



The Persistence of Rajasthan in Indian Cinema : One Region, So Many Views

Of all the eco-cultural zones in India Rajasthan has received the maximum cinematic attention from filmmakers not belonging to the region, ranging from Mani Kaul from Kashmir to Vijay Anand from Punjab to Kumar Shahani from Sind to Satyajit Ray from Bengal to Kalpana Lajmi from Assam. There is by now a large corpus of films shot in this region that together make up a series of overlapping viewpoints on aspects of Indian culture. Beginning with the very process of narrativization and visualizing narratives, thinking through India's cultural histories at its eco-cultural frontiers, to the issue of feudal cultures that constitute the political and cultural economies of north India, if not India as a whole, the films have touched on a wide range of concerns.¹ For the purposes of this seminar my simple argument would be that Rajasthan serves as some kind of a cultural matrix where the 'truth' of India is relentlessly queried and the workings of the eco-culture made to utter oracular prognostications about the fate of India, albeit a certain India. The rarefaction of cultural life in an arid eco-frontier of north India seems to distil the 'essence' of north Indian culture as a whole and therefore serves as much to reveal as construct a cultural fantasy about what north Indian culture is all

about. Such a ‘marginal-central’ position that narratives set in Rajasthan seem to occupy in the history of Indian cinema in turn creates an ‘extreme’ cinema in all registers of filmmaking that produce, I shall argue, the intensification not of a ‘real’ of India but of certain filmmaking proclivities reacting to the directions India’s cultural history has taken in the last fifty years or so. Over time, the two streams of cinema – the mainstream and the alternative have had some dialogue in film style as modes of excavating the sensational lives of Indians underlying visible cultural practice. More recently, the mainstream and the alternative have begun to mingle in interesting ways in films made from the turn of the millennium.²

A preliminary discussion of these overlapping lines of filming Rajasthan and the spectacular divergences between such lines will form the meat of my essay. I hope to show through such an examination of film styles provisional definitions of the manner in which cinematic objects have been created by filmmakers against which they have defined their cinematic alternatives. As we shall see, for Rajasthan, the lines between *a* mainstream cinema and alternatives to it are not easy to define. I shall also run a parallel querying of the idea of the ‘regional’ in modern Indian cultural thinking as a profitable mode of coming to terms with the complexities of the issue of the mainstream and the alternative for Indian cinema. As I have hinted at in the previous paragraph, Rajasthan as a cultural region seems to, in the work of Indian filmmakers, be serving as the base reference point from which the metonymy of India seems to emerge. One could argue that this tendency to thinking cultural regions of India as metonymies for India was the fundamental ideational basis for thinking India through its multicultural realities – be it the setting up of the cultural ‘Akademis’ in Delhi and their branch offices in the regions or of the FFC/NFDC experiment with funding alternative cinemas.

Two ways of looking at Rajasthan

One can in a very cursory and preliminary sampling of films set in Rajasthan discern at least five distinct ways in which Indian filmmakers have sought to grasp the ‘mysteries’ of the region, of which I shall discuss at length only two. The two modes of envisioning Rajasthan that I take up in detail in this essay for discussion I call the ‘occult’ and the ‘feudal-consumerist’. The other three are the Rajput-historical, rebirth-redemption and the developmentalist-NGO modes (which can be further subdivided into the state-sponsored art-house film and the commercial film) that I shall discuss only in passing. These films see subjects in Rajasthan as labour waiting to be liberated by developmentalism

or NGO intervention in the region's political economy. In terms of public discourses around films the principle lines of tension in the manner in which Rajasthan has been filmed lie between the 'occult' or for the purpose of our seminar, the 'alternative', and the 'feudal-consumerist' or the 'mainstream' modes of filmic presentation. There might be overlaps between the three secondary modes and the dominant ones but for most the former represent quite distinct aesthetic assemblages in terms of what of Rajasthan they mobilize as the 'significant' for India. This classification of films into dominant and secondary might fly against commonsense since the Rajput-historical and the developmentalist-NGO line would represent respectively a Right Wing nationalist and a state-sponsored cinema with pretensions of socialist developmentalism, ideological positions that might be considered as significant if not central to the cultural history of India since the 1930s. But first, cinema in India has followed aesthetic pathways that have rarely found resonance in the dominant political ideological lines that define the public sphere in post-independence India and secondly, it is precisely the uber-abstractions that Rajasthan as a filmic space offers that shape the ideological tensions marking filmic Rajasthan in distinctive ways. In other words, I would argue that the space of Rajasthan allows for cinematic abstractions that show up the edges of the mass sensibilities of modern India, encouraging a cinema against the grain that shows up a certain 'truth' of the Indian modern in counterpoint to mainstream understandings of that reality. The rebirth-redemption genre of cinema set in Rajasthan could be considered a subset of the feudal-consumerist mode of cinema, and I will come to it briefly in what follows.

Cinema Rajasthan – a brief survey

A history of films shot in Rajasthan is a difficult task for a variety of reasons.

First, the number of films shot in Rajasthan is large, and some of the cinematic material quite obscure, hidden in difficult recesses of the non-existent archive for Indian cinema. Second, and more tellingly, Rajasthan or 'Rajasthan-like' spaces have appeared in many films as a kind of general desert landscape, a kind of emotion-



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scape for physical and psychological hardship without being flagged as being Rajasthan as such. Films such as K Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Love and God* (1986), Kamal Amrohi's *Razia Sultan* (1983), Rahul Rawail's *Laila-Majnu* (1979) or Dev Anand's *Heera-Panna* (1973) to more recently Khalid Mohamed's *Fiza* (2000) might have scenes shot in or around Rajasthan but have nothing to do with the eco-cultures of Rajasthan as such. In contrast, a film like John Matthew Mathan's *Sarfarosh* (1999) uses Rajasthan in a story of international espionage, mostly in very cursory ways, and yet draws in elements of Rajasthan's eco-cultural life in bizarre yet fascinating ways. Third, film fragments shot in Rajasthan, especially in contemporary times with the rise of the 'item song', abound and make the task of the historian doubly arduous. In some ways the use of Rajasthan as a filmic flavour in the films mentioned above has now been condensed into the three-to-five minute song as an exotic effect, usually as a distraction from the serious, depressing and more deathly matters being transacted in the main body of the film. In light of such caveats what follows is a highly selective survey of films shot in Rajasthan and is mostly restricted to the needs of this particular essay.

Besides the shooting of *Light of Asia* (1925) in the palace cities of Rajputana in the 1920s, the first film to be shot substantially in Rajasthan was Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1963), a path-breaking film in the annals of mainstream Bombay cinema for its freeing of the sensational structuration of the standard Bombay youth romance film towards a more immediate, freewheeling and sensuous mode of self-presentation signalled not least by its music, which remains a momentous break with the earlier tradition of film music in Bombay cinema. Announcing at once the deaths of *shastric* erotica (the archaeologist-husband defining Rosie) and the febrile eroticism of the Islamicate *poet maudit's* doomed love (Raju, the guide, defining Rosie) as reference points for a modern Indian cinema in favour of a more transparent imagery verging on sexual epiphany, *Guide* wields Rajasthan as a passage, an analytical setting, to posit India's emergence from the archaic into the modern, less R K Narayan, more Mulk Raj Anand. And although I shall not speak at length about this film it should be kept as a reference point for much that emerges in Rajasthan cinematically in the decades to come. For one, *Guide* mobilises a freewheeling referencing of contemporary modernist artistic practices recalling the imagery of Rajasthan in a magazine like *Marg* edited by Mulk Raj Anand in those days that mixed touristic imagery, iconographic analysis and thinking about the Indian-ness of Indian modernity all at once, and through the Mulk Raj Anand axis other neighbouring modernist practices that could include Mario Miranda's cartoons

about Anglo-Indian characters on the one hand but also the modernist art of a Raza or a Husain on the other hand. Through *Guide*, the Anand brothers would graduate from urban noir to a cinema dedicated to travelling in exotic locales around India and the world to carry out a touristy excavation of the pleasures at play within the Indian modern.

This very modernist constellation of art and aesthetic theory that *Guide* mobilizes towards defining a new Indian modern would provide the matrix for the first big moments of Rajasthan on celluloid through some of the very early films of the Indian New Wave cinema such as Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972) and Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* (1975), films that will form an important part of my essay. The story of the occult/alternative genre continues in fits and starts with Kamal Swaroop's 1988 classic *Om Dar-b-dar* (1988), a quasi-autobiographical absurdist drama set in Pushkar and then more recently with Navdeep Singh's *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007) and Anurag Kashyap's *Gulaal* (2009). These five films will form the spine of the arguments I shall be making about how the techniques of alternative in 'cinema Rajasthan' defines itself against the mainstream. It is interesting to note how strongly the notion of the occult marks the extreme alternative-ness of these films against the fare of popular cinema and even the art-house NGO-developmental kind of cinema. Once in a while we find the occult affecting a film in the NGO-developmental cinema lightly as in the case of Govind Nihalani's reworking of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* as *Rukmavati ki Haveli* (1991), a film that may well be considered within the ambit of 'film Rajasthan'.

Alongside Shahani's and Kaul's films in the first half of the 1970s that form the beginning of the 'occult' mode of films set in Rajasthan we find Bombay cinema return to Rajasthan with a spectacular epic film that would serve as the benchmark for many films in the years to come. Sunil Dutt's *Reshma aur Shera* (1972), somewhat a sequel to *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) in the sense that it could be read as the story of Birju if he hadn't been shot at the end of Mehboob Khan's classic, remains an enigmatic omnibus film in terms of film style that would dialogue with almost all the genres of cinema that Rajasthan inspired and would provide the starting point for the making of films such as *Mera Gaon, Mera Desh* (Raj Khosla, 1971) and *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) and onwards towards the acme of the feudal-consumerist genre - the films of JP Dutta, of which *Kshatriya* (1993) directly references *Reshma aur Shera* in very explicit ways - both in terms of the story as well as in rehashing much of the cast of Dutt's film (it would be interesting to note that *Reshma aur Shera* borrows Waheeda Rehman from *Guide*). *Reshma aur*

Shera has interfaces with a wide variety of films belonging to the commercial variant of the developmentalist-NGO genre of film such as Gulzar's *Lekin* (1990) (but one could argue his earlier *Namkeen* (1982), although set in Himachal Pradesh, invokes many tropes of the Rajasthan film, a film that can be read as a hallucinatory concoction of the worlds of Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983), Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1970) and Shahani's *Kasba* (1991)) and Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudaali* (1993) or even Dev Benegal's *Road, Movie* (2009) , not to mention other iconic films of the feudal-consumerist genre such as Yash Chopra's *Chandni* (1989). With its connections with tragic love tales of the desert such as the ballad of Dhola and Maru the film also has strong hints of the rebirth-redemption genre of Rajasthan cinema of which *Mehbooba* (Shakti Samanta, 1976) remains a strong representative.

Other films set in Rajasthan include Rajput Historicals such as *Amarsinh Rathod* (Jaswant Jhaveri, 1956) and more recently Ashutosh Gowarikar's *Jodhaa-Akbar* (2008). We can also name the developmentalist-NGO drama of Mrinal Sen's *Genesis* (1986) and Jag Mundhra's sensationalist film in the genre, *Bawandar* (2000) in addition to the ones mentioned above. There is also a sub-genre of Bombay cinema – the Princely State fantasy that has from time to time found home in Rajasthan. Between the Historical and the feudal-consumerist, consisting of films such as Manmohan Desai's *Dharam-Veer* (1977), it is now a forgotten genre of Indian cinema but was much popular between the 1920s and the 1970s. Mehboob Khan's *Aan* (1953) was the first film in this genre to find wide favour with middle class audiences but has on the whole stayed a staple in B and C film circuits. Satyajit Ray's *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969) is a surreal, absurdist romp in the Princely State setting while more recently, Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Ekalavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), a film that I shall briefly discuss at the end of the essay, has revisited the site of courtly intrigues in Princely States, the kind we see in the *Hunterwali* films. *Ekalavya* mixes elements of the Historical and a postmodern version of the occult on the site of the Princely State and in some ways remains an interesting interface between Bombay popular cinema and alternatives such as Singh's and Kashyap's films. The rebirth-redemption drama set in Rajasthan has recently been redone in the entertaining *Bhool-Bhulaiya* (2007) by Priyadarshan, which explicitly deals with the occult in feudal settings and might in a certain ironic reading of its diegetic material be seen as tangential working out of cultural problematics that Kaul deals with in *Davidha* crossed with the ethos of a *Mehbooba*.

In addition, there exists an exotic mode of filmmaking in Rajasthan that has mainly been the domain of filmmakers from outside India, seen most

powerfully in films such as the Merchant-Ivory productions *Heat and Dust* (James Ivory, 1983) and *The Deceivers* (Nicholas Meyer, 1988) and the James Bond film *Octopussy* (John Glen, 1983) that rehashes in its mode of imagery of Orientalist excesses, old stuff such as Fritz Lang's version of the *Tiger of Eschnapur/The Indian Tomb* diptych (1959). Satyajit Ray's *Sonar Kella* (1974) remains the sole example of an Indian film in line with the foreigner's exotic eye on Rajasthan where tourism and intrigue mix in telling ways, the Otherness and opacity of Rajasthan to the average Indian eye leveraging a concomitant acceleration of expectations of thrills delivered by the Unknown. This is not to forget Amol Palekar's remake of Kaul's *Duvidha* as *Paheli* (2005) in recent times featuring the superstar Shahrukh Khan who began his career in films as an actor in Kaul's *Ahamak* (1991).

Cinema of the occult and Rajasthan-India

Briefly put, the occult mode of cinema in Rajasthan works mainly through an abstraction of the spoken word in film in tension with abstractions worked upon images that may approach sonic abstractions in the film but in the end prove to be excessive, in positive and negative ways, over and above the sonic. The emotional complexities of life in affect and intensity of feelings cannot be contained in the spoken word, creating a surplus energy field in experience that may be filled by the occult or the ghostly that code this excess as dark musings of the mind in sensory frustration when words cannot express intensity of emotion. The battle for defining the alternative for Indian cinema through films set in Rajasthan then is principally waged through control and modulations of the spoken word rather than the image. It is as if the excesses of mainstream cinema denoting mindless consumerism was located in the verbal domain and it is interesting to note that the inaugural film in the feudal-consumerist genre *Reshma aur Shera* has a very important stylistic as well as narrational track that works through a play between silence and sound. Where the cinema becomes occult is precisely in bringing speech in cinema to a stasis denoting a dramatic refinement of everyday speech to reveal the deeply personal at its most abstract and ineffable, what is revealed are the recesses of the mind where a certain kind of subtle emotional truth resides and such a recess is a dark one created by repression in hectic consumerism where the reality of one's feelings get suppressed by relentless interpellation of the senses by the banal. One must be careful not to take the pre-occupation with death-like conditions of the protagonists in Shahani's and Kaul's films as the occult element in the films. The occult has a comedic element as well which in cinema is called the slapstick



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spoken word mediating tensions between narrative, cultural memory and the cinematic image. Thus it would be beneficial to see these films as the reverse of the banal and the humdrum of a cultural scene. In this filmmakers like Shahani and Kaul are querying the flows of emotion and sensation in the recesses of ordinary everyday living as well positing a certain emergence of the authentic personal in such recesses even when life goes on as usual. The director is casting a wilfully distracted eye and ear at a busy scene only to catch the emergence of life itself in all its complexities within the scene from the corner of the eye or the ear, the occult within the scene. But the important point to note is that the occult in son + image consists of an exorcism of the diabolical in a cultural landscape cured by a sonic chant. Action, the frame of the image, is to be guided by the precedence of magical speech and it is this ascent of the sonic over the visual in Kaul's and Shahani's film that makes explicit the occult heart of their Rajasthan films.

Claims to Rajasthan's capacity to present the eye with pure abstractions range from Shahani's praise of the light of the region that allows for a certain kind of abstractions in colour that suited his purposes in making *Maya Darpan* to Kaul's evocation of a Tantric style of abstracting on sound and the written word in tension with one another (the sonic epiphany in the written word, in Om) to produce the hallucinatory sensation scape for his *Duvidha*. Rajasthan as a gateway to India where all nomadic tribes have tarried from time immemorial before moving on to the innards of the subcontinent stacks up scriptural and symbolic complexity in a landscape that however is voided of human presence. It's a land where the ghosts of those who have moved on are to be found thick and fast. This is not to mention the personal biographical expertise that Shahani and Kaul bring to a deep understanding of the dynamics of narratives in the Rajasthan sun, Shahani having grown up in the arid Sind

genre of film. There too the sonic element of violence coded in crashing objects produces an editing down of movement in the image as they do in the occult films discussed here.³

Films such as *Maya Darpan* and *Duvidha* inaugurate a style of alternative cinema set in Rajasthan that plays on tensions between the written and the

and Kaul being a native of Rajasthan. However for our purposes it would be more apt to place the workings of these directors within a certain moment in modernist Indian art and aesthetic practices where a number of artists such as Raza, Tyeb Mehta, G R Santosh and Akbar Padamsee amongst others were deeply involved in abstract and more or less Gnostic musings on calligraphy, the image and the sound of the holy word in their paintings, and so were theorists such as Kapila Vatsyayana, another stalwart contributing to the *Marg* school of Indian aesthetic theory. Filmmakers such as Shahani and Kaul were part of this aesthetic circle and their cinema has to be seen emerging in a dialogue with the more intricate and somewhat obscure depths of Indian modernist artistic practice and theorizing.⁴

Shahani's *Maya Darpan* provides us through its painterly abstractions on the image track a certain truth about the relationship between a crumbling colonial feudal set-up in postcolonial times and its redemption through the heroine's discovery of her sexuality, a fleshy organicity set at par with the lush tropical greenness of Assam, the diametrical opposite of arid Rajasthan and an equally arid Puritan colonial feudal ethic. It is as if all the suffering heroines of Ritwik Ghatak's films have been redeemed in Shahani's quasi-feminist take on Indian developmentalism, the woman redeemed through an easy relationship with technology would redeem feudal India's troubled relationship with the modern. The occult in the film, the inner musings of the heroine's mind as well as the stilted, stylized form of dialogue between protagonists on the sonic track, are broken down through a series of restless movements by the heroine who thus liberates the image and the light in the image to redeem a space that has been left behind by history.

Kaul's *Duvidha*, although similar in certain ways to Shahani's film in the manner in which it sets up speech, sound and image in counterpoint, is a darker and denser affair. If Shahani's film set in Rajasthan is a metonymy for such middlebrow Bombay fare such as Basu Bhattacharya's *Anubhav* (1971), filmic fare set in India's mainstream, then Kaul's film is a metonymy for cultural universe depicted in films that deal with patriarchal feudal violence in India. Freer movement for the female protagonist and her sexual satisfaction remain central to Kaul's dissipation of the spoken occult dimension of life in feudal Rajasthan, and his image in its freer moments begin to resemble Mughal miniature paintings set to the apt Hindustani classical *raga*. However compared to Shahani's film Kaul's film remains a darker affair if only because it deals with the lives of a Rajput-Marwari feudal ethos that, far from declining, would provide one of the most powerful bulwarks for a hectic regime of *bazaar*

consumerism marking the growth of commodity markets in postcolonial India. Kaul's heroine (played by Raisa, the artist Akbar Padamsee's daughter) is trapped between the patriarchal values of a Marwari mercantile family and the passion of the ghost of a Rajput warrior hero who is being superseded by the workings of the Congress government that put up the modern businessman as hegemonic cultural face of Rajasthan in the period in which the film was being made.

The evocation of sacrifice marks *Duvidha* throughout – the sense of life being on edge of sacrifice begins with the heroine's musings about her desire as being sacrificed to marriage, is emphasized through the rituals of a Rajasthani marriage ceremony that invoke the groom as the sacrificial victim and culminates in the violence that follows in the family following the bride's affair with the ghost. The occult in Kaul's film is as much a haunting of the present by the past as it is a matter of the present being haunted by its futures, a future of consumerism where youthful life will be sacrificed to a field of competitive capitalism more easily through a rough, ready and perfunctory evocation of feudal tyranny ensuring the triumph of the competitors.⁵ If Shahani's heroine escapes the fate of being an Iphigenia sacrificed at the altar of feudal decline then Kaul's heroine lives out a death-in-life situation reserved for Indian widows, her sexual husband having been exorcized by sacrifice, her real husband a pointless reference in her life.

Compared to this deep focus on Rajasthan in Shahani's and Kaul's films one can in the the state-financed developmentalist-NGO film see a distinct problem of the speed of a political economy of and the speeds that are coded into films such a political economy produces. In such films developmentalism more often than not falls in line with a certain consumerist logic of the economy of images, something that would ironically be seen as a simplification of the historical logics animating life in a region like Rajasthan apprehended by purist filmmakers of the surface such as Shahani and Kaul. Both Shahani and Kaul relentlessly query surfaces of past representations of cultural life in the region – be it the walls of a house or mansion or the surfaces of synoptic paintings in the Indian miniature tradition - to gradually reveal in the sound and image tracks the teeming and dark complexities of lives, the occult, hidden beneath such surfaces, to then take them towards fantasies about the future. Developmentalist cinema set in Rajasthan is, in contrast to such thick descriptions of the layers of cultural reflexes making up life in the region, seen as entirely stuck in a convenient simplification of reality, filled with ersatz images of what is commonsensically held as standard imagery of feudal contradictions in the general intellect, a convenient fantasy through and

through. This ersatz recall of feudal violence in the developmentalist film would make it teeter perilously close to the mythic images of feudal violence that would make up the fabric of commercial cinema about Rajasthan.

The feudal-consumerist Rajasthan film

In comparison to these, the feudal-consumerist mode of 'film Rajasthan' is nothing short of an alternate take on the future of Rajasthan by the Bombay film industry. If the future of Rajasthan in Shahani's film lies in a slow poetic unfolding of the inner lives of a cultural matrix towards Assam where her brother lives, to nature and thrilling uncertainties of life in the open marked by a gentle liberation of the spoken word in the sublimation of the image in natural repose, then the feudal-consumerist mode is all action and noise that titrates the logic of extreme of feudal violence in no uncertain terms to a noisy heart of a frenetic consumerist society. The logic of Rajasthan as a metonymic substitute for India here follows the historian Dirk Kolff's important observation that almost all of north India is structured by a Rajput feudal ethos, most notably by the little



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tradition of the *purbiya* or the eastern Rajput warrior-mercenary who worships the goddess and is close to the Saiva-Tantric godman.⁶ Thus Rajasthan offers for directors such as Sunil Dutt or J P Dutta the opportunity to study the feudal heart of the entirety of north Indian culture in its pure form through films set in the mother territory of Rajasthan, the more derivative forms of which are the *dacait* films and feudal dramas of revenge and sexual vendetta set all over India such as Mansoor Khan's *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak* (1988).

If the same understanding of feudal culture underpinning modern India drives Shahani and Kaul to deconstruct the violence of this culture towards alternative histories in modernization and growth of human sensibilities then the feudal-consumerist film champions the extreme masculine violence of a feudal culture towards an endorsement of hyper-consumerism to which Bombay cinema has, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued, always served as a hand-maiden.⁷ The logic of this genre is martial sacrificial where violence itself is the crucible that 'outs' the material glory of feudalism in competitive

conspicuous consumption, as well as the acme of artisanal technological expertise in the form of the weaponry of feudal vendetta wars. The sacrificial churning of the ocean of Rajasthan's cultural psyche in feudal violence produces both the divine and the diabolical. The occult heart of these films is produced by an excess of martial violence depicted in more and more explicit terms. When consumerist noise begins to code the glint of the sharp blade that beheads that's the moment when the occult begins in son + image.

The first film in the feudal-consumerist mode, *Reshma aur Shera*, is remarkable on many counts for its positing a neighbourly relationship with a more abstract kind of cinema about Rajasthan almost abutting Kaul's *Duvidha* in its opening sequence and then quickly moving towards positing a direct relationship between violence and Indian consumerism in a long sequence set in a fair. In the fair, traditional and modern objects of consumption are coveted by those a passion that also informs the first vendetta battles that break out between two warring Rajput clans. *Reshma aur Shera* also marks out Rajasthan as the site of the examining the region to posit a metonymic feudal-Rajput India by defining the location as apt for filming feudal violence in its most graphic and immediate forms, as if the region provided some form of 'pure' exhibition of the logics of feudal violence that marked all of India. As mentioned above the imagery worked out in the film would spill over into many a developmentalist-NGO alternative film. But in the main the film is a seething critique of the noise that was beginning to be produced in the overlap between violence and hyper-consumerism creeping into all corners of India in the early 1970s. The fair sequence is shot in long durations of silence as if to make a point about the two kinds of noise that were beginning to disrupt the quiet of the desert.

J P Dutta's films of the late 1980s and early 1990s brings back the feudal-consumerist film to Rajasthan after the genre had done detour in the 1970s through the generic *dacait* films or feudal -consumerist films set nowhere in particular. Watching Dutta's oeuvre is like watching *Reshma aur Shera* remade across a number of films, especially since he re-employs many of the same actors in his films – Sunil Dutt, Vinod Khanna, Rakhee and Sanjay Dutt. *Kshatriya*, made in the early 1990s, literally re-presents *Reshma aur Shera*'s scenario of fairs, consumerism and feudal battles, but in a cultural scene that has long been structured by the intimate relationships between violence and consumerism. The film is all noise; no question of querying the complexity of the sound in a space like Rajasthan is possible. All silence is pregnant with the crackling tension of violence to come or awaits the bursting forth of the rage

for vendetta in an endless cycle of retributive murders. In its second half, the film posits a 'reform' of feudal Rajasthan, and by that token of all feudal India, by a rationalization of life brought in by a younger generation of feudals trained abroad in management of resources while maintaining the upright masculinity symbolic of Rajput feudalism that Dutta so admires. In this, the film is prescient of the manner in which feudal Rajasthan would be transformed in the era of liberalization with power – economic and political - passing on to the scions of feudal houses now armed with degrees in business schools from America and fit to mix with the successors of the mercantile bourgeoisie and the corporate managers in the Indian metropolises. The relationship between violence and consumerism are kept intact except that there is a mutual slowing down of speeds in both registers that results in the creation of denser and longer lasting veins of property as investment in longer pauses in feudal vendetta wars, where feudal glitter is imbued with the densities of the radical Nehruvian developmentalist chic of a 'Fabindia'. The logic of feudal vendetta is not given up but instead reset to longer cycles of settling scores over time.⁸

Dark passage: Kamal Swaroop's Om Dar-b-Dar

In the meantime the occult mode of alternative cinema too moves in response to historical change and presents us with a series of remarkable meditations on the dark heart of Rajasthan modernizing through the 1980s and the 1990s. Kamal Swaroop's *Om Dar-b-Dar*, the closest an Indian film has come to representing the anarchy of a postcolonial text such as G V Desani's *All About H Hattarr*, takes up Rajasthan from where Mani Kaul had left it, as a sorcerer's apprentice would, and presents us with an exhilarating if mind-boggling deconstruction of life in a small Rajasthani town just as television begins to become a part of the furniture of modern Indian life in the molecular. In depicting the vicissitudes of Om, the film's main protagonist, Swaroop displays a world skidding out of control in various directions, an explosion of aimless desire as lethal as the A-bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The occult is on full volume through the film as the confusions of consumerist desire have intensified and multiplied as rampantly as frogs since Kaul's film, resulting in many channels of the occult beeping through the alleyways of the town.

The lexical in the son + image is located in occult superstition on the other side of the volcano of consumerism – plenitude of the Indic variety is good for astrologers as only the archaic lexical can save the soul as damned as Om's in the media wars that mark Pushkar. Om can only cancel out all elements of the cinematic spectacle in order to escape the onslaught of an 'everything'

functioning not through rational markets but through the anarchy of a frontier *bazaar*. There are too many things for a medium as slow as cinema to contain. The only manner in which such an explosion can be rooted back to earth is by putting to work in slave chain gangs those who have stayed back and are active yet powerless – the young, the children, boys like Om who go to a good school but have no future in a chaotic cultural matrix where everyone is in a hurry to get out to more prosperous futures elsewhere. They are put to work on the commodities of modernity read now in pure superstitious terms for their magical qualities.⁹ Bicycles, textbook knowledge and a heap of banal objects are mobilized by individuals to work out their desires triggered off by the commodity with the young used as conduits for passage of secret missions between seeker and the object desired. Om spends the entire film dodging various kinds of slavery and finally gives up, but not before he has cursed the land by withholding life that he controls through his uncontrollable voyeurism. The occult reaches a final conclusion by becoming what it is all about – an intensification of its visual powers in Om's voyeurism at the expense of his powers of speech, an intensification powerful enough to cut off his breathing, his life, the light in his eye. The end of cinema as we knew it.

Interestingly enough, Swaroop's film is one that does not evoke Rajasthan in any way as a significant cultural referent for the story it has to tell, the story could be true of most north Indian *qasba* towns. Paresch Kamdar's *Khargosh* (2009) set in Gujarat follows a similar logic and has much in common with Swaroop's film. *Om Dar-b-Dar* is semi-autobiographical as it is set in Pushkar, the town to which Swaroop belongs by virtue of natal origins. However, his film is definitely a frontier town film in what in following Yuri Lotman we could say is on the boundaries of a semiosphere, that is India, that maximum and chaotic traffic happens between cultural elements arriving at the frontier from all sides, from within India and from without.¹⁰

The return of the occult and the fusion of film genres for global Rajasthan

Moving on, Navdeep Singh's relentlessly inventive *Manorama Six Feet Under*, which also has much in common with *Om dar-b-dar*, explicitly invokes the shifting sands of the light in the desert as being central to his neo-noir film set in Rajasthan. If cinema can continue despite Swaroop's prognostication of the impossibility of cinema in Rajasthan-India, then Singh's film happens in a 'rurban' region that has survived the most momentous transformation of its cultural landscape in the 1970s and 1980s in the first wave of globalized consumerism and wide scale migration of the educated and subaltern labour

to the towns and cities of India and abroad. Swaroop could present a Rajasthan without explicit reference to the feudal powers of the region if only because the 1970s marked the heyday of the power of the educated middle classes and the business communities over the feudal powers in India's regions.

By the time Singh revisits Rajasthan in the 2000s the region is a punishment posting for educated people and is in the hands of an alliance of feudal lords, politicians (sometimes the two are the one and the same) and the rampant power of developers. The economy is a fragile yet populous one of the kind that grows around labour on highways, a state that is perpetual for regions like Rajasthan today. Ideal ground for yet another occultation of the region's cultural life; but with Singh's film for the first time we find the occult flipping over from the sonic to the visual track in very explicit ways. Singh's film too is marked strongly by the central protagonist's inner musings, but these musings do not play on the edge of the spoken word becoming object, a pure esoteric visual symbol, but are in fact the script of the noir novel that he is writing. There is an illusory occult quality to this inner speech in the sense that it has the quality of a thriller but gone is the dark materialism marking inner speech in Shahani, Kaul and Swaroop's film. And yet Singh's excellence as a filmmaker lies in converting the *mise-en-scène* of his film, the object world of his film, into verbal entities, as if the occult darkness of speech has been drained into the object world. With his dark inner musings Om, , who died holding his breath underwater in a tank in Pushkar, has entered the object world of Singh's film, a haunting of Rajasthan's consumerist material world by the unhappy spirits who were decimated by the orgy of consumption that Swaroop's film describes so well. This is the reality of development post-development. Yet again Rajasthan has been abandoned by its settlers in a convulsion of history leaving behind a region haunted by the victims who have no other option but to stay on. In *Manorama*, with its denouement in the exposure of child sex slave traffic (the corrupt Congress end of politics) in a region where political violence has been completely feudalized (the BJP end of Hindutva Right Wing violence) we see the accuracy of Swaroop's diagnosis for Rajasthan as a region that would be destroyed by child slave labour, the heart of India's *bazaar* economies since the 1970s, which haunts Om to his death.

In a similar vein of flipping the occult into the visual terrain from the sonic track but for entirely different ideological reasons, Anurag Kashyap's *Gulaal* marks a cinematic summation of Rajasthan's cultural landscape today. If Singh's film made use of the looseness of a frontier town's life that allows a wide variety of human types to congregate in loosely connected ways to speak about



Manorama Six Feet Under

metonymically about small town India today, Kashyap's film is a synoptic view of Rajasthan in order to comment on the core of the politics of Hindutva in India today. In this it could be read as a critique of a film such as Kamal Hassan's *Hey Ram* (2000) that maintained an equivocal stance towards the connection between Princely States and Hindu Right Wing politics. Invoking very explicitly the occult heart of the rise of the Nazis in Germany that yoked invocation of archaic historic myths to a rampant militarism with the Prussian Junker feudal class leading the way, *Gulaal* posits a future of India in very similar terms with the Rajputs deprived of their feudal privileges by a democratic governance dreaming of becoming the stormtrooper for a land ruled by Hindutva militarism, a militarism that invoked the archaism of the purity of a Brahmanical sacral as the cause for the warriors to rally around. The occult here is this spurious invention of imagined archaic codes of chivalry constituting the *mannerbund* (male bonding) that cannot be invoked in a public sphere defined by democratic dialogue and pluralism. This society of men must be invoked only in secrecy, in a sort of Fight Club of deluded Rajput feudal young. Kashyap, in revealing such ambitions as rooted in the politics of property in today's liberalized economy, treads the same ground as Singh but takes his narrative in a direction that calls the bluff of feudal-consumerist narratives produced in Bombay by showing them up as idle fantasies of the average petty bourgeois feudal-mercantile classes of India masquerading as Rajputs and these classes' intimate relationship with the rise of faux-Rajput Hindutva politician of today's India such as the *baniya* Narendra Modi. The latter, let us remember, seeks from time to time to integrate a Rajput secessionist Kathiawar into Gujarat by donning Rajput regalia and raising the sword of rebellion against the Indian state on their behalf. J P Dutta's feudal lords are seen as scheming for property as property sharks anywhere would, and the foreign-retuned scions of feudal families are shown up as ignorant and feckless young greedy for petty power that does not see beyond its shiny nose.

Interestingly enough the occult within this Right Wing ethos is lampooned through the absurd and cowardly characters of a performer couple living in a

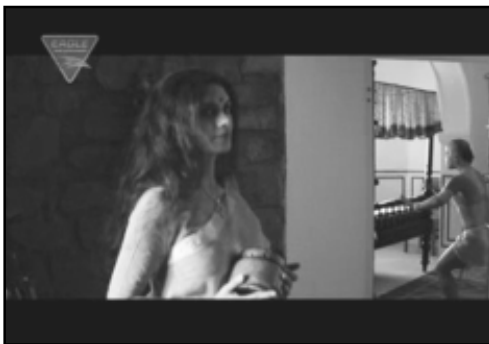
feudal mansion, one of them a poet-singer-bandmaster who could have been a protagonist in *Om Dar-b-dar* and the other a supposedly androgynous dancer who cavorts through the empty mansion mimicking the camera movements of a film like *Maya Darpan* and has the metrosexual pretension of being the truth of the frustrated mistress of the manor. Kashyap is here not only re-articulating J P Dutta's feudal-consumerist cinema as a Rajputization fantasy of a Punjabi business class in charge of a violent agro-industrialization of India but also relocating the occultism of Shahani and Kaul in the sinister imagery of the feudal lord who dreams of becoming the warrior for Hindutva. Swaroop had already announced the end of any substantial organic logic for a Tantric occult to Rajasthani life by relocating the astrological lexical in the corruption of consumerism, just one more medium amongst many other mediawaves coursing through Pushkar, Kashyap takes this occult firmly on to the side of the neo-Rajput feudal, Hindutva's hidden hand. As in *Manorama* so in *Gulaal* the occult has drained out of the Tantric Om into the body of the Rajput where it circulates as a dark poisonous liquid, finally in the form of the *dalit* bastard child of the feudal lord who rises to power in India today.¹¹

The stakes of the filmic sacrifice – India in the making in Rajasthan

Gulaal in some ways provides a remarkably apt coda for the analysis presented above as it brings together two worlds resolutely kept apart in Cinema Rajasthan in the occult and the feudal-consumerist films. While the former type devoted itself to lives in the interstices of feudal Rajasthan dealing with modernized service gentry or mercantile lives, the latter was devoted to the contradictory cultural worlds of the Rajput *thakur* with no space devoted to middle class cosmopolitan urbanity or the lives of the Marwari merchant. In *Gulaal*, these worlds finally come together as equally important cultural worlds informing one another within the frame of a single film. Indeed, the film of the occult and that of feudal consumerism then maybe seen as occupying contiguous cultural spaces which are made adjacent through the politics of genre division in cinematic commerce. However, as argued above, even in the absence of any explicit direct contact with one another in a single film, the films in the genres could be made to dialogue with another through an analysis of the stances various filmmakers took towards the noise of popular culture and consumerism, especially in their attitudes towards the sonic elements in film. It would be interesting to piece the films together as different elements in the same cultural framework reacting to one another through an analysis of the sonic tracks of the respective genres. Therefore, as compared to the mindless sonic excesses

of the popular feudal-consumerist films that followed, *Reshma aur Shera*'s play on the sonic track seems all the more remarkable where it announces the birth of a certain kind of noisy retributive feudal violence in Bombay films with the advent of a certain kind of noisy consumerism in the traditional fair. It is as if a composite universe would split into two kinds of cinemas once the noise entered defined by two kinds of sacrificial occult logics. Feudal martial violence would lead to the 'active' sacrificial churning of the noisy cultural heart of Rajasthan while what gets pushed to the margins by this violence goes into a 'passive' sacrifice, into the automatism of a Vygotsky-ian inner speech as ego reportage in the explicit cinema of the occult, under the pressure of violence at its margins. The surfacing of the inner whisperings of the senses under psychic pressure explains the ascent of the sonic occult chant, or rather the sonic as the marker of the occult in cinema, over the image track in *Duvidha*, *Maya Darpan* or *Om Dar-b-Dar*.¹² In doing so, the film of the occult demonstrates that the truth of cinema Rajasthan lies not in the image but in the sonic/verbal track of things.

It may be argued that even the cinema of the occult codes the logic of feudal-consumerist violence in very direct ways as well. In *Duvidha*, for example, the feudal-consumerist could be literally coded into the dark space of the ghostly presence on the edge of Marwari mercantilism. But Marwari mercantilism itself is shown as mimicking feudal martial violence in the manner in which survival of Capital in an arid frontier requires tough masculine codes of psychic violence for the mercantile ethos. Likewise, the father figure in *Maya Darpan* could be imagined as being part of a feudal-consumerist universe, the violence of which is what produces the occult heart of the heroine in the modern context. We could argue that despite the presence of the household depicted in the film in the modern edge of feudal India, the loneliness of the patriarch



Gulaal

and therefore that of his daughter have been produced through successive waves of mechanisms of feudal competitive violence, and the heroine is haunted precisely by this history in the occult. Similarly, not only could many characters in Swaroop's *Om Dar-b-Dar* may belong to the feudal-consumerist ethos overlapping

with the modern, but the mode of competitive violence that cuts Om out of life is the extension of the feudal mode of competitive violence present in the fabric of north India middle and lower middle society as a whole. Instead of swords and guns this universe utilizes ritual hierarchy of caste and the manipulation of this hierarchy in seizing economic opportunities to the exclusion of others. Indeed, therefore, when we have run through Swaroop's film one feels the presence of the same dark occult heart of the sacrificial host as one would in a feudal-consumerist film. We are left in no doubt by the end of the film that Om has been sacrificed to the collective madness of Pushkar (it would be interesting to analyze the film through the trope of the famous Sunahsepa story of the *Mahabharata*).¹³ The manner in which contending forces combat with one another and the intensity of violence at sacrificial levels to keep out the demons out of the system through purificatory blood-letting are coeval between genres. Indeed in *Gulaal*, it is precisely a figure like Om who rises to become the Fascist youth wing leader of *thakur* politics and indeed increasingly the Prince to come for the entire system.

Thus, one could argue that the cinema of the occult could in indirect ways code the noise of feudal-consumerist violence in the very measures it took to clean up popular everyday speech of its popular babble and deconstruct it to discover the dark chamber of the sonority of the violence of the sacrifice, a darkness that is to be found at the heart of the feudal-consumerist film as well but is constructed through the explicit depiction of the noise of the sacrificial violence as such amongst the martial elements of Rajput society. What happens in a slow deliberative manner through the more civilized and sedately paced sectors of Rajasthan life – the service gentry, the middle classes or the mercantile classes appears in a flash in the hectic action of martial violence. What has to be discovered as an after-sound/after-image of the hectic audio-visual noise of the popular film is in the hands of directors such as Kaul and Shahani shown as being constructed piece by piece through a systematic draining of son + image of the son-signs of organic life that leads to the dimming of op-signage as well during the course of a film.¹⁴ *And this occult at the heart of cinema Rajasthan is nothing but the magical chant of the brahmanical sacerdotal mind (coded in the incantatory use of Sanskritized, 'pure', modern Hindi) to exorcize reality off evil.*

Nowhere in 'cinema Rajasthan' is its connection with brahmanical sacerdotal liturgical practice as explicit as in the cinema of the occult's privileging of its son-signs over its op-signs. The brahmanical sacrifice is guided by the sonic that is supposed to exorcize the psychic of delusional movements leading to the clarification of the image track of life to the point of the extinction of

the image.¹⁵ The image is nothing but an error in the regime of vibrations (as a rule sonic) that bring our sensibilities together in psychic coherence; it is in the manipulation of the son-sign that a history of delusional movements and false imagery could be corrected. The lullaby is supposed to obviate the infant's dream. But Dutta's *Kshatriya* too begins with a Tantric occult sacrifice of a baby buffalo officiated over by brahmins, which was supposed to serve as a symbol of the sacrifice of the young to the collectively held popular occult sacrificial mindset of the feudal lords of the region and their subjects. The sequence ran into controversy for its having shown pornographically an actual buffalo sacrifice.¹⁶

It is the brahmanical sacerdotal model of thinking then that unites the cinema of the occult and of feudal consumerism about Rajasthan together in a single cultural system of reference. And one could argue that Rajasthan becomes the reference point for Indian cinema to work out the dynamics of Indian society as such not least because Rajput feudalism structures much of Indian society and because colonial discourse gave the Rajasthan frontier a special place as definitive of Indian history, but also because the frontier allows for orchestrating tensions within the heartland in pure lines of confrontation in the myth of the frontier being a zone where survival is harsh and competitively violent 'naturally'.¹⁷ It is therefore prone to exteriorizing the 'truth' of the violent history of India in a pure distil as compared to the miscegenated confused centre of things. Not only is the frontier the space for 'natural' competitive violence which seeks to use 'everything' in that landscape for survival to the hilt but paradoxically it is also the region through which the 'everything' of historical flows of goods enters the system. Thus an intense attitude towards using the 'everything' in a landscape for survival then acts upon the global 'everything' to produce a hallucinatory landscape of desires out of control exploding in all directions. The free flow of goods through the intense lifestyles of the frontier then sets up the ideal scenario for a grand sacrifice of India in the making at its frontiers where the competitive logic at its extremes on the frontier can be played out against the 'everything' that constitutes history in its purest form to produce the grandest spectacle of the forces at play at the heart of Indian history. The psychic strictures that frontiers offer applied to the everything therefore provide the ideal frame of instigating filmic action towards working out the full range of possibilities of the functioning of the brahmanical sacerdotal psyche across the entirety of modern India.¹⁸

The feudal then is not restricted to the martial code alone but is seen as running across the entire order of the social and is indeed posited as a mode

of life on the frontier. Such a message would resonate well in the deep unconscious of an Indian society forever teetering perilously on the arid frontiers of economic and psychological sublimation, the product of an economic system beset with the burdens of underdevelopment trying to catch up with global industrial capitalism through a competitive open market order. It is in the understanding of positing the entirety of Indian history in the modern everything as belonging to a frontier life and therefore productive of the brahmanical sacerdotal reflex as a solution to the contradiction between competitive violence of the frontier and the everything that one begins to appreciate the accurate genealogies Kashyap draws between life in Rajasthan and the dark heart of sacerdotal violence defining the tenor of Right Wing Hindutva politics coursing through the veins of the Indian ecumene defined by the effects of economic liberalization that promises the 'everything' to India.

To conclude then it may be said that all cinema ultimately has a sacrificial structure where the unconscious structures of society are 'outed' through the dialectical structures of melodramatic action that churn the social to reveal pure lines of psychic confrontation. This may be further qualified by the fact that Indian cinema has as a rule privileged the sonic component of the filmic over the imagic to carry the burden of filmic signification. What the frontier then allows for is an extreme cinema where the occult by its definitional logic of the sonic then becomes the truth not only of Indic cinema but also of cinema as such, but especially any cinema that privileges the son over image in son+image. Such cinema it seems might have a special role to play in times of economic upsurge in the 'everything' where the sonic base of life, that which defines affective community, is under threat from the pure attractions of desire that pull you away from speech towards the action-image through a passage in the occult. It is the 'everything' at the frontier fair that produces feudal violence as need for new territorial space to accommodate the new 'everything', it is the 'everything' of modernization that produces the girl of the mansion to look askance and it is the 'everything' in a frontier town that produces a character such as Om who is producing endless virtual territories of the imagination to make sense of this new 'everything'. In such times speech does not make sense in the older sense since affective relationships are interrupted by the surge of desire that this 'everything' produces. The spoken becomes the medium of psychic crisis because the desire surge interrupts speech, as well as for the simple reason that confusions created by new desire cannot be discussed with the old order or in an order where everyone is distracted by the glitter of the 'everything'. And thus the occult rises in the frontier in the

effects of the ‘everything’ that mutes speech, creates distortions in speech trajectories and causes sensibilities to veer off into occult musings (in two senses therefore, frontiers are where the occult is strongest in the presence of the ‘everything’ in its purest forces and the ‘everything’ pushes the senses to their frontiers by the effects of disorientation and confusion it produces in the field of desire). Protagonists are bogged down between the desire to bolt to freedom and the desire to destroy the system that one feels guilty to leave, and the occult is precisely this spectrum between slapstick and murder – reactions to the ‘everything’ in historical circumscription, and both are very noisy affairs.

Afterword

I bring my discussion of the genres of film Rajasthan to a close with a short discussion of Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s *Ekalavya* that marshals generic elements of a John Masters novel, the rebirth-redemption narrative and the occult circulating in feudal decline to present us with a reformist narrative that seeks to provide an antidote to the prognosis for the Rajasthan history offered in a film such as *Gulaal*. Here, the *dalit*, played by Amitabh Bachchan, is posited not only as the noble soul of Rajputana but also the illegitimate father of a new, reformed generation of the Rajput princeling. A real-life Muslim princeling, Saif Ali Khan, plays the new face of the reformed Rajput who abhors feudal violence and its masculine



Gulaal

iconicity and attempts to disperse the darkness of the occult within Rajasthan with the light of new youth freed of archaic historical responsibilities (he marries the daughter of a subaltern as if to prove the centrality of subalternity to Rajasthan’s history). The princeling with the help of his subaltern father is able to down the evil designs of the old feudal elite, their dubious Right Wing offsprings (the film even depicts the killing of a old style Prince who might have schemed to assassinate Gandhi by orchestrating his filmic death that could recall the manner in which Gandhi was shot down) and the feckless and ruthlessly greedy elements of the feudal third generation as well. The air of the film is filled with the occult secrets of bastardry, reversals of caste hierarchies, the very thing that the brahmanical sacrifice is supposed to establish (bastardry

in the history of feudal violence in Rajasthan is a track worth following up substantially but is beyond the scope of this essay).¹⁹ . Feudal violence leads to excesses that lead to ‘unnatural’ social practices done covertly; desire flows in covert rather than overt channels where the open space of visibility is crackling with feudal surveillance. The young prince is supposed to renew this cultural space where motor drives have gone pathological and are sagging under the relentless onslaught of internecine war, which could also only be done by a brutal removal of the agents of darkness in the manner of the action in a Playstation game.

The film should have been called *Vyasa* since the kind of sexual union with a male imported from outside the cultural system that ensures the continuation of the ruling line is closer to the role the first-ever redactor of the *Mahabharata* played in making the survival of the Kuru clan possible rather than the tribal subaltern excluded by Kuru caste pride in the same text that the name of the film invokes. Bachchan’s elderly presence at the moment of the enunciation of the film while placing him at the ‘origins’ of the tale by way of paternity intensifies his identification with Vyasa who can be imagined as being elderly at the time of the central event of the text – the Bharata war. One can read this confusion in the naming of the film as a symptom of the cunning of class reason in corporate India today where one can posit radical revisions of history including invoking untouchable histories of Indian society at the centre of things (Ekalavya) but when visualizing such a possibility one falls back upon imagining this untouchable as within feudal-aristocratic imagery (Vyasa).

There is an element of truth here, since Rajput histories are indeed through and through untouchable from the go – erstwhile Central Asian tribes castigated as *mlechhas* (untouchable foreigners) in Pauranic texts settled down in India and got absorbed into Indic histories by marrying into the tribal populations of the subcontinent.²⁰ But such dynamics of history by which a dark tribal male could be absorbed into high aristocratic Rajput histories were gradually put an end to by British colonial practice of impeding the natural cycles of Rajput history, something that became even more impossible in post-independence India when class intersecting with caste would make hypogamous sexual union between an untouchable man and a *kshatriya* woman impossible and therefore terrifyingly occult if it were to happen. Textures of social visibility in our times would make such a union impossible to countenance, producing an occult effect on the field of cultural perception. Chopra’s film therefore conveniently pushes game-changing hypogamy into the hoary past and establishes hypergame between *kshatriya* male and untouchable female as the

way ahead for Rajasthan.

Thus it is Kashyap's untouchable anti-hero who is the true Ekalavya of the latest *avatar* of the occult in film Rajasthan, and there, as we saw, false-historical solutions to Rajput history that a film like *Ekalavya* offers are far from the ground realities. Surprisingly, *Duvidha* posits hypogamy through the ghostly coupling of a forest spirit with a 'civilized' woman as the heart of the occult in film Rajasthan as does *Maya Darpan* through the girl of the feudal manor falling in love with an ordinary middle class engineer. One can wonder too what kind of sexual fantasies would a hyper-consumerist like Om have – probably nothing short of the top Bollywood heroines would satisfy his ambitions. *Om Dar-b-Dar* explicitly articulates its action around caste wars three years before the Mandal Commission delivered its epochal verdict in favour of the 'backward' castes of India. And in *Manorama*, we find the banal middle class protagonist of the film being repeatedly sexually drawn to women connected to power. Reading between the lines caste is never far away in the world *Manorama* depicts.

It seems desire, when it gets stuck in the tyranny of tradition can only be redeemed by the transgressive act that demands a passage through the occult, a movement of the low upwards to become the high that is also the logic of growing out of cultural circumscription to encompass the full possibilities of organic life open to the cosmos without prohibitions. The generalized competitive ethos of life is made explicit and extreme every time the system articulates itself towards a new 'everything' produced by epochal shifts in the production-consumption regime. At such times hierarchies need to be re-articulated as the low seeks to rise to the high in competition in the 'everything'. The sacrifice is the edge of historical experience that the true hero of history has to mediate in this passage of the low to the high and survive in order to shift the registers of history to a new and more democratic register of things. Hierarchies will have to be overturned in order that the new may emerge from the stifling old. Otherwise the occult begins to take over in the blockage of the energies of human growth. Undoubtedly sex is that ultimately dangerous edge of things where historical and cosmic destinies converge, making it the last and the most important hierarchical obstacle that would need to be overturned to usher in a new era where human growth is possible in its fullest glories. Here, of course, we need to just have a look around us and see how impossible something like that is becoming in contemporary India.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Mani Kaul

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¹ This privileged focus on Rajasthan amongst all Indian cultural regions from cultural commentators of all kinds is as much reflected in cinema as in academic studies. No other region of India has received as much historical academic attention as Rajasthan and it was the first region in India that was honoured with a publication dedicated to the full range of historical imaginations of the cultural region. See, Karine Schomer, Joan Erdman, Deryck Lodrick and Lloyd Rudolph eds., *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity* (2 vols), New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2001.

² For a discussion about this mingling of the art-house and commercial streams of Indian cinema in recent times, see Agnitra Ghosh, 'NewStream: A Historical Perspective', *Catalogue of the 11th Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema*, New Delhi: Osian's Publishing House, 2009, pp.120-121.

³ One would miss the point of the full range of Ritwik Ghatak's occult take on cinema if one did not factor in the slapstick as an important constituent of the occult to make sense of the very substantial element of the slapstick in his cinema.

⁴ For a discussion of the ideologies underlying Indian art practice and art patronage of this period, see Kaushik Bhaumik, 'Passages from the Ethos of Wood', paper presented at the *Made in Delhi: Post-1947 Cultural Institutions* seminar held on 13 April 2010 at the Centre for Studies in Developing Societies, Delhi.

⁵ For an Indic scriptural-ideological framework through which the kind of occult patriarchal sacrificial violence that Kaul's *Duvidha* portrays can be read, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Tales of Sex and Violence: Folklore, Sacrifice and Danger in the Jaiminiya Brahmana*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

⁶ Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: An Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450-1850*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁷ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009.

⁸ For a discussion of the generalized sacrificial texture of contemporary Rajput life ridden with feudal violence, see Lindsey Harlan, *The Goddesses' Henchmen: Gender in Indian Hero Worship*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁹ Swaroop's film invokes the tacky yet visually riveting world of Indian street magic and banal sleight-of-hand tricks. For a wonderful discussion of this world of Indian street magic, see Lee Siegel, *Net of Magic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

¹⁰ Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, London: IB Tauris, 2001.

¹¹ It would be interesting to read Kashyap's denouement of the etiology of Right Wing Hindutva in a crisis of Hindu masculinity in the light of Klaus Theweleit's diagnosis of the rise of Nazism in a similar crisis of male sexuality. See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (2 vols), Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

¹² For an illuminating contemporary appropriation of LS Vygotsky's idea of 'inner speech' with respect to the darker frontiers of linguistic conditions for current cultural theory, see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Deleuze and Language*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

¹³ Comparison of this story with what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben analyzes as the 'state of exception', the *Homo Sacer* who defines sovereignty, might yield interesting historical tracks to analyze the production of sacrificial scapegoats of Indian history defined by brahmanical sacerdotal practice. For a discussion of *Homo Sacer*, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

¹⁴ According to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze's classification of the kinds of signification that make up cinema's expressive powers, son-signs and op-signs are moments where the cinematic image appears as pure sonic or optical situations, as pure temporality (the time image) expressed either in sound or sight. Films such as *Duvidha* or *Maya Darpan* veer between images that evoke pure sight (for example, when one does a slow close-up pan of a wall surface that saturates the eye) and those where the image is only comprehensible as an expression of a pure sonic material in the film (for example, where the voice or a sound fills up the filmic space and guides our perception of the image or when silence is signified through spatial and architectural elements in a scene). See, Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

¹⁵ It would be interesting to place the Hindi used by the directors of the cinema of the occult alongside that employed by the writer-protagonists of the radical *Nayi Kahani* and *Nayi Kavita* movements. One could argue that the force of the poetic word in the writings of the movements tended towards an aniconicity that was produced through the application of the brahmanical sacerdotal chant against a cultural landscape to yield the radical turbulence of the occult at the heart of Indian developmentalism. In Kashyap's *Gulaal*, the mad poet and his androgynous partner in performance become the repository of such literary sonic and performative avant-gardism in Hindi as if contemporary Hindi language radicalism can only respond to the circus of media popular culture in a performance of deadly irony that mixes the sacerdotal and the slapstick in equal measures.

¹⁶ For a relationship between the class of 'fallen' *brahmins* who would carry out popular sacrificial rituals and the overall brahmanical ideology of caste, see D F Pocock, 'The Vocation and the Avocations of the Guggali Brahmins of Dvarka', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, January 1981, 15: 321-336.

¹⁷ For the spread of Rajput influence into southern India, see the chapter 'Senji, 1714' in Velecheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600-1800*, New York: Other Press LLC, 2003. For a description of Rajput power spreading through the Malwa/Bundelkhand/Dakshin Kosala corridor all the way up to Orissa, see John D Smith ed., *The Visaladevarasa: A Restoration of the Text*, Cambridge,

UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976. The text attributed to Narpati Nalha is one of the earliest examples of the *raso* genre of the heroic-romantic poem epic in Old Rajasthani of which the Chand Bardai's *Prithviraj Raso* is the most celebrated example. It must also be remembered that over time Maratha and Sikh martial cultures of early Indian modernity have shown substantial tendencies towards a 'Rajputization' of their identities when it comes to presentation of the self to historical memory as if becoming Rajput-like was the acme of defining communal pride in feudal values.

¹⁸ It is significant to note that the two Indic epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, make a narratological point of explicitly locating the site of their composition in the Naimisha forest (now thought to be in the foothill regions of northwestern India) on the frontiers of the Indic brahmanical world. Going back to the frontier to compose cultural texts that sum up the dynamics of Indic histories in their purest lines of force that can only be discerned from a vantage point of the frontier seems to be an oft-utilized strategy in Indic cultural practices.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the complexities of bastardry in the Rajput social system, see Ramya Sreenivasan, 'Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines: Female Slaves in Rajput Polity, 1500-1850' in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (eds), *Slavery in South Asian History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, pp.136-161.

²⁰ For the close historical relationships of the Rajputs with 'tribal' groups such as the *bhils* now classified as Scheduled Tribes of the Union of India, see chapter entitled 'Warriors, Robbers and Priests' in Janet Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death: History and Poetry in Medieval Marwar (South Asia)*, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2008, pp.197-218.