

Ideology of the Hindi Film

A Historical Construction

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Middle-Class Cinema

The FFC project was defined by a commitment to realism, but this was by no means the first attempt in that direction. There already existed a progressive realist tendency of which K.A. Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) are the best known examples. Italian neo-realist cinema, seen in India for the first time in 1952, is said to have inspired some realist ventures, including *Do Bigha Zameen*, the story of a small peasant family driven to the city in an unsuccessful effort to save their little piece of land from the landlord's greed. While *Dharti Ke Lal*, made under the left-wing Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) banner, ended with the vision of a brighter future modelled on Soviet collective farming, *Do Bigha Zameen* ends without the slightest hint of hope for the peasant. Realism here signified a thematic shift, focusing attention on the poor and the exploited but continued to feature a melodramatic narrative.

Satyajit Ray's work represented the other great strand of realism. In an influential essay, Satish Bahadur hailed *Pather Panchali* as 'a film which reflected the Indian reality as no other film had done before' (Bahadur 1982: 13). Ray was the exemplar of realism as an artistic form which Bahadur in another essay defined as:

an organic form in which all elements are in a state of interdependence; it has no extraneous elements in its structure. The technique of composition used in creating the form derives its logic from the themes which the work expresses; in other words, what is being said is achieved through the way it is said (Bahadur 1985: 71).

While progressive realism was political in its choice of themes, the aesthetic project associated with Ray was political in the sense that it was related to the project of nation-building. The Nehruvian theme of the 'discovery of India' was seen to have found its cultural

expression in a realist portrayal of the nation in cinema (ibid: 70).

The FFC project drew from both these strands in defining its realist programme. However, in 1969 the possibilities for a realist aesthetic were determined 'not only by the available models but also by the political imperatives of the moment. In the event two broad tendencies began to emerge within the single programme of realist cinema. The beginning of the shift is usually identified with two films, *Bhuvan Shome* and *Sara Akash*. In a comment on the latter, we find this version of a frequently encountered statement: 'A simple story, told with touching realism, *Sara Akash* was made the same year that Minal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* ushered in the "new Indian cinema"'. Part of the same genre, both films have realistic locales, new faces, and an unglamorous setting' (Banerjee and Srivastava 1988: 162).¹ Five years later, a new round of national enthusiasm was focused on two privately-financed films, *Ankur* and *Rainigandha*. The first named in the two sets (*Bhuvan Shome* and *Ankur*) represent a continuation of the political realist tendency while *Sara Akash* and *Rainigandha* belong to the genre of the middle-class cinema. The movement from Sen's film to Benegal's is paralleled by the movement from Basu Chatterji's first film to his first major commercial success. These continuities are reinforced by another feature: while Sen and Benegal set their narratives in rural India, Chatterji's films were about the urban middle class. One invoked the image of the nation, while the other addressed itself to a class. One invited the urban spectator to witness a world other than his own but falling within the same political unit, while the other promised to create a world which the spectator could recognize as his/her own.

While these two tendencies within the realist programme thus seemed to diverge in their thematic concerns and seemed to posit two different spectator positions, they were addressed to the same audience. The audience is an empirical category, referring to the actual individuals who frequent the cinema whereas the spectator is

¹ It is also characteristic of the standard critical explanation that *Sara Akash* and the middle-class cinema that it pre-figured should be defined in relation to the other realist enterprise. In the comment cited, the authors place *Sara Akash* in the so-called neighbourhood of *Bhuvan Shome*. The latter is said to have 'ushered in' the new cinema, thus suggesting that it was the more important historical landmark. The very next sentence refers to both as belonging to 'the same genre'. This ambiguity is symptomatic of the fact that middle-class realism had a subordinate position in the project as a whole. The same authors, in their comment on *Bhuvan Shome* make no attempt to highlight its kinship with *Sara Akash*.

a theoretical concept that stands for the viewing position arising from the text's strategies of representation.² As spectators the 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. This chapter deals with the realist cinema of the subject, or what is commonly known as the middle-class cinema.

In *Sara Akash* ('The Whole Sky', 1969) the urban middle-class world is treated with a solicitous detachment that was to disappear with the further development of the middle-class cinema. This mild trace of ethnographic objectification is a sign that Chatterji had not as yet recognized the possibilities of a cinema of identification based on realist principles. The interventionist agenda of the FFC project and the freedom from considerations of marketability no doubt contributed to this. The objectification effect in *Sara Akash* is achieved through an emphasis on the characters' immersion in a feudal culture, although the joint family home in which the story unfolds is located in an urban milieu. The potential for a cinema of identification was still concealed by the burden of ethnographic distancing which the FFC's realist programme placed on the film-maker. As in Avar Kaul's *27 Down*, the story deals with the problem of modern individuals still caught up in a network of feudal customs and mental habits. A university student marries an educated woman but both are in the grip of family traditions which determine their lives. The marriage is arranged by the family. Unhappy with a relationship brought about in this manner, the hero rejects the woman, while his family burdens her with all the housework. When she goes away to her parental home, the hero finds himself missing her company. A reconciliation is brought about when, after her return the wife becomes more assertive and rejects him.

While employing the imagery of feudalism to effect an ethnographic distancing, the film does not undertake a critique of feudalism. Instead, it attributes the failure of the couple's union to their shyness and immaturity. The film tries to produce a nuclear couple within the confines of an extended family. Since both members are educated, there is a possibility of their overcoming the initial extraneous compulsion that brought them together and of

²See Kuhn (1987) for a discussion of the significance of this distinction.

establishing intimacy. In their ability to do so lies the value of the aesthetic: to wrest from the feudal space a couple who can be relocated in the space of modernity. In this task it is equally necessary to distance the feudal structure of the extended family as well as foreground the couple as the object of our sympathy. A visit to the cinema is an important moment in the film: the scene where the couple walk to the theatre, with the wife walking several steps behind the husband, heightens the pleasures of realism. On the one hand, the ethnographic interest is aroused by the recognition of the image: who has not seen such a phenomenon? (The answer of course is: those who walk like that, in single file; but the pleasure of recognition that realism offers us is not diluted by such reminders of realism's institutional/class determination.) On the other hand, the narrative proceeds to 'demonstrate' that the possibility of closing the gap between husband and wife depends on a process of psychic, rather than social, reform.

The middle-class cinema is predominantly characterized by an emphasis on the extended familial network as the proper site of production of nuclear couples. Even when, as in *Rajinigandha*, no such common ground of kinship is suggested, the idea of *endogamy* is strongly inscribed in the narrative delineation of the class. This is because middle-class narratives are confined to the world of the upper castes. These castes find themselves dispersed in an urban world, and define themselves as the middle class in the language of the modern state, while maintaining their endogamous identities. In deference to the semiotic prohibition which inaugurates the modern state, the caste identity of this urban society is generally concealed behind the term 'middle class'. It is thus that the paradoxical thematics of 'class endogamy' emerge as a narrative element in films like *Guddi* and *Rajinigandha*.

The middle class, however, also carries the burden of national identity on its shoulders. While one sector of the middle-class cinema represents a community hemmed in by the larger society and devoted to its own reproduction, there is another that presents the class's national profile, its reformist role in the drama of class and religious conflicts within the nation-state. Here the realist aesthetic draws upon the tradition of Gandhian melodrama, including Bimal Roy's *Sujata* and *Banini*, and the films of his pupil Hrishikesh Mukherjee from before the FFC era, such as *Asbirvad* and *Satyakam*.

Thus, there are two broad sectors of the middle-class cinema, of which one is oriented towards asserting the national role of the

class while the other is committed to the construction of an exclusive space of class identity. While the first sector enjoyed a strong pre-FFC history, in the post-FFC era it was redefined around the political pressures of the moment. Three significant films of this type are *Anand*, *Namak Haram* (both by Hrishikesh Mukherjee) and *Mere Apne* (Gulzar). All three take up the question of national and class reconciliation in a period of political crisis.

The second sector, concerned with the consolidation of middle-class (upper caste) identity, can be further divided into three sub-types based on thematic differences. The first sub-type would include films like *Guddi* and *Rajnigandha*, both of which raise the question of the threat to class identity posed by the lures of the outside world, to which women in particular are susceptible. The second sub-type includes *Abhiman*, *Kora Kagaz* and *Aandhi* where the post-marital tensions of the middle-class family arise from the ambitions and individualistic tendencies of one or both the partners. Films of the first sub-type differ from the second mainly in that they resolve the conflicts prior to marital union. The third sub-type includes films which take up the question of the space for middle-class existence, the dependence of middle-class life on the possibility of privacy. While *Pya ka Ghar* deals with the problem of private space in a humorous fashion, *Anubhav* and in particular *Dastak*, in a complex mode uncharacteristic of the middle-class cinema in general, employs the thematic of private space to explore questions related to the institution of cinema itself as well as the transition to class society. *Aandhi*, included in the second sub-type, can also be discussed in terms of the third sub-type.

The Dissemination of Bengal

The middle-class cinema is marked by an overwhelming dependence on Bengali culture for its narrative and iconographic material as well as film-making talent. This cinema was founded on the twin distinctions of primacy of narrative and the ordinariness and authenticity of the world represented. Bengali literature and cinema provided a ready source of such narrative material. Even a commercial film-maker like Shakti Samanta, after making films like *An Evening in Paris*, *Pagla Kabir ka*, and the deftly plagiarized *Aradhana*, turned, for *Amar Prem*, to a Bengali middle-class narrative set

(without too much emphasis on realist detail) in the nineteenth or early twentieth-century Bengal.³ It would be wrong to conclude, on this basis, that there was a demand for Bengali middle-class narratives. It would be more accurate to say that the industry found in those narratives a ready supply of 'difference' which could be re-presented. Examples of films directly based on and iconographically faithful to Bengali narratives were *Balika Badhu*, *Upbaar*, *Amar Prem*, *Chhoti Babu* and *Swami*. Others like *Guddi*, *Anand* and *Kora Kagaz* derived part of their claim to difference from the fact that the characters had Bengali names and dressed like the Bengali middle class. In *Kora Kagaz*, the final scene at the railway station, like a similar one in *Swami*, has Bengali literary resonances: Yet others, like *Rajnigandha* (based on a Hindi story), *Abhiman* and *Aandhi* were less specific in their cultural allusions but reinforced the popular association of good middle-class culture with Bengal if only because they were either directed by Bengalis or had Bengali actors in principal roles. (It is difficult to think of *Aandhi* without being reminded of the historic 'return' of Suchitra Sen to the Hindi screen.) Of course, Bengali narratives had been used in the Hindi film industry before, but in the seventies they served as the resource for a major thrust towards product differentiation and market segmentation. The FFC-sponsored films of 1969 played no small part in provoking this change. Let us now turn to a discussion of the sub-types of the middle-class cinema.

Narratives of National Reconciliation

National reconciliation acquired urgency in the context of the disaggregation of the social already discussed. Martyrdom is the cleansing event which produces the possibilities of reconciliation in all the three films in this category. In *Mere Apne*, the martyr is an old peasant woman. In *Anand* and *Namak Haram*, he is a middle-class individual (played by Rajesh Khanna) who rises above the conflicts that surround him and reunites a divided world by dying.

In *Mere Apne* ('My Dear One', Gulzar, 1971), based on the Bengali film *Apanjan* an old woman is brought to the city by her relative who needs household help, while he and his wife go out to work.

³Some of the narrative elements of *Amar Prem* can be recognized in the sociology of prostitution in nineteenth-century Calcutta. See, for instance, Sumanta Banerjee (1993).

The woman is thrown out when she questions the exploitative motive behind the altruistic gesture, and finds refuge in an old ruined building where two orphans live. A student gang leader, estranged from his family, also spends his nights there. In the midst of daily confrontations between two rival youth gangs, the woman's motherly affection and innocent and upright behaviour wins the hearts of the gang members. At election time the two gangs are hired by rival candidates. In the explosion of campaign violence, the woman is killed by a police bullet as she tries to stop the street fighting between the gangs.

During a conversation with the gang members, the old widow recounts an event from her past which identifies her as a patriotic woman along the lines of the heroines of *Bandini*, *Mother India* and the Tamil film *Anda Naal* (1954). Set in pre-independence India, the flashback recounts the events of a night when the woman and her husband hid a freedom fighter, who was being pursued by the police, in their bedroom. This scene serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made in the past to produce the community which is now breaking apart.

A conversation between some gang members at the beginning establishes the film's reading of the contemporary world. Socialism has become a mere collection of empty slogans which all parties, including communal ones, use indiscriminately. On the other hand, the blood ties which united people in the past have become an excuse for exploitation. The well-to-do extract free labour by using the rhetoric of kinship while the poor and the young find themselves helpless in a world in which parents and college principals do not understand their idealism or the frustrations of the unemployed. The woman functions as the agent of an infusion of binding affect into a world divided by class and generational conflict.

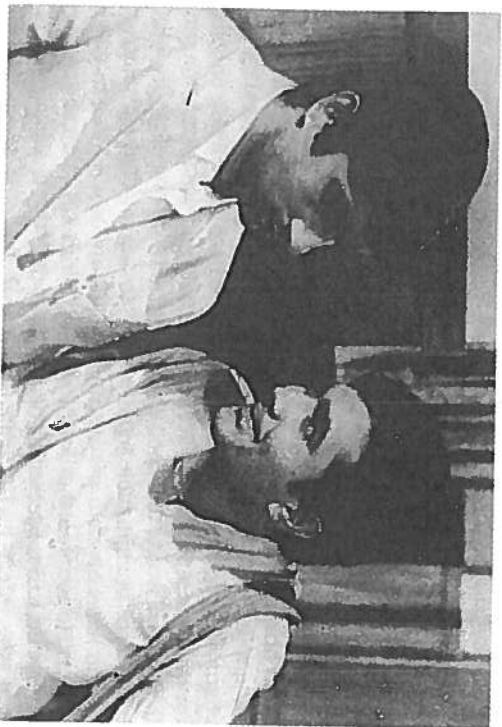
While the peasant woman is the textual agent of resolution, the affect deployed in the movement towards resolution is a complex one, combining values drawn from several sources. One such source is the village, which figures in the text as an 'elsewhere', untouched by the conflicts that are tearing the urban community apart. Another source is the past, the history of nationalist struggle, of which the woman serves as a reminder. Thirdly, there is the maternal element that the peasant woman brings to the urban scene. The hero's disaffection with the world is partly attributed to the fact that his mother died early. The only urban mother in the film is the wife of the peasant woman's relative. She is a working woman with a

character that is completely negative. She colludes with the husband in exploiting relatives as unpaid servants and readily abandons her child to the servant's care in order to enjoy the pleasures of the city. Finally, part of the affect is also drawn from the star system. The legendary actress Meena Kumari is cast as the peasant woman while young trainees of the Film Institute play the roles of the gang members. The nostalgia evoked by the presence of Meena Kumari, combined with the emerging star identities of actors like Vinod Khanna and Shatrughna Sinha, enabled a textual compromise between old and new which reinforced the narrative drive towards a resolution of present conflicts through the restoration of links with the past and the far away.

In *Anand* and *Namak Haram*, the martyr figure is male and clearly identified as belonging to the urban middle class. Nevertheless, Anand, the eponymous hero of the first film, is closer to the woman in *Mere Apne* in being a figure of national reconciliation whereas *Namak Haram* directly takes up the question of class struggle. The story of *Anand* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1970) is narrated by a doctor. The film opens in a literary gathering where Dr Banerji (Amitabh Bachchan), is being honoured for a novel based on his diary entries about a man who defied death by living life to the full and spreading happiness wherever he went. In his address to the assembly, the doctor recalls his own state of mind at the point of time when Anand (Rajesh Khanna) first came into his life. An idealist, Banerji had devoted himself to treating the poor who could not afford to pay for his treatment or buy the medicines they needed to recover from their illnesses. His helplessness against the social 'diseases' of poverty and unemployment had driven him to a state of utter despondency. At this point a fellow doctor and friend who runs a small hospital informs him of the imminent arrival from Delhi of a patient with a fatal illness. Anand arrives, a day early, and with his charming ways, endears himself to all. He becomes a living enigma for everyone around him. He knows that he does not have long to live but will not let that spoil his fun. Doctor Banerji feels angry with himself for being unable to cure him. Moving into Banerji's house, Anand hides his own private anguish and involves himself in good deeds. He reunites the doctor with his girlfriend (Sumita Sanyal), whom he had neglected in his idealist pursuits. He adopts doctor Prakash's wife as his sister, the matron in the hospital, Sister D'Souza (Lalita Pawar), as his mother, and a theatre owner, Isabhat (Johnny Walker), as a friend. Hindu, Christian and Muslim pray to their

respective gods for the health of Anand. On his death-bed Anand asks for a tape of Banerji's poetry reading to be played and he dies as the poem ends. When Banerji, who was away, returns with some medicine, Anand's and his laughter, taped inadvertently, bursts forth to break the spell of grief. The last words in the film, spoken by Banerji, are 'Anand is not dead, Anand (joy) does not die!'

In *Anand* as in *Mere Apne*, the central character comes from elsewhere and brings purpose and meaning into the lives of those who were drifting apart and sinking into despondency. Anand functions as a focus for the scattered, free-floating affect of his acquaintances. Failing in their commitment to social causes, they take him up as a surrogate cause. He is an exemplary figure who teaches the despondent to value all that life offers. In contrast, Dr. Banerji's clear and unambiguous perception of the evils of society makes him despair. As a doctor he rejects the path taken by his friend Prakash (Ramesh Deo) who thrives on the anxieties of his rich patients. On the other hand, he perceives that society is plagued by evils that are for the most part beyond the healing power of medicine. His clarity of vision makes him anxious. The arrival of Anand serves as a distraction from this anxiety. Anand is an enigma. In a world whose reality had seemed so transparent to Banerji a



Amiabh Bachchan and Rajesh Khanna in *Anand* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1972). Courtesy National Film Archives of India, Pune.

moment ago, there now appears a mystery. The paralysing effect of intellectual clarity is reduced as the enigma re-activates the emotions. The centripetal force of the enigma effects a displacement so that the spectator can participate in a surrogate resolution for the world's problems.

In *Namak Haram* ('Traitor', Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1973), the martyr is explicitly named as a member of the middle class. The film is roughly modelled on the Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole starrer *Becket*. Somu (Rajesh Khanna), a middle-class youth, and Vijay (Amiabh Bachchan), a big industrialist's son, are close friends. When Vijay takes over the running of a factory, he refuses to concede a legitimate demand for compensation and abuses the trade union leader (A.K. Hangal). Faced with a strike, he is forced to apologize to the union leader. Swearing vengeance, he recounts the whole affair to Somu. The latter offers to help him. Joining the factory as a worker, Somu (now called Chander), with the help of Vijay, scores a couple of successes as a self-proclaimed workers' leader. His popularity grows as the workers find that his confrontationalist ways pay quicker dividends than the old union leader's slow, rule-bound methods. He defeats the old leader in the union elections. Having had his revenge, Vijay wants Somu to leave the job and go back to his old life. But Somu, having lived in the workers' colony and become acquainted with their misery, has had a change of heart. Vijay's father (Om Shivpuri), who believes in the policy of divide and rule, realizes the threat posed by a middle-class man whose conscience has been awakened. He deliberately exposes Somu's real identity before the workers. When the workers turn against him, it is the old trade union leader, who has recognized Somu's change of heart, who defends him. Vijay goes to the slum to bring his friend back but Somu declares his intention of staying on with the workers. Rejected, Vijay prepares to fly to another part of the country where his father is setting up a factory. In his absence, the father hires some criminals to get rid of Somu. Vijay misses his flight, and on returning home, learns about the plot. He arrives too late to save his friend, who is run over by a lorry. Knowing that his father is too powerful to be convicted of a crime, Vijay takes the blame for the murder on himself and goes to prison. On his release from prison, he is met by the old trade union leader, his girlfriend (Simi), and the mother and sister of Somu.

At the heart of the film is a long speech by the industrialist who tells his son about the unreliability of the middle class. They are

usually pliable and can be useful, but every now and then, when their conscience is aroused, one of them decides to aspire for greatness. Somu, fulfilling this prophecy, becomes a martyr to the cause of working-class rights. But in the process he also unites the classes: Vijay rejects his father's divide-and-rule strategy as anti-national and pledges to continue Somu's struggle. In terms of the film this does not mean Vijay's transformation into a trade union leader but a process of reform whereby capitalists abandon their loyalty to British values and enter into a mutually beneficial pact with workers. The virtues of socialism are proclaimed in the film by Vijay's girlfriend, daughter of another industrialist. The camp of capitalists is thus shown to be internally divided and containing the seeds of a self-transformation. The middle-class martyr functions as a catalyst of reform, cleansing the capitalist class of its colonial habits.

In these narratives political conflicts are resolved by aesthetic and affective infusions mediated by disinterested subjects whose power lies in their ability to serve as distractions. Gandhi is the prototype for this magnetic point, whose charismatic power draws the spectator into the fiction of a surrogate resolution and liberates her/him temporarily from the obligation of decisive action imposed by intellectual clarity. These narratives thus propose a non-political resolution of political conflicts as the middle class's contribution to national cohesion. They assert the role of the middle class as a depoliticizing influence, as a repository of affect that absorbs and neutralizes class conflict.

The second type of middle-class narrative, on the other hand, attempts to represent the class as struggling to maintain its unity and identity in the face of disruptive intrusions and external pressures. Hrishikesh Mukherjee bridges these two segments. Firmly committed initially to Gandhian melodrama, which portrayed the middle class as the force of national reconciliation and reform, Mukherjee turned, with *Guddi*, to the new aesthetic of identity in which middle-class isolationism was the primary theme. The two forces that threaten middle-class identity in these films are sexuality and politics.

The Middle Class as Endogamous Unit

In *Guddi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1971), the sexual economy of a middle class upper caste extended family is disrupted by the lure of the cinema. Guddi is the pet name of Kusum (Jaya Bhaduri), a

charming school girl who is obsessed with the film star Dharmendra, who plays himself in the film. A chance meeting with the star turns this fan's admiration into a serious sublimated love for him which is modelled on the medieval saint Meera's love for the god Krishna, a love that is unrequitable but eternal. The change is registered by means of a linguistic shift, with Kusum adopting the grandiose prose of popular film dialogue. This love threatens the endogamous network within which she has been marked out as the future wife of Navin (Samit Bhanja), her brother-in-law, an engineer from Bombay who is in search of a job. A visit to Bombay provides an opportunity for visiting the studios, where her uncle (Utpal Dutt), entering into a secret pact with the star, introduces Kusum to the 'reality' behind the images seen on the screen: the lowpaid workers, the screen villains who are kind souls in real life, the stuntmen who substitute for the stars in fight sequences, etc. She also discovers her friend's brother (Asrani), who had run away to Bombay to be a film star, working as an extra and struggling to stay alive. These revelations apart, the star and the uncle, in a patriarchal plot to direct the girl's desire towards the legitimate object, provide opportunities for Navin's courage and masculinity to be revealed in a dramatic form. Kusum's education, a two-pronged process of demystification of the cinematic image and a remystification of the legitimate male's image and the patriarchal system, is complete when she expresses her love for Navin of her own will.

Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the maker of *Guddi*, was one of the people involved in the implementation of the new FFC policy. He also played an important role in transferring the realist aesthetic to the commercial sector. In this context, *Guddi* can be read as an ingenious allegorical representation of the construction of a constituency for the realist sub-sector of the commercial cinema. The subject who is liberated from the spell of commercial cinema in the film, is also the subject who is addressed by the film. As we watch Guddi maturing into responsible middle-class womanhood, we too go through a process of maturation at the end of which we, and Guddi with us, become rational, intelligent film-goers. Through our privileged access to the machinations of the well-intentioned men who undertake to educate Guddi, we become partners in an operation to reclaim the middle-class woman from her captivity to an irrational obsession.

The film deploys images of authenticity and realism as a point of contrast to the illusions of popular cinema. Here it would be appropriate to mention the role of the press in promoting the aesthetic

value of authenticity and narrative integrity. *Filmfare* played a pioneering role in this regard. In its pages the necessity of short, integrated, linear narratives was emphasized relentlessly. Read primarily by the English-speaking middle class, the magazine served as a vehicle for the creation of a demand for a realist cinema.

One of the most popular columns in the magazine was called 'Readers Don't Digest', under which were printed entries from readers pointing out errors and inconsistencies in popular films. In *Budhamez*, a reader pointed out, the hero and heroine covered 'four miles on foot in the space of a three-minute song'.⁴ Here the objection is to what more charitable critics have described as a non-linear conception of time that is characteristic of Hindi film narratives. Another reader observed the Hindi film-maker's indifference to historical accuracy: in *Baharen Bhir Bhir Ayengi*, the Chinese war of 1962 is shown but a character refers to the narrative present as 1965. Sociological accuracy was also demanded: 'Funny that Dharmendra becomes a News Editor and still stays in a hut.'⁵ Other readers pointed out formal inconsistencies: in *Vaasna*, 'Surprising that Padmini, narrating the past to her son, remembers the comedy sequences in which she didn't figure.'⁶ More commonly, failures of continuity like a character's clothes changing within the same scene were detected by the dozen. As a pedagogical tool, this column was instrumental in training the readership to anticipate a Hollywood-style realism. It also provided opportunities for a kind of disdainful engagement with the popular which sustained the existing industry by making available the supplementary pleasures of readerly superiority.⁷

Guddi combines both these pleasures in its representational strategy. It offers a narrative suffused with iconic and situational

⁴ *Filmfare*, 5 August 1966, p. 45.

⁵ Both in *Filmfare*, 19 August 1966, p. 45.

⁶ *Filmfare*, 28 February 1969, p. 33.

⁷ Another feature that enhanced the pleasures of disdainful engagement was the film review. Baburao Patel, editor of *Filmindia* and later *Mother India*, was a pioneer in this regard but it was S.J. Banaji of *Filmfare* who liberated the review from the referential relation that it bore to the film. Banaji, whose byline began to appear in 1969, developed the review into an independent prose form which quickly abandoned the responsibility of commentary. Although the stories of the films were recounted, the main source of enjoyment was the style, which was copied by reviewers everywhere. When *Filmfare* started a column for readers' reviews, it was the Banaji-clones who won the prizes for best reviews.



Guddi swallows her disappointment at not being able to go to the cinema and sings a 'classical' song for her suitor's benefit, surrounded by India's artistic heritage. Jaya Bhaduri and Samit Bhanja in *Guddi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1971). Courtesy National Film Archive of India, Pune.

authenticity, inviting spectator identification. At the same time it softens the critique of popular cinema through a 'disclosure' of the human world behind the illusion. The film industry emerges from the process unscathed, with the stars absolved of any blame for the fantasies the industry puts into circulation. One of the devices employed to produce a 'realist' effect in the film is that of 'not going to the cinema'. Guddi and Navin set out to go to the cinema but Navin changes plans and takes her to an archaeological site. This deflection or re-routing of the characters gives what follows a realist significance. Taking shelter from the rain in a cave at the site, Guddi offers to sing a film song but is persuaded to sing a 'classical' song instead, reinforcing the withdrawal from cinematic fantasy. At this stage in the film, Guddi's obsession with films is contrasted with Navin's complete dislike for them. In the concluding segment, at a party to celebrate her birthday, Guddi sings a film song. But this time the song, '*Ma ja re paradesi*' has been wrested from the fantasy world of film and redeployed as an external aid to the resolution of a 'real' narrative (its difference is also guaranteed by the fact that it is from a film—*Madhumati*—made by Bimal Roy, one of the revered

precursors of the middle-class cinema.) The song, whose meaning is appropriate to the context (while Guddi is singing, Navin is absent and thus becomes the addressee of the song), serves as an illustration of the ideal attitude to adopt towards cinema. This attitude consists of a detached indulgence, a knowing and provisional surrender to its pleasures. The subject must be able to draw affective material from the cinema for the narratives of real life without being sucked into its illusory world. The middle-class cinema thus provokes a disidentification with the mainstream only to open up the possibility of a reidentification based on a compromise.

The carefully produced authenticity-effect is the source of the positive counter-popular valence that is assigned to this cinema. Its ideological function differs from that of the New Cinema in that its site of intervention is not only a 'real' in which new subject positions, allied to a shared political anxiety need to be produced; further, rather than a representation of an alternative reality in its distinction from the reality represented in the popular cinema, the middle-class cinema confronts the popular cinematic image and exposes its falsehood, its unworthiness as an object of emulation. At the same time, by means of the very cinematic devices which conceal the realities of the industry, it renders the 'real' world of the endogamous petty bourgeoisie desirable in itself. The new screen image is not a fantasy creation with no basis in reality; it is coded as the spectator's own image reflected back to him/herself. The mirror is adjusted to remove the look of surprise from its face.

In this world, endogamy—the signifier of class solidarity—has to be enforced in order to maintain that solidarity, which rests on the affirmation of patriarchal authority. Meera Bai, the *bhakti* poet and devotee of the god Krishna, whose example Kusum wishes to emulate, is an instance of the disruptive power of a love that transgresses the rules of endogamy: Meera was a princess who abandoned her royal family for a life of spiritual love and devotion. Woman is the displaced site of the struggle over the re-integration and re-identification of the class which hitherto shared the spectatorship of the popular cinema with the lower classes. If Kusum is not cured of her spiritual love, Navin would have to go to his new posting alone, increasing the potential for the breakdown of the network. The reconciliation between the cured Kusum and the engineer takes place in the nick of time, a few hours before his departure to his posting.

The film rescues the popular cinema from its own critique in

another way too: Navin, the man who never goes to the movies, however finds a good friend in Dharmendra. The industry, as an economic enterprise, is thus represented as redeemable even as its product, the screen image, is rejected. The logic of this is not difficult to see. In the first place, the rejection is only partial: cinema as a source of discursive devices for use in the real world is approved. What is criticized is the absorption of real subjects into the screen image, the displacing, ungrounding of the spectator from his/her true being. Besides, by endorsing the industry and the entrepreneurial spirit behind it, the film is more firmly restricting its audience membership, for it does not dispute the suitability of the fantasy screen image for another kind of person, another class of people. It situates its audience on the other side of the camera as potential participants in the economy of film-making, which effectively renders the top strata of film personnel the class allies of the real world characters as well as the implied audience, thus distancing itself from those whose only access to the film world is through the image on the screen.

Basu Chatterji's *Rajinigandha* ('Tuberoses', 1974) also includes, at the very beginning, a scene of not going to the cinema. The scene begins with the heroine waiting in front of a theatre. Her boyfriend arrives, but has forgotten to bring the tickets. She is disappointed but agrees to go to a restaurant. This initial turn away from the cinema, which in *Guddi* occurred a little way into the narrative, is even more effective in establishing the authenticity of the rest of the narrative as a representation of the real world. The story centres round Deepa (Vidya Sinha), who is writing her Ph.D. thesis and looking for a teaching position, and her boyfriend Sanjay (Amol Palekar), who is a clerk awaiting a promotion as officer. Sanjay's initial indifference to the movies is a character trait—when he does go, he eats constantly, disturbs his neighbours and goes out for a stroll whenever a song begins. His eyes are never fixed on the screen like the others' in the theatre.

Sanjay's promotion faces two hurdles—one, a rival in the office who has the advantage of being from the same region as the boss, a strain of mild social satire which provides some gentle humour. The second hurdle is Deepa herself and her conflicting desires: the impending Ph.D. which signifies her independent ambition, her job search, which threatens to take her away from Delhi (where they live), and Navin, a college boyfriend whom she has almost, but not quite, forgotten. The possible negative outcome of her transgressive desires is prefigured in a nightmare, with which the film opens. An



Waiting to go to the movies: Vidya Sinha in *Rajinigandha* (Basu Chatterji 1974). Courtesy National Film Archive of India, Pune.

interview call from a college in Bombay is the occasion for the surfacing of the anxieties over these potential threats to their stable life. Sanjay jokes about the imbalance that her Ph.D. will cause and the equalizing potential of his promotion. He does not object to Deepa's desire to go to Bombay for a job, and even talks of taking a transfer in order to be with her. In response to her anxieties about getting around in Bombay, Sanjay jokingly drops the name of Navin, which Deepa has forbidden. Bombay itself (as in *Guddi*) is a possible threat, the city of disruptive fantasies.

Arriving in Bombay alone, Deepa is met by Navin (Dinesh Thakur), who has been sent by Ira, Deepa's host and former college friend who couldn't come herself. Navin is wearing sunglasses and khadi clothes—the sole mark of continuity between his college days, when he was a student radical, and his current life as an ad film-maker with high connections. In a flashback that followed Sanjay's mention of Navin we have already seen him and Deepa as students, at the moment when they break up because of a difference of opinion over a strike. Deepa insists on breaking the strike and going to classes, which leads to an argument and Navin's words of rejection. Deepa's apolitical subjectivity is shown on one more occasion when, trying to persuade Sanjay to leave his urgent office work and meet

her, she suggests, 'Why don't you start a strike?' Her indifference to the strikes that preoccupy the young Navin and the promotion-hungry Sanjay is a repudiation of politics. But while Navin's radical politics is as threatening to middle-class integrity as his later ad-world life-style, Sanjay's trade-unionism, restricted to economic demands, is not subjected to any critique—it is presented with humour and equanimity as an unavoidable means to upward mobility.

Deepa's forgotten fascination for Navin resurfaces almost instantly. Ira tries to encourage her and Navin to rediscover their old passion. Navin, taking a keen interest in her job search, makes phone calls to fix a favourable impression prior to the interview while Deepa wonders expectantly about the significance of his interest in her welfare. Deepa faces the interview board and spends her free time going around Bombay with Navin.

On one of these outings Navin takes her to see his ad film unit in action, filming a beach scene. Watching the two models come running out of the water, Deepa fantasizes herself and Navin in the same roles. This fantasy transforms her revived emotions into a consuming desire to hear Navin speak the words of love that she is sure are on the tip of his tongue.

The recurring image of Navin with sunglasses (Deepa too begins to wear them in the course of her outings with Navin), like the images of the cinema, is irresistible. Sometimes the image is interrupted by that of Sanjay, but reasserts itself. The transgression, thus, is located in the obsessive return of a cinematic image of Navin which, like Kusum's absorption in the screen image, is a form of possession, a capture by an alien force which portends a ruinous loss for the endogamous sexual economy. Navin is not blamed (any more than the film-makers are in *Guddi*) for causing this obsession. On the other hand, Navin's use of his connections to fix Deepa's interview is presented with no moral overlays. At once (economically) useful and (sexually) dangerous, the figure of Navin is invested with both the fears and desires of the class.

Returning to Delhi and awaiting news of her interview results, Deepa continues to be haunted by Navin's image. Sanjay, who has meanwhile been regularly bringing a bunch of tuberoses to replace the old ones in the vase, has had to go away on duty and is absent in this period of continued fascination with the screen image. When Navin's letter arrives, it proves to be quite formal, informing her of her success in the interview, wishing her well, but with no hint of any other emotion. The image finally fades and at that very instant,

as she is still holding the letter in her hand, Sanjay reappears at the door with a bunch of tuberoses, smiling—the image is repeated, lingered over, till it suffuses her lately evacuated being. Sanjay has got his promotion, Deepa decides (on the spot) not to take the job in Bombay.

While in *Guddi* the endogamous group was still represented as a natural (blood-related) one, *Rainigandha* takes the logical step forward by introducing a stranger into Deepa's life—a stranger who is familiar, instantly recognizable, trustworthy. They meet one rainy day when Sanjay invites her to share his umbrella on the way to college. He quickly becomes a member of the family and endears himself to all with his wit and charm. He talks non-stop about his job, the union, his rival for promotion, the coming strike, and cannot be persuaded to act romantically. The familiar grammar of romance which everybody has learnt from the movies is foreign to Sanjay but we are assured that a more genuine love lurks behind the clerical facade, signified by the constant supply of tuberoses that he brings to Deepa. The title song, which is heard as Deepa paces her home and arranges the flowers, speaks of her longing for the man's love to flourish in her heart as the flowers do in the vase. When the song exclaims 'How enjoyable is this bondage', it speaks of the flowers uncomplainingly standing in the vase in a corner as well as the woman who stays at home. Another song, played against Deepa and Navin's wanderings in Bombay, tells of the mind's (natural) boundaries which it breaks on occasion and goes in search of 'unfamiliar desires'.

In moments of crisis, thus, the spotlight is turned on woman, locating all threats to class identity in the transgressive nature of female desire, a desire that takes its own undiscriminating route to fulfilment, threatening to establish undesirable contact with the lower classes (through the cinema) and disruptive political movements (through declassed individuals like the student radical turned ad film-maker). The polymorphous sexuality of the Bombay woman, Ira, who whispers in Deepa's ear on her departure, that she will 'miss her in bed' provides a glimpse into the future in store for Deepa if she were to abandon the security of Sanjay's love for the exhilaration of a renewed affair with Navin.

The third set of middle-class films deal with post-marital conflicts arising from a variety of factors. In *Abhinan* and *Kora Kagaz*, the couples are torn apart by envy and pride. Of these *Abhinan* ('Pride', Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1973) is the more significant film from our

point of view because its narrative of domestic conflict is intermeshed with certain cultural questions important to the middle-class cinema's identity. Subir Kumar (Amitabh Bachchan), a popular singer, marries Uma (Jaya Bhaduri), daughter of a traditional brahminical scholar and herself a singer in the classical style, although she only sings for her own pleasure. After marriage they decide to sing together (and only together) in public. Her popularity soars and recording companies ask her to sing solos. She resists but Subir persuades her to break their pledge and accept the offer. Subir is consumed by envy and the suspicion that she is a better singer. In an attempt to save the marriage Uma gives up her career, but as the relationship deteriorates, she goes back to her father's house. She has a miscarriage and enters into a state of deep shock. Subir, now repentant and trying to save his wife, agrees to a plan that is aimed at making her cry and break out of the state of shock. At a public gathering, Subir sings a song which he had written in happier days, expressing their longing for a child. Uma breaks down and sings with him.

The contrast between the ordinariness of popular music and the superior skills required for classical singing is deployed in *Abhinan* to provide the affective aura within which domestic conflict is staged. The 'light classical' song was reinvented for the middle-class cinema with Vani Jayaram's '*Bol re paphara*' in *Guddi*. *Abhinan* includes some songs of this type. Unlike the popular song that Subir sings at the beginning of the film, the 'classical' song is not presented as a spectacle, with the singer dancing on stage. Popular music is meant for others' pleasure, whereas Uma's singing is not addressed to any audience. Parallel to this theme of musical traditions in conflict, the film also touches upon the question of the conflict between narrative and spectacle. Domestic harmony is broken when, in his desire to display Uma's talent to the world, Subir urges her to sing with him in public. Her singing thus acquires an addressee other than herself and the members of her family.⁸ In *Abhinan* the classical aura is maintained by making Jaya a reluctant public singer. The disruptive effect of her popularity is not her own fault because she did not want to sing in public.

Gulzar's *Aandhi* ('The Storm', 1975) however, does not 'protect' its heroine in this way. Political ambition is the factor that disturbs

⁸The story of *Abhinan* has echoes of the real-life story of its leading actors, Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bhaduri (as does *Silsila*, a later film). Jaya Bhaduri gave up acting after her marriage to Amitabh in a realization of the moral of the story of *Abhinan*.

domestic harmony in *Aandhi*. Arati Devi (Suchitra Sen), a popular politician, goes to a town for campaigning and stays in the only hotel there. It is owned by her husband (Sanjeev Kumar), from whom she has been estranged for many years. The husband lives in the hotel with his trusted servant. After their encounter at the hotel, a series of flashbacks cover the previous history of their relationship. Arati's father (Rehman) is a man with great political ambitions for his daughter and is impatient with her for wasting time in romantic frolic instead of pursuing a political career. For a while Arati tries to balance the two lives but ultimately decides to sacrifice family life for her political career. In the narrative present, Arati Devi's election campaign is jeopardized by gossip about her relationship with the hotel owner. At a public meeting where her rival is exploiting the gossip for political gains, she makes a confession of her true relationship with the hotel owner. After winning the election, she decides to subordinate her political career to her renewed domestic life.

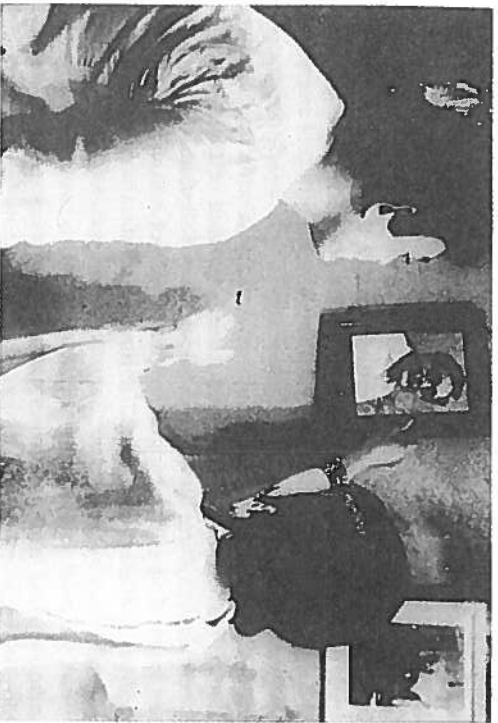
Indira Gandhi may have been a possible model for the character of Arati Devi. Mainly for this reason, *Aandhi* was banned and then allowed to be re-released with changes. There are references within the film to Nehru and Indira Gandhi which leave us in no doubt as to the parallels being suggested. However, it is not a 'biopic' that purports to be based on Indira Gandhi's life. The protagonist emulates Indira Gandhi and brings suffering upon herself as a result. Arati feels suffocated by the dullness of domestic life and longs to return to public life. The husband contributes to her rebellion against domesticity by his authoritarian ways. In the movement towards resolution, both have to acknowledge and atone for their sins.

Arati Devi's political career serves as a narrative device to symbolize a threat to the middle-class family. Arati is an idealist in politics, and is oblivious to the shady dealings of her own supporters. She is thus represented as a pawn in the hands of male politicians, who exploit her sincerity and honesty. The cinema, the world of glamour and advertising, politics: all these have the same function, in the middle-class cinema to signify a threat to the integrity of the family. With the change in enemies, however, there is also a change in the protected object itself. The family unit in these films is nuclear while its field of existence is the class. This is a significant step away from the narratives of pre-crisis popular cinema, in which the threat was directed at the *bhandardan's* property and honour, and where the couple's sexual and affective energies remained harnessed to the furtherance of the khandan's splendour and enjoyment. In middle-

class cinema the class continues to be identified with an enlarged and more diffuse traditional unit, the kinship network or the caste, but the couple emerges into relative autonomy. The sources of conflict shift from the economic and moral domains to the realm of the psychic, where envy, ambition, pride and other disruptive emotions reside. With the middle-class cinema, women's subjectivity becomes a cultural issue.

This brings us to the last sub-type of the middle-class cinema, which takes up the construction of a class space as a condition for the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity. (*Annubhav*, one of the films in this category, has already been discussed in Chapter 3.) *Pyaar ka Ghar* (Basu Chatterji 1972) narrates in a humorous mode a couple's trials in the city of Bombay as they search for a place to have sex. In Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Dastak* (1970), the housing question is combined with the thematics of conjugal intimacy in a complex narrative that foregrounds some of the central preoccupations of the middle-class cinema.

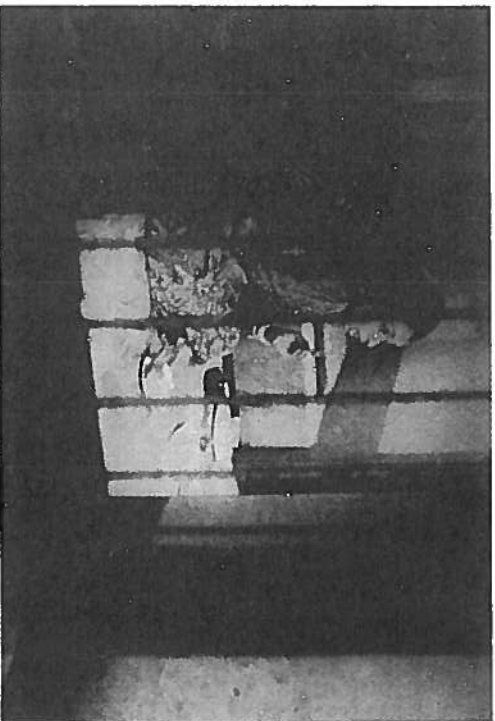
When it was first released, *Dastak* ('The Knock') achieved notoriety for a single shot lasting no more than a couple of seconds in which Rehana Sultan appears in the nude. This 'displacement' of audience attention, which in any case was encouraged by the publicity, points to one of the central contradictions of middle-class ideology that the film tries to deal with but itself ultimately succumbs to. Hamid and Salma, a newly married couple, find an apartment in Bombay after a long search. After moving in, they realize that the previous tenant had been a *lawaiif* (courtesan) called Shamsah Begum. Her customers, unaware that she has moved, come and knock on the door and disturb the young couple. The *paniwala* in front, who owns the apartment, expects to persuade or force the young woman to become a *lawaiif*. Two youth living in an opposite apartment watch Salma as she bathes and dresses. As if all these signs of scrutiny motivated by voyeuristic interest were not enough, Hamid finds a framed photograph of a stranger lying in the house and hangs it up on the wall. (This man is later discovered to have been a client of Shamsah Begum.) The *mis-en-scène* functions to foreground a lack in the conjugal relationship. At first sight it appears to signify the absence of privacy, the difficulty of maintaining a zone of intimacy impervious to the prying eyes of the world. Soon we learn that there is more to it. When Hamid goes away to work, Salma is alone, and unaware that she is being watched by the men across the street, enacts her fantasies. She plays cards with an



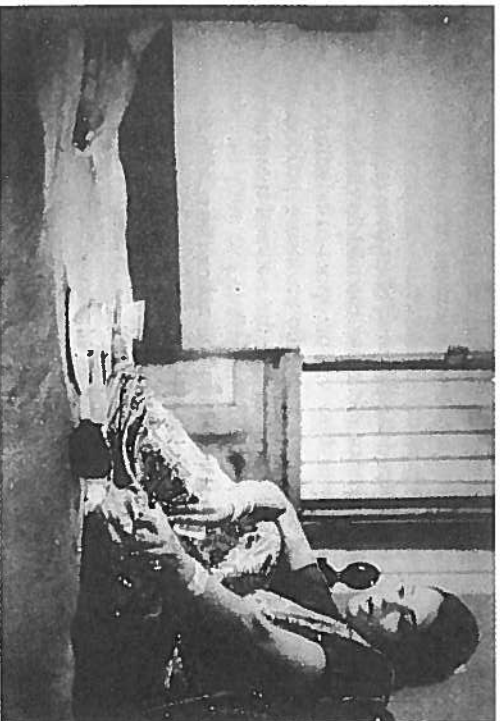
Symbolizing the lack of closure in the domestic scene, Hamid hangs up a picture of a stranger found in the house. Sanjeev Kumar and Rehana Sultan in *Dasrak* (Rajendra Singh Bedi 1971). Courtesy National Film Archive of India, Pune.



The voyeurs can see Salma (Rehana Sultan) talking to someone . . .



. . . but try as they might, they cannot see the other person



. . . when the camera moves into the house, *we* see that the Other is imaginary. Courtesy National Film Archive of India, Pune.

district makes the couple decide to move to a better place. Hamid struggles to find money to pay for an apartment under construction. When asked for his name, he hesitates and comes up with a Hindu name. The option thus translates into a fugitive existence in the midst of a Hindu middle class. However, the problem of the divided woman whose re-integration is one of the conditions of bourgeois subjectivity, is not exclusive to Muslim society but also affects Hindus, as the other films in this category demonstrate. The message of *Dastak*, however, is that Muslim society must be reformed from within by its educated members, instead of running in search of neutral spaces in which they can only survive by adopting a Hindu identity.

The middle-class film foregrounds the problem of bourgeois subjectivity through the exploration of the contradictions and conflicts of conjugality. Sometimes the continued hold of the parental family over the conjugal scene is the source of the conflict, as in *Kora Kagaz* where the wife's rich family tries to compensate for the husband's meagre salary by providing modern amenities. In all cases, however, the woman is at the centre of bourgeois narrative, the journey towards the recognition of woman's subjectivity stands as proof of the arrival of bourgeois conjugality.

For middle-class cinema as an institution, the thematics of female subjectivity and the problem of domestic space form the basis of a new aesthetic. Homologous to the problem of the domestic space and its unresolved conflicts, the middle-class segment of the industry, in its products, confronted the problem of its own cultural space. In the populist/socialist political climate, the middle class, whose class identity was intimately tied up with an upper-caste status, was more amenable to the exclusivist aesthetic enclosure produced by the narratives of domestic conflict than the national integrationist role delineated in the narratives of martyrdom.

The structure of the narrative of *Dastak* can be read in this context as an allegory of the middle-class cinema's aesthetic aspirations. The gaze mobilized by the popular cinema is a national gaze which reads the woman-in-public as a 'public woman' and thus denies her subjectivity. The unity of middle-class cinema as an institution however, depended on an ability to create an audience whose gaze is responsive to the subjectivity of the protagonists, especially women. As such the task that the film-makers undertook was not a confrontation with the popular cinema but an education of their audience in a narrative form which could retain its integrity while

absorbing the libidinal excess of the polymorphous popular film text. From the contracted voyeurism of the popular film text (and the brothel), the middle-class cinema turned its audience towards a 'realist' voyeurism in which sexuality occurred in the depths of screen space, as an attribute of subjectivity.

In one of the most intriguing sequences in *Dastak*, the two voyeurs on the balcony opposite the apartment are seen looking through the window at Salma. From where they stand, they can see her only, holding a bunch of playing cards, but her actions suggest that she has company. The two men try to look from various angles but cannot catch sight of Salma's companion. Leaving them behind with their frustrations, the camera takes the spectator into the room to disclose the truth: Salma is alone and is playing with an imaginary Hamid. She follows up the card game with more play acting; she lights up a cigarette, chokes on it and then dresses up as a man. The importance of this scene lies in its representation of *the imaginary* which startlingly draws our attention to the naive materialism of the spectatorial gaze in the popular cinema. As long as we persist, like the spectator of the popular film and the voyeurs on the balcony, in reading the image as a (partial) representation of objective reality, our attention is fixed, with intense curiosity, on the point outside the frame where Salma's gaze is directed. By means of a leap through the window, however, the camera rallies the spectator behind another strategy, which permits us to see that the other resides in Salma and is an expression of her subjectivity. The spectator is separated from the communal voyeurism of the men on the balcony (such voyeurism is always collective), placed inside the room and made intensely aware that he/she is alone with Salma and her fantasies. The bourgeois spectator is invented as a support for the institution of the middle-class cinema.

Dastak and *Phir Bhi* (1971) belonged to a sub-genre which explored sexuality and the question of bourgeois (female) subjectivity. But *Dastak* in particular came to be identified with the sex films, which briefly ruled the film scene in India. They were supplemented by the sex education films, another brief eruption in the early seventies, which represented cinema's taking over of certain developmental functions, particularly the more lucrative ones. In any case, *Dastak's* attempt to forge an aesthetic predicated on individualized voyeurism was negated by the reigning logic of collective voyeurism. The bourgeois cultural revolution had to be postponed yet again.