic but whose nostalgic yearning for an indeterminate "elsewhere" is a foundational trope within the modern itself'.²⁴ Written into the film scripts of the 1940s are desires for change, change tempered by the Indian subcontinent's particular struggles with received ideals of economic modernity and social justice.

Upendranath Ashk ponders a related issue in his observation that

Shashadhar Mukherjee's formula films [at Filmistan] and the films of his imitators had one factor in common: the hero would invariably be an illiterate, unemployed or delinquent youth. The heroine would be educated or wealthy and would fall hopelessly in love with our socially unworthy hero.²⁵

Ashk does not question producers' politics but turns his gaze at audiences instead: 'Cinema halls were always crowded during the war years, filled up mainly by soldiers, uneducated workers and artisans.'²⁶ Going for a show of *Taqdeer* (Mehboob Khan, 1943) in Delhi, Ashk remembers being startled upon seeing that elite balcony seats were occupied by the lower classes. He notes that the 'white-collar crowd shifted to halls like Odeon and Plaza [in Delhi]'.²⁷ Ashk's Delhi could as easily be Bombay, with its cash-rich publics as well as its geographically segregated theatres. His observation implicitly suggests that given the changing audience demographic, producers sought to attract a new class of viewers by creating romantic protagonists they could identify with.

The Second World War changed audience demographics drastically. The wartime twilight economy of bootlegging and black marketing increased production in certain sectors, and a large population of soldiers, waiting for war to erupt in India, created a new cinematic audience armed with ready cash. The *Handbook of the Indian Film Industry* (1949) says that 'The demand for motion picture entertainment increased several fold from the Armed Forces as well as from the general public.' Some of the reasons given for increased theatre attendance were 'general inflation, better employment, migration of the younger generation to the towns and cities . . .'.²⁸

Several factors worked simultaneously to create a noticeable focus on working-class issues in the 1940s. The war created many economic opportunities in the port city. At the same time, the increasing wealth of the local industrial elite was becoming highly visible. The consolidation of the Communist Party of India in Bombay, a culture of worker protests and global discussions of economic imperialism changed the atmosphere of the city and impacted filmic content. Ashk's partial impressions allow us to imaginatively approach such thematic foci through the prism of spectatorship. But the imagined sphere of spectators was a fractured and heterogeneous one. Just as the balconies were filled with workers and soldiers, so were there 'other' theatres

like Odeon and Plaza. Just as there was the desire for social equality so were there counter-utopian drives that imagined a neatly bracketed and visibly classed society.



'Hindu camera! Muslim microphone!':
secular utopias

A 1946 film, *Jhumke* (Plate 3), based on a short story by Manto, peripherally touches upon a major emotive point with contemporaneous subcontinental audiences – communalism. Several films of the 1940s, like *Padosi* (dir. V. Shantaram, 1941) or *Hum Ek hain* (dir. P. L. Santoshi, 1946), were completely premised on the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity. In a plot reminiscent of Manto's 'Kali Shalwar', *Jhumke* follows the tale of a couple estranged by a misunderstanding over a pair of earrings, or *jhumke*. Charanji is a humble *tongawala*. His wife, Sundri, asks him to buy her a pair of earrings, but two years elapse before Charanji is able to save enough money. The day he brings home his gift, he sees his wife in the embrace of another man who has brought her a beautiful pair of *jhumke*. Needless to say, this visual tableau is misleading – Sundri was actually trying to fend off the other man's advances. But Charanji is inconsolable and turns Sundri out of their home. He brings up their daughter as a single parent and strives to give her a decent education. When the young college girl falls in love, her boyfriend gifts her a pair of earrings, painfully reminding Charanji of his own past.

While this primary plot was much criticized in the contemporary film press, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss it in detail. Rather, we will look at a sub-plot which contained a different reference to contemporary concerns, a reference that was not lost on reviewers or audiences. When Charanji, a Hindu *tongawala* decides to raise his daughter as a single parent, he is aided by Jamal Khan, a Muslim *tongawala*. Based on available publicity material, the friendship between the two presumably becomes a key plot point in the second half of the film. Celebrity film reviewer Baburao Patel pointed out, 'This situation is forged to suggest the Hindu-Muslim friendship.'²⁹ This casual observation indicates that communal harmony had become a recurrent theme in films of the period, so much so that it had become a cliché. Just a year earlier, Manto had written Filmistan's first feature film, *Chal Chal re Naujawan* (1945), which

featured a single song reference to secularism. This song touched a raw nerve with the same editor of *filmindia*, who commented at the time: 'That Hindu-Muslim unity song broadcasts only common sentiment which has now become very cheap on the screen, having been heard so many times before in different pictures.'³⁰ This 'cheap' trick, this didactic invocation of Hindu-Muslim solidarity, comprises our third and final study of the 1940s utopian cinematic prescriptions.

Barely a year away from the violence and mass displacement of the Partition, the subcontinent was in the grip of communal fever. In Bombay itself, there were daily incidents of stone throwing, acid throwing, stabbing, assault, and mistaken killings which intensified towards the end of year.³¹ Certain sections of the Bombay film industry added their voice to the growing pleas for sanity, driven by a variety of reasons. In 1942, speaking at an industry meeting, the actor-director Mazhar Khan stressed the important role cinema could play in issues of national importance. He said:

I tell you, we film people have the right to boast of our achievements. And I refuse to be modest. I dare say *Padosi*, in which I had the good fortune to work, has done more for Hindu-Muslim unity than several conferences and hundreds of articles of our Azads, Nehrus and Gandhis.³²

Surely, Khan's perception of the transformative power of the cinema was not totally misplaced. A medium that was able to reach out to seven lakh people every day, across a varied demographic base, would definitely create ripples of effect.³³ But Mazhar Khan's harangue stemmed more from an aggrieved sense of injustice than an agenda for activism. Gandhi's notorious distaste for the cinema prevented Congress politicians and other powerful elite from acknowledging the movie business as a 'national industry of no small advantage'. Political recognition would not only benefit the industry's public image, but would yield direct economic advantages. For example, on the eve of the Second World War, the stepmotherly treatment meted out to the film industry was discussed at the Third Madras Provincial Film Conference. According to Mr Narayanan, the president of the conference, new unfair taxes were being levied on a film industry already burdened by wartime restrictions on raw stock imports and taxes. This treatment was keenly felt by film industries across provinces in forms such as a new tax on bills and hoardings, special rates charged by the Railways for film parcels and the higher rates for electricity

charged from film companies. Narayanan further claimed that other major industries were charged less for these same facilities and often even got wartime concessions.³⁴

Crucially, the film industry itself was susceptible to the powerful currents of the times. The 1940s saw increased attempts to polarize the industry along communal lines. In an article written in 1942, journalist and scriptwriter K. A. Abbas described various moves being made by Hindu and Muslim factions to consolidate their position in the industry. He himself was 'invited to join a group of Hindu directors and technicians, formed with the avowed object of counteracting the communalist activities of certain Muslim directors and technicians'.³⁵ On the other hand, stories were circulating that the

Muslim director of a studio (that is owned by two partners – one Hindu and one Muslim) actually delivered a speech to a gathering of his Muslim colleagues in the studio, and told them, in eloquent terms reminiscent of a Muslim League meeting that soon they hoped to rid the studio of all non-Muslims including the Hindu partner.³⁶

Abbas then attempts a joke: 'I won't be surprised if we do reach the ridiculous stage where we would be telling one another, "This is a Hindu Camera", "That is a Muslim Microphone"!'³⁷ Going by these accounts, the film studio had become a site for serious communal contestations. By August 1945, Baburao Patel was saying, 'Communalism seems to have come into the Indian film industry, steadily though surreptitiously, and it looks as though we shall soon have two hostile camps facing each other'.³⁸

The fact that an industry that enabled many fluid negotiations of identity welcomed workers from myriad backgrounds and projected itself as a secular work sphere should be vulnerable to the divisive politics of religion is a well-guarded secret. Manto is almost alone in his documentation of the increasing impact of communal frenzy on Bombay Talkies, which pushed him to leave the city he so identified with. Manto's reminiscences of the period are among the rare instances when an industry insider has acknowledged communal tensions within the studio. Around 1946–47, Bombay Talkies was taken over by Savak Vacha and Ashok Kumar, who had left Filmistan. Manto writes about how the new senior staff at the studio was dominated by Muslims,

which created a great deal of resentment among the Hindu staff. Vacha began to receive anonymous letters that threatened everything from

murder to the destruction of the studio. . . . I advised them [Vacha and Ashok Kumar] to do away with my services because the Hindus thought that it was I who was responsible for so many Muslims getting into Bombay Talkies. They told me I was out of my mind.³⁹

In sharp contrast to this account is Ram Tipnis's narrative. In 2008 I interviewed Ram Tipnis, the chief make-up artiste at Filmistan Ltd and Rajkamal Studios in the 1940s. Here are some excerpts from that conversation:

DM: This was a time of great political turmoil and communal tension. Independence and Partition were looming. Did this atmosphere affect life at the studios?

RT: At the time, '42–45, I was at Rajkamal. There was nothing of the sort.

DM: Manto writes about Bombay Talkies being threatened with arson, around '46–47, because of the large numbers of Muslims who were employed . . .

RT: No no no. There was nothing like that. Dekho, film industry ek aisi industry hai jahaan na koi Hindu na Muslim. Sab artistes aur workers hain. [Trans. See, the film industry is a place where there is no distinction between Hindu and Muslim. All are artistes and workers.]

Rather than try to ascertain which of the two narratives, Manto's or Tipnis's, is more 'true', it serves us better to reflect on the meaning of the enduring legend of the secularism of Bombay's film industry. Even post the 1993 communal riots, film practitioners asserted that all the violence and hatred was happening somewhere else. Surekha, a dubbing artiste, articulated in 2005:

Even when the riots took place in 1993, I remember work going on as usual. Industry mein aadhey Hindu hain or aadhey musalmaan. There's no communal prejudice at all. Even after '93 no one stumbled, because we all knew that the whole thing was orchestrated by politicians. Individuals in the Industry may have certain strong views or may be aligned with a particular political party, but it never affects our work.⁴⁰

In some ways, the utopian harmonious societies promised on the film screen spilled out of the screen into a mythology of Bombay and its film industry. This Bombay is not a real place but an imagined elsewhere. Just as fictional characters routinely overcame their religious differences to build a new nation together, the Bombay film industry continues to turn a blind eye to everyday religious tensions in the

workplace. These tensions definitely exist, but perhaps the constant reiteration of the myth makes it a tenuous reality? After all, utopias are not just idyllic visions of the future but are crucial to what we expect of the present.

Through the three films discussed here, and the contexts of their production, one observes a range of modes through which the promise of utopia was being mobilized in late-colonial Bombay. Viewing these films through the framework of utopianism allows us to approach a conflicted terrain of interests and desires. Some parallel histories come into view. The logic of technological 'forecasting' reduces the complex configuration of industrial anxiety, audience engineering, studio competition, and media overlap into a story of triumphant emergence. At the same time, a focus on the romantic invocation of a classless society in *Apni Nagariya* firmly pushes the Progressives' activism and the war economy in 1940s Bombay cinema to the foreground. Finally, the didactic insistence on Hindu-Muslim unity in *Jhumke* speaks to one of the most stubborn nightmares of South Asia. Communal violence in this region has historically been a very real trauma, and popular cinema, in its brief life, has repeatedly tried to address this trauma indirectly. I hope to have demonstrated some of the ways in which the simple, 'naïve', happily resolved tales of the late-colonial Bombay film industry negotiated the complex realities of the day. Gilane Tawadros has said that the modernity project tried to speak universally from 'the privileged bastion of Western metropolises', but expanded into a vernacular modernity that 'emerged vociferously [and] responded with an equally emphatic insistence on national and local specificities that were nonetheless in constant dialogue with an international consciousness'.⁴¹ By examining both on-screen as well as off-screen rhetoric, I have tried to argue for a historically grounded analysis of utopian visions of modernity as they subtly shift and merge and remake themselves through time.

Notes

- 1 For their valuable comments on a draft version of this article, I would like to thank Ranjani Mazumdar, Arvind Rajagopal and Kartik Nair. Many thanks also to the American Institute of Indian Studies for enabling research in the National Film Archives of India, Pune.

- 2 Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1980).
- 3 Ardeshir Irani, 'Foreword', in *Kisan Kanya* song booklet (Bombay: Imperial Film Company, 1938).
- 4 1937 is the year of release followed by most filmographies, including the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. I will follow the date of release as mentioned in the film's print advertisements which state that *Kisan Kanya* had its 'world premiere' at the Majestic Cinema, Bombay on 8 January 1938.
- 5 Ardeshir Irani, *Kisan Kanya* song booklet (1938).
- 6 Donald Crafton, 'Mindshare: Telephone and Radio Compete for the Talkies', in John Fullerton and Jan Olsson, eds., *Allegories of Communication: Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to the Digital* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2004), p. 142.
- 7 Ibid, p. 152
- 8 Crafton, 'Mindshare', p. 153.
- 9 Reported in *filmindia*, February 1939, p. 24.
- 10 Irani is careful to point out that *Kisan Kanya* was indeed a swadeshi product. This was the first time that every stage of the colour process was carried out in India, from processing to printing. Earlier attempts at colour included *Sairandhri* (V. Shantaram, 1933) which was shot on black-and-white negative but printed in Germany using a colour print process.
- 11 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 316–17.
- 12 In an article titled 'History of Film Industry in India', Mr I. K. Menon, secretary of the Motion Picture Society of India, confirms: 'The impact of this global war was felt by the industry after 1941. . . . There was dearth of materials due to lack of imports of raw materials and equipments from foreign countries and the progress of the industry was hampered' (Menon and Chandavarkar, *Handbook of the Indian Film Industry*, xxiii).
- 13 I. K. Menon and S. G. Chandavarkar, *Handbook of the Indian Film Industry* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1949), p. xxiii; A lot rested on *Kisan Kanya's* success, but according to Manto, Irani's gamble did not pay off as spectacularly as was hoped, and this might be one reason why Imperial Film Company had to fold later that year (see Manto, 'Meri Shadi').
- 14 *Apni Nagariya* song booklet (Bombay: Hindustan Cinetone, 1940). Unnumbered pages.
- 15 *Apni Nagariya* song booklet, 1940.
- 16 See for example: Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India: A Review of the Literature* (Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi; London: Sage, 2004).
- 17 Lyrics by Pandit Indra and Dr Safdar 'Aah'. Translations mine.

- 18 Sa'adat Hasan Manto, *Bitter Fruit*, ed. and tr. Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 475.
- 19 Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, *I Am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography* (New Delhi, Kanpur: Vikas Publishing House, 1977), p. 97.
- 20 Quoted in Shabana Mahmud, 'Angaare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 447–67.
- 21 K. A. Abbas, *I Am Not an Island*, 1977, p. 227.
- 22 See Aamir Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India', in Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan ed. *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal & Permanent Black, 2000.
- 23 *Apni Nagariya* song booklet, 1940.
- 24 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 30–31.
- 25 Upendranath Ashk, *Filmi Duniya Ki Jhalkiyan*, Vol. 1 (Allahabad: Neelam Prakashak, 1979), p. 37. Translations mine.
- 26 Ashk, *Filmi Duniya Ki Jhalkiyan*, Vol. 1, 1979, p. 37.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Menon and Chandavarkar, *Handbook of the Indian Film Industry*, p. xxiii.
- 29 *filmindia*, September 1946, p. 72.
- 30 *filmindia*, January 1945, p. 41.
- 31 Home Dept. Pol [I]: F 5/3/1947.
- 32 Quoted in *filmindia*, May 1942, p. 60.
- 33 Panna Shah, *Indian Film*, 1950, p. 106.
- 34 See *filmindia*, February 1939, p. 23.
- 35 *filmindia*, February 1940, p. 31.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 *filmindia*, August 1945, p. 13.
- 39 Manto, *Bitter Fruit*, 2008, p. 500.
- 40 Surekha Prasad, Personal Interview, conducted in Bombay, 4 February 2005.
- 41 Gilane Tawadros, 'The Revolution Stripped Bare', in *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, 50th Venice Biennale (London: Institute of International Visual Arts in collaboration with the Forum for African Arts and the Prince Claus Fund, 2003), p. 17.

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- 'Mr. A Narayanan Hits Out!', February 1939, p. 23.
- 'Film Industry as the 8th Key Industry', February 1939, p. 24.
- 'Communalists, Keep Out!', February 1942, pp. 31–33.
- 'Mazhar Khan Hits Our National Leaders', May 1942, pp. 59–60.
- 'Mountain in Labour Yields a Mouse!', January 1945, pp. 39–42.
- 'Jhumke Slanders Our Collegians', September 1946, p. 72.
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Tipnis, Ram, Personal Interview, conducted in Bombay, 18 August 2008.

5

National becoming, regional variation
and everyday moments
*The Film Enquiry Committee, Uttar Pradesh and
the student cinema-goer*

SUZANNE L. SCHULZ



In the net of every wave, exist A hundred gaping mouths of crocodiles:
See what the rain drop goes through, Before it becomes a pearl
—Ghalib, quoted in the *Film Enquiry Committee Report*¹

Each state claims to produce a space wherein something is accomplished—a space, even, where something is brought to perfection.
—Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*²

For those who have studied the relationship between Indian cinema and the state, the 1951 Film Enquiry Committee Report, a 300-page compendium of opinions, statistics and recommendations about the present and future of Indian cinema, has been an indispensable resource on the Indian cinema during the postindependence era.³ The report outlines important debates between the Indian film industry and branches of the government and highlights the informal economics and haphazard organization of the Indian film industry in the post-war era. While the Film Enquiry Committee Report offers a complex picture of postindependence production, distribution and exhibition, its commentators have tended to focus on its final recommendations for national institutions for cinema, sidelining both the step-by-step process of the Film Enquiry, which included 19 months of testimony and data collection, as well as regional differences of opinion throughout the Film Enquiry regarding how best to regulate Indian national cinema.