Obscure Subjects of Desire: 
Gender, Conjugalituy and the Remaking of Class in 1970s Hindi Cinema

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It is relatively uncontroversial today to assume that the decade was marked by intense political crisis and social change, and that emergent cinematic trends registered—here directly and powerfully, there through subterfuge and over-coded iconography—the prevailing structures of feeling. Even a cursory trawl through the filmic archives of those transitional years heaps up, on the one hand, images of unparalleled despair/desperation over the republic’s thwarted hopes; and on the other, flamboyantly wrought vignettes that affirm a sense of desire/aspiration predicated on the heterotopic possibilities of a new materialism. The texts refract diverse constellations of critique and social refashioning at work, and it is futile to search for a common visual style, narrative regularity, or form of cognition/action on the screen. This essay focuses on the new cycle of domestic middle-class melodramas that emerged within Hindi cinema during the 1970s, especially those associated with the directors Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee. These films have been lauded for opening a middle path of realist entertainment between the frugal plotting and (self-imposed) marginalization of “art” cinema and the “mindless” or “escapist” protocols of commercial/conventional/masala movies. In my reckoning, it might be more productive to attend to these films in terms of specific formal attributes, narrative innovations, and ideological effects (on audiences and the discursive terrain alike). To be sure, the staging of middle-class domesticity and desire in these films is by no means without precedent in Hindi cinema; but something “original” does become visible when they are seen—as in this essay—as a counter-point to the theme of subaltern anger and public unrest that had emerged within the genre of the Social during the 1970s. While the latter was commonly articulated through the figure of the vigilante superhero or the newly sensitized “developmental” agent of the state/civil society,
the former sought a different site of (seemingly a-political) engagement: the insecurities linked to romantic and marital conflict, often under the shadow of aspirations for class mobility. Two crucial elements in these tales of passion and conjugality are (i) the value accorded to female desire, and (ii) a re-assembling of middle-class masculine agency through inter-textual face-off between the “angry” and the “affable” young man. Together, these (rather than the deployment of the conventions and energies of the Social) put into play a newer aesthetic contract that laid the ground for the appearance and consolidation of the desiring/consuming screen subjects of post-liberalization Hindi film narratives of today.

**Periodising the Seventies**

Despite the chronic shortage of funds, scarce exhibition avenues, poorly developed distribution infrastructure, high dependence on imported film equipment, prohibitive levels of taxation and censorship regulations, and precious little support from the government, the Indian film industry emerged in 1971 as the world’s largest producer of films—a position that has been consolidated in subsequent decades. Clearly, notwithstanding the severe handicaps (or perhaps due to them), the industry embarked on untested paths and an autonomous expansion, responding to the public’s desire for new cinematic mediations during that crisis-ridden conjuncture.

Historians of contemporary Indian political life have argued that the Nehruvian consensus regarding the institutions and instruments for nation-building had begun to unravel gradually during the mid-1960s and with greater urgency during the 1970s, primarily due to the mounting economic crisis, the internal power realignments within the Congress party system, the widespread upsurge of disaffection against a mode of governance perceived as inefficient and uncaring, and decisive shifts in the world economic system.¹ According to Sanjay Seth, the privileged classes learned to view distortions in national development not as a function of an
“incomplete” modernity but as necessary structural features of a modernity into which the nation had already “arrived”:

And so, with an almost audible sigh of relief, these classes...decided to embrace and celebrate this discovery; they have accepted that it is in the very nature of this Indian modernity that the latest consumer goods coexist with extreme poverty. (p. 353).

Kalyan Sanyal similarly points to a marked shift in developmental discourse in the early 1970s, with the earlier goal of “all-encompassing, macro-level transformation” being replaced by an approach that emphasized the emergence of “a network of interventions aimed at the ‘management of poverty’ in the wasteland produced by the primitive accumulation of post-colonial capital” (p. 88-9). Clearly, however, such a large-scale discursive shift could not be effected merely through the privileged classes’ “sigh of relief” or managerial exhortation from the state. As Tharu and Lalita have observed, the mid-1970s was also a period in which “world capitalism...made a concerted effort to break the power of national oligopolies” and the “internationalization of markets, and the transformation of the Indian state essentially into a mediator in that process, required that the nation be imagined anew” (Tharu and Lalita 49, emphasis in original). Put differently, the 1970s witnessed a modification in the existing discourses of nationalism which had been ballasted primarily by the imperatives of anti-imperial bonding or the economic and scientific prestige associated with developmentalism. These nationalist discourses, which had hitherto ensured dirigistic centrality for the numerically marginal (middle-class, upper-caste) national elite, were increasingly challenged from a variety of locations: potent regionalist demands for greater or lesser redistribution of resources; various population groups that aligned around a shared perception of long-pending injustices which they sought to remedy through their expanded representation/participation in public life; and a new entrepreneurial class, keen to extricate economic initiative from bureaucratic shackles and
confident that competing globally was both possible and profitable. These macro-historical shifts are of not mere contextual “noise” but crucial determinants in the field of cultural production that came into existence.² It might be argued that the new “middle (class) cinema” that emerged during the early 1970s was a key element of a new aesthetic contract³ that brought the historical shifts into alignment with processes of “subjectification.”

The origins of this middle-of-the-road cinema has been traced to younger film-makers who had apprenticed with Bimal Roy during the 1950s. Ratnottama Sengupta has listed Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Chatterjee, Gulzar, Rajendra Singh Bedi, and Basu Bhattacharya as representative film-makers of the new trend, noting that their novelty lay in having “a sophistication that was in keeping with the recent developments” (89). According to some film historians, this new trend was pioneered by Hrishikesh Mukherjee who “carved a middle path between the extravagance of mainstream cinema and the stark realism of art cinema” (Gulzar et al: 492), while others have claimed that it was the “unexpected commercial success” of Basu Chatterjee’s Rajanigandha in 1974 that “helped to open up a new space which would subsequently be referred to as middle cinema” (Ahmed). This cinema drew its thematic, narrative and marketing attributes from a wide variety of sources: like much of art-house cinema, it was built around “ordinary” characters, settings, conversations, and events (except that the ambience here was resolutely urban, middle-class and upper-caste); it usually had lesser-known but trained/talented cast and crew (stars, when present, were willing to work at greatly reduced prices and subordinate their roles to the story/directorial vision), and the consequent low production costs allowed a niche market to be cultivated; commercial viability was also enhanced by not eschewing the market-magnetic conventions of popular songs, deft use of comic and melodramatic elements, topical commentary, and cinematic self-reference. The trend was also significantly aided by the fact that between 1971 and 1975, the Indian government allowed what
it perceived as a lop-sided agreement with the Motion Pictures Exporters Association of America to expire (for details, see Pendakur), and directed the state-owned Film Finance Corporation to fund independent cinema with a view to turn the medium into “an effective instrument for the promotion of national culture, education and healthy entertainment” (cited in Willemen and Rajadhyaksha: 27). The first step meant that the screen space that had until then been blocked by Hollywood films became available to alternative cinema, while the second ensured that relatively soft loans were in principle available to those willing to make what the government considered “meaningful films.” It is worth noting that these governmental initiatives ultimately proved unsuccessful and short-lived: many of the successful new wave films were privately funded and promoted, and after 1975 the government chose to pursue its developmental agenda through state-run television rather than through film.

However, for the inquiry pursued here, more crucial than the career or the recurring features of this genre are broader questions concerning what they did and how they worked. We might usefully take a cue from Madhava Prasad’s suggestion that at the start of the 1970s two broad trends emerged within Hindi realist cinema. The first, set in motion by directors such as Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal and based on a notion of “progressive realism”: it invoked a division within the national space, and positioned the urban spectator to witness a different social world that was nevertheless within the same political unit. The second trend, associated with film-makers like Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee, comprised of films that addressed themselves to a class within (or specifically associated with) the nation, and sought to “create a world that the spectator would recognize as his/her own” (161). Although both sets of films were made almost exclusively for the urban middle-class audience, Prasad points to an inner schism that inflected the narratives in separate directions, leading to different viewing positions convoked by the strategies of textual representation:
[T]he audience of citizen-subjects were called upon to occupy two different positions. One corresponded to the citizen side of the entity and involved a frame of reading that included the perspective of the nation-state while the other was addressed to the subject, the individual in society, faced with the struggle for existence, the locus of desires, fears and hopes. [The latter tendency is] the realist cinema of the subject, or what is commonly known as middle-class cinema. (162).

In its turn, the middle-class cinema itself might be seen as oriented externally (assuming or asserting the middle-class’s reformist role within nationally significant conflicts, thus responding more explicitly to the social tensions and contradictions of the period) or internally (focusing on how the class is hemmed in by the larger and presumably backward society, and seeks to reproduce its identity through a combination of individualist rationality and upper caste endogamy). Building on this schematic template, I turn now to a closer analysis of selected films from the oeuvre of middle-class cinema, made by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee—arguably the most-successful directors of the genre during this period.

The Political is Personal

Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s films of the 1970s with Amitabh Bachchan in key early roles are melodramas of personal tension between intimate individuals, ending in an awkwardly-staged reconciliation that also involves the chastening of the socially-privileged, haughty male protagonist. The “brooding anger” associated with the Bachchan persona is already in evidence here, but before it has been yoked through the screenplays of Salim-Javed to a populist/subalternist impatience with the “system.” Instead, this smouldering rage takes the form of distressed vulnerability against a loved one’s—and indeed society’s—ailments (in Anand and Mili), or an intense ressentiment directed against the rise/popularity of the lower middle-class
wife (in *Abhimaan*) and the lower middle-class friend (in *Namak Haraam*), who suddenly seem to become rivals rather than grateful underlings. The films end in a rapprochement of sorts as the angry (ressentimental) young man learns—after the traumatic experience of a close one’s death—to accommodate the presence/viewpoint of the subordinate subject, so that order might be restored and things move on as they “ought.” Like most melodramas of reconciliation, these too powerfully evoke a problem (gender inequality/prejudice, exploitation of labour, absence of reliable medical system in the country adding to the vagaries of illness and death) that is socially caused and maintained, but resolve them through the narrative contrivance of a personal “change of heart” in a yet-privileged subject. We might grasp how these films “work” by paying closer attention to the ways in which *Abhimaan*, for instance, poses and resolves its problem.

*Abhimaan* was made at a time when “the woman question” was returning to the national agenda under feminist pressure. The film might be seen as a parable not just about artistic envy but also about the (im-)possibility of companionate marriage. It opens with a popular song in which Subir (Bachchan) laments about not finding a desired soul-mate in spite of all his wealth and fame. He is intimate with Chitra, a charming rich admirer, but his protective manager-friend Chandru emphasizes her unsuitability in the following terms: “in this relationship, she is the eagle and you are the pigeon,” “this wealthy and independent woman will snatch all your peace,” and “you need a loving wife who will serve you and look after your house well, someone just like your mother and your aunt.” Subir pretends to be irritated by this advice, but he accepts—as in all other matters—Chandru’s “sensible” view. He meets on a visit to his aunt’s village the demure and talented Uma whom he instantly finds alluring; when his aunt suggests that he marry Uma, he immediately obliges. In Bombay, Uma begins to manage Subir’s posh home and busy life with aplomb and affection. Subir unilaterally decides that he and Uma would sing together professionally, but soon her rapid rise to stardom eclipses his own career. Sensing his mounting
insecurity and resentment, Uma offers to quit singing but is persuaded to continue after Chandru realizes that financers were willing to pay her astronomical sums of money (which—with Subir’s career going downward—is needed to run their household). Subir starts drinking heavily and seeks solace in Chitra’s company; Uma quietly goes away to her father’s home in the village, where she has a miscarriage and goes into depression. A repentant Subir tries to get her “cured,” but nothing works till, following an avuncular mentor’s suggestion, Subir sings at a public function a song that reminds her of the early days of their marriage. She breaks down and weeps—and joins her husband in completing the duet. In the closing sequence, Subir holds Uma by her shoulder and they leave the auditorium amidst enthusiastic applause, ignoring all the autograph seekers.

At one level, Abhimaan also offers a perspective on the re-making of the Indian middle-class during the 1970s. The film registers the growing influence of the cultural industries in promoting and naturalizing a materialist ethos within this class—witness not just the dissemination of film-culture in public places and domestic spaces through glossy magazines, radio, cassettes and records, and crowded public performances, but also expressions such as “Binaca smile” passing into everyday conversation. More striking is the candid (and largely non-critical) depiction of this class’s rising affluence through the “black” economy: Chandru’s manipulation of Subir’s (and Uma’s) tax papers and frequent references to the black money they have accumulated—casually suggested in one scene to be almost one-third of their legitimate wealth—is projected as a pragmatic necessity rather than a corrupt or criminal act.

However, the questioning of gender norms seems the more emphatic point in the film. Abhimaan is a solemn enough critique, more acute than in most Hindi films, of patriarchal routines that render marriage and a career so thorny for women. Several insights from feminist debates of the
period find an echo in the film. The venerable maestro Brijeswar Rai comments that men have
never been able to tolerate women more talented than them, and that while Subir’s decision to
make Uma sing professionally might be a “mistake” in terms of their marital happiness, it would
be a worse mistake if a singer as talented as Uma were to be lost to mundane domestic chores.
Subir initially affirms to Uma that marriage had merged them into “one” and so it made no
difference at all which of them sang/earned for the family, but when she becomes more
successful than him we see his inability to live up to the consequences of this cogent truism.
There is also an effort to break away from prevailing stereotypes about “proper” femininity:
Chitra’s lively yet level passion for Subir, both before and after his marriage to Uma, is depicted
without grating moralism; and when Subir and Chandru attempt to “cure” Uma of her depressive
apathy after her miscarriage by inducing “maternal” tears (they show her the little green socks
she had knitted for the unborn baby), she walks away saying “throw them away.” Also
noteworthy are several sequences in which the overtly affirmed meanings are possibly undercut
by a semiotic doubling/subversion from a woman’s perspective. Given that Uma is an artist
herself, it is reasonable to assume that her singing stages her complex feelings, perhaps even her
“political” self. Notice the scission at work under the surface of Uma’s melodious paens to
marital love: “Loote koi mann ka nagar ban ke mera saathi” (A stranger plunders my heart in the
guise of a friend), “Ab tho hai tum se har khushi apni; Tum pe marna hai zindagi apni” (From
this moment all my joys are from/with you; Dying for you will be all my life), or more
poignantly, “Tere saath hum bhi sanam mash-hoor ho gaye; Dekho kahaan le jaaye be-khudi
apnee” (I have attained fame alongside you, my love; Look how far hence my rapture/loss-of-self
takes me). At the film’s rather strained climax, we are unsure whether Uma has been able to
awaken the right “an-sunee si dhadkan” (unknown pulse) in Subir’s heart or whether he will
merely accept the fact that she will continue to “nayi ada se sataayegi” (torment me in new
ways), just as it might be ambiguous whether his promise for their future signifies that he would support her or continue to hold her back/down (“tujhe thaame kai haathon se”). Evidently then, many scenes in the film pick up aspects of the politics of gender that contemporary feminist critique had broached during the early 1970s. Yet, the personalization /domestication of how these problems are (to be) understood limits the scope of that critique in the film. Uma’s recuperation is premised on her husband becoming more sensitive and accommodating, not on her connecting up with sites and attitudes that would render her a more assured woman-singer in the world.

Fig. 1: The inability to succeed together. Subir (Amitabh Bachchan) leaves Uma (Jaya Bhaduri) grounded in Abhimaan.

If Abhimaan effectively plays down the social politics of gender by prioritizing individualized experience as the framework of interpretation, it forms a pattern with the other key films made by Mukherjee during the 1970s. In Bawarchi, a teacher-turned-chef moves from one squabbling household to the next, working as a servant for a lower wage than offered (out of consideration
for the inflation that afflicts the masters! and teaching each family-member the virtues of
sacrifice and service so that harmony prevails. Namak Haraam, which is perhaps Mukherjee’s
most directly political film, involves the viewer in a discussion on capitalism versus socialism
through a narrative in which a shrewd and ruthless industrialist is confronted by a range of pro-
worker positions espoused by diverse key characters. The film is indeed remarkable for its
frequent and overt references to “class” conflicts and “socialism”; its on-screen debates on social
philosophy, industrial policy, and the right principles of effective trade union activism; its semi-
documentary montage that references the contemporary working-class sense of ruin caused by
hoarding, unemployment, inflation, and destitution. Such themes, to be sure, resonated with
Indira Gandhi’s contemporary diagnosis of the crisis facing the nation during that period, and
were not unusual in the popular cinema of the 1970s, but it might be argued that Namak Haraam
stages the most explicit discussion on class politics within mainstream Hindi cinema. Yet, as in
Abhimaan, the narrative here tends to contain the fundamental political questions of its time
within the ambit of personal conflicts between the key characters.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Namak Haraam is remembered decades later less for its political impact
and more for heralding Amitabh Bachchan’s explosive potential in harnessing societal edginess
into a charismatic on-screen rage. Hrishikesh Mukherjee has claimed that this was Bachchan’s
“first angry man role when he didn’t pick up an AK-47 and fire at the villains.” It is well known
that soon after Namak Haraam began a cycle of films in which Salim-Javed sculpted that role to
perfection, manifesting the felt by impatience and anguish felt by the petit-bourgeois and
subaltern classes. However, the advent of Bachchan as the quintessential angry young man was
also marked by a counterpoint: the appearance of Amol Palekar as an affable young man, laying a
timid but deft finger not on the pulse of populist socialism but on newly emerging scenarios of
desire and social security/mobility. We now turn our attention to this new desire for modernity and the re-making of Indian middle-class subjectivity during the mid-seventies.

**The Advent of the Affable Young Man**

Ashis Nandy (2010) has rightly noted that by the middle of the 1970s Nehruvian India had become “a slightly embarrassing inheritance rather than an immediate presence,” although that dispensation with its “democratic, Brahminic, patronizing socialism” had been instrumental in releasing “much creative energy at the bottom and peripheries” of the nation (p. x). The vigorous effervescence in literary-cultural articulation as well as political mobilization, especially by women, dalit-bahujans and religious minorities, points to the new democratic ferment of this period. We must not, however, lose sight of the fact that crucial transmutations were occurring at the top and the centre too, where newer hegemonic forms and practices had to be invented in response to the changes that were afoot. A more accommodative socialist populism directed against the “system” was one aspect of the manoeuvring from above; another was the move to surreptitiously shift the ground from beneath the unruly citizen to the desiring/enterprising consumer. Discursive shifts of this order evidently required alterations in the prevailing narrative/aesthetic contract, and the rise of contemporary “heroes” who could clinch a fresh consensus. Drawing on Michael Kimmel’s work point that masculinity should be seen not as the experience of power but rather of the entitlement to power, Rahul Roy urges us to a conception of masculinities beyond men as custodians and wielders of power to men negotiating often contradictory flows of power and their sense of entitlement to power. It might thus be argued that Hindi cinema of the 1970s mediated both the discursive shifts mentioned above: Amitabh Bachchan’s “anger” re-directed the Social genre in unprecedented authoritarian-populist directions, while Amol Palekar’s “affability” freed up the urban middle-class/upper-caste male to pursue his self-interest unencumbered by the sense of social(ist) guilt or obligation. Rather than
A bit of film-historical probing might indicate why.

Amol Palekar made a remarkable debut in the mid-1970s with three successive silver-jubilee hits directed by Basu Chatterjee: all films in which Palekar brought to the screen a distinctly ordinary “hero”: clumsy but well-meaning, self-absorbed but likeable, vulnerable but determined, bungling but triumphant. In Rajnigandha ("Tuberoses," 1974), Sanjay is a smooth-talking but befuddled government clerk who feels he is being denied a promotion (which he considers his due) on account of regionalist/caste politics at the office. His lover Deepa is more educated than him, but he is confident this will not be a problem for their marriage; he does not seem to pay attention to what she says most of the time, and frequently keeps her waiting while he chats endlessly with his pals, but he wins her over every evening with his sincere smile and a bunch of fragrant tuberoses (they seem to fill her with heady adoration as she muses “kitna sukh hai bandhan mein”—how joyous is this bonding [bondage]); despite being requested by her, Sanjay does not accompany Deepa to a crucial job-interview in a faraway city, expressing confidence that she will do just fine and that if she gets the job he would be happy to seek a transfer to be with her; at the end of the film, Deepa’s hope that her suave and successful former lover Navin
would ask for her hand proves futile, and when Sanjay meets her with the usual bunch of flowers and trusting smile she buries herself in his arms thinking “this alone is true/real.” And since Sanjay has managed to secure his promotion, she decides to turn down the college-teacher’s job at Bombay and settle down as Sanjay’s wife in Delhi. In *Chhoti Si Baat*<sup>10</sup> (“A Small Issue,” 1975), Palekar plays Arun, a dreamy but feeble-spirited clerk at a private firm in Bombay whose attempts to get close to Prabha are constantly thwarted by her pushy and garrulous colleague Nagesh Shastri, a competitor for her affection. After a series of failed efforts to impress Prabha, Arun turns to a retired army officer (portentously named Col. Julius Nagendranath Wilfred Singh), who runs a career-counselling and personality-development centre at Khandala. Col. Singh’s expensive grooming helps Arun transform into a canny and self-assured lover; he returns to Bombay, turns the tables on Nagesh, and successfully woos Prabha. At the happy ending of the film, we see Nagesh approach Col. Singh for counselling. Next, Palekar appeared in *Chit Chor* (“Heart-Stealer,” 1976) as Vinod, an amiable overseer working for an engineering firm: arriving from Bombay to Madhupur village, he is mistaken to be the wealthy engineer by the local school headmaster’s family who dream that their daughter Geeta could marry him. Vinod is perceived within the family as being “agreeable, joyful, sociable, very sweet” and soon even the initially disinclined Geeta falls in love with him. He is flattered with attention and comfort till Geeta’s parents realize the “mistake.” When Sunil—the actual engineer and Vinod’s boss—arrives, Geeta’s parents do their best to court him and he agrees to marry Geeta. Vinod wishes to fade away from this properly arranged happy ending, but once Sunil realizes the truth he brings the lovers together.

The early Palekar persona thus embodies personal desire/social aspiration tinged with a sense of uncertain entitlement, he is subjected to various trials and taunts, and eventually his goodness and astuteness see him through. It is important to resist viewing this persona as a local variant of the
“good Joe” American social type because, as Richard Dyer alerts us, that the “cultural world” articulated by the notion of social types obscures the hegemony of one section of society over another. A striking feature of Rajnigandha and Chhoti Si Baat is how the narrative constantly flits between the outer world inhabited by the urban middle class (offices, restaurants, bus-stops, streets, apartments, cinemas) and the inner desires/tensions that structure the experience of “their” world. The lower classes are absent for most part from the screen; when shown, they are either quietly acquiescent (domestic help, service staff at shops or restaurants) or come across as irritating or mildly menacing (assorted quacks offering psychic cures that never work, swindling mechanics peddling shoddy equipment, lazy and uppity office peons): they are like props on a set, mere local colour or an insignificant blur against which the world of middle-class desire is under construction. The really rich and powerful classes are also not prominently framed, and thus the protagonists propel themselves within these narratives exempt from the polarised economic hierarchies that structure the action in the Social genre. The conflicts that drive the plots are overwhelmingly emotional, the obstacles/contradictions the protagonists face are in large measure internal to their class, and the resolutions effected through inter-personal tact and contact rather than the mobilization of dissenting energies. Indeed, any involvement in political activity is subtly derided: Deepa regards Sanjay’s union-activities at his workplace as a futile distraction from their leisure-time companionship, and the only good that could possibly result from it would be win him free time to attend to their personal work—when Sanjay says that his office work prevent him from accompanying her to Bombay, Deepa asks “tum office mein strike kyon nahin kara dete? (why don’t you get a strike organized at your office?).” Again, when the younger Navin requests her to support the student-union’s demand for justice from the college management, she declares issues extraneous to her own studies do not concern her. And between
the two modes of politics, Sanjay’s patient petitioning deemed more acceptable than the younger Navin’s more disruptive public activism.

We notice one other subtle narrative stratagem that serves to bracket off the passions of the popular/political in these films. Above the bus-stop where Arun regularly meets Prabha in Chhoti Si Baat is a large poster of the soon-to-be-released Amitabh Bachchan starrer Zameer, which simultaneously advertises the mainstream film then being made by B. R. Chopra (the producer of both these films) and insinuates a contrast between the realism of the middle-class romance unfolding beneath the poster and the implausible passions that beset a masala-Social film like Zameer. When Arun is at the personality development centre at Khandala, we see Amitabh Bachchan (as himself) walk in and briefly consult Col. Singh about his tax returns, a scene that reinforces the “realism” of Chhoti Si Baat and renders more credible the persona of the enthralled Amol Palekar who momentarily star-gazes at Bachchan along with the implied viewer of the film.
Fig. 2: Mr. Affable meets the Big B. Ram Prasad (Amol Palekar) in a twinkle-eyed engagement with Amitabh Bachchan in *Golmaal*.

This device of contrasting the screen personas and cinematic styles associated with Bachchan and Palekar is later repeated in Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Golmaal* (1979): in a scene set outside Kamal Studio, the character played by Palekar shakes hands with Bachchan (as himself, shooting for Mukherjee’s own masala-Social *Jurmana!*); and in another intrepid sequence, the Palekar character’s fantasy of sending Bachchan out of business is filmed through cinematic self-references to *Guddi* and *Amar Akbar Anthony*.

We might see this peculiar contrivance as connoting a preference for the ideologies associated with reformist realism (associated with the Palekar persona), and twinkle-eyed disengagement from representational forms that gratify subaltern taste/identification (associated with the Bachchan persona). In the popular films made under the aegis of what Prasad terms “the aesthetic of mobilization,” Amitabh Bachchan’s appeal was established through a combination of differentially coded values:

> While the power derived from elite affiliations served to legitimate the persona for the middle class, the personality derived from the subaltern roles was the basis for a new mode of address, which spoke to the proletariat and other marginal sections and mobilized the spectator behind the star (141).

Fareed Kazmi has argued that the angry young man embodied a “fiercely independent Promethean vision” of an extraordinary individual who starts apart from the ordinary and passive masses on behalf of whom he fights—provided he has “divine benediction and his mother’s blessings” (p. 143). Thus, Kazmi concludes that what appears to be social intervention and
activism in these films simultaneously naturalises fatalism and passivity, and “what is being attacked are the checks and balances of the liberal framework of society (p. 151)

The affability in middle-class cinema provides not so much a contrast as a counterpoint to the anger in the masala-Social film. Middle-class cinema sought to promote the self-identification of its characters/audiences, installing a verisimilitude based on individuated desire and action, and avoiding what it regarded as the un-real/excessive phantasms that burdened the masala-Social. This is confirmed in the films by Basu Chatterjee, where the key site of power and economic mobility is located not in organized political action or social mobilization but in the realms of the bourgeoisie’s discreet charms. In Rajnigandha, Deepa’s fascination for Navin is built around the sophistication and gainful social connections that help her to get the college job in Bombay; in Chhoti Bi Baat, Arun’s successful tutelage in “personality development” under Col. JWN Singh helps Arun not just to defeat Nagesh and get Prabha but also to put in their “proper” place the likes of lower class mechanics like Gurnaam and the subordinate staff at his office. Cultural capital (fashion, taste, etiquette, contacts within high society, and appropriately gendered behaviour in public) is naturalised as the most prudent and effective resource to be acquired and deployed by the middle-class to promote itself. During the next couple of decades, as the socialist accent petered out of political discourse, the bourgeois hero could emerge from his discreet niche and strut into the high-budget arc-lights of Bollywood.

**Conclusion: “Sab Golmaal Hai”?**

Madhava Prasad has suggested that since the 1990s, Indian commercial cinema witnesses an ongoing “process of transformation that, instead of coming in with alternative modes...works on and appropriates the existing mode, bidding to replace the dominant rather than wrest a space beside it” (p. 218). My sense is that this process could be regarded as a longer-term legacy of the
1970s. Clear narrative and institutional linkages may indeed be discerned between (i) the modest genre of middle-class cinema, (ii) the influential tele-serials on Doordarshan during the 1980s which effectively consolidated an Indian middle-class audience of unprecedented size, authority and aspiration, and (iii) the de-politicized/consumerist blockbusters of Hindi cinema of the 1990s. Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Basu Chatterjee both carried over their success in 1970s middle-class cinema to the emerging field of television entertainment during the following decade. Mukherjee made serials like *Hum Hindustani/We Indians, Talaash/Quest, Dhoop Chaon/Sun and Shade, Rishtey/Relationships, and Ujale ki Or/Towards the Light*: all of these touched upon contemporary issues or reformist/developmental initiatives launched by the government. Chatterjee was even more prolific and influential—setting a very brisk pace by completing a 30-minute episode in two days each, he made landmark programmes such as: *Darpan*, consisting of dramatizations of short stories with classic liberal-humanist themes from around the world; *Kakkaji Kahin*, a local adaptation of *Yes Minister*, satirising the ineptness and corruption of the political class in India; *Byomkesh Bakshi*, based on cases solved by a gentleman-detective; and most notably *Rajni*, which made Priya Tendulkar as the eponymous combative consumer-activist a household name and perhaps the first “television star” in India. Bhaskar Ghose, who was at the helm of Doordarshan during the mid-1980s and praised these serials for being good as well as popular, recalls: “Producers like...Basu Chatterji (sic) had a very clear notion of what they wanted to present and were skilful enough to do it in a manner that attracted large audiences” (p. 52). Media scholars have noted how many of these serials, although commissioned for delivering “developmental” messages, were forcefully driven by commercial sponsorship and soon created a consumerist ethos that expanded the Indian market almost beyond recognition (see for instance Rajadhyaksha, Poduval, and Page and Crawley).
During the same phase, the “anger” associated with the 1970s masala-Social films has largely dissipated. Writing of the transformation in Hindi cinema leading up to *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), columnist Nikhat Kazmi noted that there had been a swing away from “the nasty, brutish hero” and viewers and film-makers were turning from revenge, the reason for all that blood and gore..., to the family, the nation, and love. There is a ubiquitous demand for good, clean cinema. A demand which is reflected in the stupendous success of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*... [Cited in Uberoi, p. 311].

Significantly, this film was made by Rajshri Productions (which had also funded Basu Chatterjee’s *Chitchor*), and it was innovatively advertised on the newly emerging cable television networks through an emphasis on the family-feeling that went into its making. Rustom Bharucha’s incisive critique of the film as “claustrophobic, homogenized, monocultural, and totalizing” (p. 170), “its extravagance punctuated with naturalistic details of the contemporary Indian market... [in the process naturalizing] the generic north Indian, upper caste, upper class, extended family, around which the film revolves” (p. 169) prompts a recognition of both its discontinuities and the continuities with the aesthetic contract of 1970s middle-class cinema.

The major stars of today (including the once-angry young man) function as relays in a libidinal economy of middle-class consumerism and depoliticized aspiration. The affable young man, that obscure subject of desire who worked by tact and stealth during the 1970s, might have won the day after all.

**NOTES**

1. Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam (2008) summarize the Nehruvian consensus as combining three basic features: a vision of a self-reliant economy based on an import-substituting industrialization strategy; a broadly secular polity; and a non-aligned foreign
policy. Kaviraj (2010, 2011) insightfully discusses the process—and the implications—of the collapse of this consensus.

2. As Karen Gabriel notes: “The 1970s constitute a benchmark in Hindi cinema because it was during this period that important changes that began in the late ‘60s intensified, consolidated and manifested themselves cinematically, in unmistakable ways. These included the political and social upheavals of the time, and organizational and structural changes in the industry—the collapse of the studio and star systems, the flow of unaccounted money, the power of the underworld—which became apparent, cinematically and narratively, in generic changes, and in the emergence of new idioms of gender, sexuality, rebellion, and heroism” (xi-xii).

3. Henry Sussman proposes the aesthetic contract as a framework for taking cognisance of the linguistic nature and dynamic of all cultural productions, contrary to the Kantian protocols of Romantic genius/individualism. Noting that works of art hold our interest because “they sustain a certain uneasy balance between public discourse and idiosyncratic personal usage,” Sussman argues that a prevailing aesthetic contract “incorporates particular images, sounds, literary styles, and so on, in part because they are as yet publicly undigested, not yet reformulated as truism”—and this causes artworks that become the basis for aesthetic contracts to “hover between an exciting hypothesis regarding possibility and a plausible analysis of existing conditions” (p. 166).

4. Ravi Vasudevan’s magisterial account of historical forms in Indian cinema surprisingly ignores this second trend. He contrasts the 1970s social-realist films of Benegal, Sen and Nihalani which were funded by the government’s National Film Development Council and which “explored various topical issues of social exploitation, and political and moral corruption” with the 1990s realism of Mani Rathnam which “is privately financed and very much of the mainstream rather than the parallel cinema” and whose realism celebrates
“middle-class modernity rather than develop a stance of social criticism” (224-25). I would argue that these features Vasudevan (correctly) discerns in Mani Rathnam’s work were also characteristic of the middle-class cinema of the 1970s. It should be stressed, no doubt, that the aspects as well as the prospects of “middle-class modernity” imagined during the early 1970s by Mukherjee and Chatterjee, and during the 1990s by Mani Rathnam were considerably different.

5. Valentina Vitali has suggested that middle-class cinema enabled the class which was “imbricated in religious and casteist structures to re-imagine itself as modern and pan-Indian,” while genre fragmentation enabled the upper-caste audience to further “construct itself as separate from the lower classes.” The new genres of the 1970s—which she names as ‘middle-class,’ ‘action’ and ‘parallel’ cinema—indicate that Hindi cinema had “found new ways to address a fragmented audience, mediating in a manner that these audiences would deem convincing the contradictions constitutive of the 1970s socio-historical context.”

6. Raju Bharatan cites Hrishikesh Mukherjee as telling him: “Abhimaan was based on the life of Kishore Kumar. As you know, Kishore’s wife Ruma (Amit’s mother) was no less talented. Since Kishore had a bit of a struggle, early in his career, he was always conscious of Ruma’s gifts as a performer.”

7. Such issues are indexed in films as diverse as Gulzar’s Mere Apne (1971) and Aandhi (1975), Manoj Kumar’s Roti Kapda aur Makaan (1975), Shyam Benegal’s Ankur (1973), Nishant (1975), and Manthan (1977), Kumar Shahani’s Tarang (1976), and Yash Chopra’s political “trilogy” with Salim-Javed scenarios: Deewar (1975), Trishul (1978) and Kala Pathar (1979).


9. *Rajnigandha* is based on the well-known Hindi short-story “Yehi Sach Hai” by Mannu Bhandari. The narrative is largely focalized through the perspective of Prabha, her ambivalent affection for the lackadaisical Sanjay and her uncertain but intense desire for the suave and successful Navin (named Nishith in Bhandari’s version). The film version also relocates the action from Kanpur and Calcutta to the more cosmopolitan settings of Delhi and Bombay.

10. *Chhoti Si Baat* borrows many of its plot elements from the British comedy *School for Scoundrels* (1960), and is an interesting instance of a successful—albeit unacknowledged—remake.

11. O. E. Klapp had drawn up a list of social types, defined as “an idealized concept of how people are expected to be or to act” and exemplified through the likes of the Good Joe, the Tough Guy, the Pin-Up, etc. The good Joe is described as “friendly and easy-going; he fits in and likes people; he never sets himself above others but goes along with the majority...” Cited by Dyer (pp. 47-8).

12. According to Partha Chatterjee (2004), the governance of Indian cities underwent a remarkable transformation during the 1970s and 1980s, when unprecedented numbers of low-wage labourers and migrants had to be integrated into urban life through “paralegal arrangements” (137). This resulted in the passing of the older modes of social-political dominance but also “more significantly, a disengagement of the middle classes from the hurly burly of urban politics [which was] an important precondition for the transformation of the 1990s” (142).
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