

'DHANDHA YANI
KAAM' MATERIAL
AND NOTATIONS
OF WORK

MADHUSREE DUTTA

The term *dhandha*, popular on the streets of Bombay, was initially used by Gujarati-speaking traders to mean business or, more precisely, transactions towards profit-making. Over time it became a part of the city's street vocabulary with multiple connotations, such as occupation, trade, intention and plan. In his first conversation in the city with a fellow homeless person Raj, the archetypal aspiring migrant in *Shree 420* (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1955), says: 'Dhandha yani kaam na? Kaam hi ke talaash me to mein Allahabad se paidal chal kar yahaan aaya hoon' ('Dhandha means work, right? I've come here walking all the way from Allahabad only in search of work'). Within the next reel of the film he comes to understand that *dhandha* in Bombay means much more than a defined job: it means fixing dubious deals, impersonating another class, functioning in an extra-legal space, simulating unauthorized dreams, generating and protecting black money (unaccounted and in cash), and so on. In short, to do *dhandha* means to negotiate and find a way around everything that is stipulated by the ethics and policies of law and governance. Through these modes of decoding *dhandha*, within eight years of independence the metropolis developed into a hot-bed of unauthorized, underdefined, unaccounted for, extra-legal, speculative and shadowy livelihood practices – from a city that was reeling under the impact of war-induced excess and scarcity. Cinema, popularly perceived as a field of speculation and possibility within the specifics of romancing the metropolis, by then had evolved a complex pattern of labour inflow and work culture.

Dhandha in the cinema city of Bombay, where everybody 'struggles' to become someone else, is fragmented yet copiously dense. It is not a simple occupational aspiration but the desire for a metamorphosis and, in other contexts, for a change of identity: a kind of impersonation, a bodily transgression or, at the very least, a refracted image of the self. This desire for another identity is not necessarily aimed at any permanency. It can be a fleeting phase, a chanced encounter, a prolonged ride, but it must be sharply different from one's lived life – a moment that can be enshrined, if not prolonged. That is the form of the desire that has eventually led to such a phenomenal rise in the culture of Reality TV and talk shows. To be transformed under a different kind of visibility even for a few minutes, even under surveillance or even behind a veil – one's entire life could be staked for that. It is this that makes *dhandha* in Bombay, especially in its entertainment industry, a complex phenomenon. *Dhandha* no longer simply means working for a livelihood; it may not even primarily be concerned with earning money. It is a kind of abstraction, an expansiveness of the imagination, based on a high degree of contempt for the ordinariness of one's present state. It is also the rising, however ephemeral, of an individual out of the locked-within-itself community and class: an irresistible call to somewhere else, something else ... somebody else.

This search for an 'else' makes a whole lot of people in the city live out their entire lives as understudies: a night watchman as an understudy writer, a stud-farm assistant as an understudy actor, a tea vendor as an understudy cameraman; also, a home in a shanty-town becomes an understudy for a film studio, a temple an understudy for a film-set and so on. Everybody and everything wait with bated breath to get a chance to be on stage, to acquire another visibility, to be born again. So heady is the air of expectancy that most even forget what they are waiting for. The one thing that remains foremost in their minds and bodies is that the present

state is only temporary, like in a transit camp. And, in a strange reciprocal movement, this present state of being becomes an act of role-playing. As everybody believes they are actually something they are currently not allowed to be, they simply keep performing the roles of characters that others think they are: night watchman, stud-farm assistant, tea vendor, etc. The performances of these temporary selves play out in different configurations to maintain the flow of labour into the sector of filmmaking, which functions under norms not applicable to other manufacturing industries. The existence of a whole population of single individuals in different states of prolonged transit creates the edgy energy and cheap labour of the cinema city.

TWIN SISTERS AND MOVING BODIES

BAR DANCER

Salam-e-ishq meri jaan

Zara qubool kar le

Tum humse pyar karne ka

Zara si bhool kar lo ...

(A salute to romance, my beloved

Just accept it once

Make the slight mistake of loving me...)

– Lines from a song in the film *Muqaddar ka Sikandar* (dir. Prakash Mehra, 1978), sung by the urban courtesan for the angst-ridden client–hero; a very popular number in the dance bar circuit of Bombay.

The 'dance bar', a version of the night club, was a phenomenon that first appeared in Bombay in 1985 and multiplied rapidly for two decades, until the government banned it in 2005 on grounds of public morality.¹ The dancers in these bars who performed to the tunes of popular Hindi film songs were used to increase the sale of alcohol by developing a clientele of loyal patrons. Suketu Mehta, in his book *Maximum City* (2004), details the saga of dancer–patron loyalty around the careers of some of the divas in the dance bar circuit. But the standard practices and settings were not conducive to showcasing individual excellence. The dance bar, typically, was a rather cramped space of about 15 x 15 feet, where, surrounded by male clients, a dozen or more female dancers performed to recorded film music. The dancers were an eclectic lot: some were the offspring of out-of-work courtesans, some were poverty-driven migrants or belonged to families of the numerous retrenched workers in the city, others were understudies aspiring to roles with greater visibility in the charmed world of cinema, and then there were a few who took to the profession for its heady lifestyle and seeming autonomy.

Though the job assigned to them was to imitate dances from popular films, not all the imitations were of equal quality or equally infused with specificity – but together they invoked a memory of the cinema. Unlike in other sexuality-based performances, the bar dancers' task was not to foreground their own sensuality and skills but to insinuate a sensuality that the popular cinema relayed, which was imprinted in the minds and bodies of the spectators. So, it would be a Rupa-as-Madhuri and Saloni-as-Sridevi in one bar competing with a Celina-as-Rekha and Salma-as-Meena Kumari in a neighbouring bar. The memory of the movements of the actors on screen

¹ For details of the debate on the ban, see Flavia Agnes, 'The Bar Dancers and the Trafficked Migrant: Globalization and Subaltern Existence', in Gayle Letherby, Kate Williams, Philip Birch and Maureen Cain, eds, *Sex as Crime?*, Devon: William Publishing, 2008: 99–117.

– Madhuri, Sridevi, Rekha, Meena Kumari – who were being imitated was far more important than the merit of the dancers on the floor. So bar dancing was meant to be neither reproduction nor impersonation, but an act of evocation/insinuation. Often, when the floor of the bar was too crowded to afford a full-scale performance, the dancers would just sway their bodies to the music, their eyes locked in deep gaze with chosen clients. It was a cultivated act to the extent of being ritualistic, and the patron would freely bestow currency notes as offerings. The synthesis of shared memory between the dancer and the patron, and the act of invoking that memory, would create a third entity – an imagination of urbanity, a temporary state of anonymity and hedonism, a mutual act of daring in defiance of the structured social system. This short-lived, transient entry into the cinema city was what made dance bars such a popular phenomenon.

The norms of this rehearsed theatrical performance were evolved by keeping to the gestural codes used in cinema: a particular slant of the neck, a definite swing of the locks, a sensational movement of the bust. In the spirit of a ritual, the dance floor – with its chorus of female bodies swinging and gesturing independently and simultaneously, under a common set of codes, to the beats of an erotic song pounding out from the speakers, a song that is a part of collective memory – would often resemble a tableau on display in a public place. 'Figures take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined [like a sign] and memorable [like an image of a tale].'² Like the ethnic parades of Republic Day celebrations where citizen-subjects are consolidated within the displays of the state, or religious processions which display notations within a system of common faith, the collective performance of the bar dancers, with their elaborate costumes and body postures, evoked a sense of subjugated sexuality within the common vocabulary of Hindi cinema. Yet, despite the obvious parallel with the entertainment industry, these groups of insignificant girls with varied degrees of skills, decked out in ritualistic costumes, jewellery and stances, often commanded a strange agency.

Agency – but not in the sense in which Suketu Mehta's book sketches the wanton sexuality of the *femme fatale*. It was the sheer numbers of these women dancers on daily display, hidden under sexualized personas, that slowly evolved into a certain kind of autonomy. When the ban on dancing in bars was announced, the question the dancers often posed was: 'If the dances in films are acceptable, then what is the moral issue about us performing those numbers in bars?' The issue was hidden in that demography of sexualized and subjugated female bodies which, even while copying familiar dance numbers, demolished the abstract and distant sexuality of the dancers on screen, and instead, almost absentmindedly and in some cases even due to lack of dancing skills, created a form of solo-erotica. It is worth speculating whether the dance bar would have faced the same opposition if the set-up had both male and female dancers, like in the enactment of songs in most Hindi films. The absence of male dancing partners (with very few exceptions, and even there the male dancers would perform as solo dancers in female garb and not as male partners to female dancers) made the women dancers appear autonomous, irrespective of the original filmic movements they were assigned to evoke.

On average, a mid-sized dance bar would have about thirty girls on its payroll. The

² Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, Penguin Books, 1990.

reason behind recruiting such a large number of dancers could have been that most of them were not capable of holding an audience on their own for an entire night. The high number was also indicative, of course, of the resort to cheap wage labour. Unlike the divas written about in *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta, the large numbers of these ordinary girls gathered in hundreds of bars posed a threat by appearing to be like a community, assemblies of autonomous women. These assemblies created a temporary community which, even while being in the job of just imitating a more gentrified avatar of performance through the night and then disintegrating into the city at dawn, eventually unnerved the moral police and the state administration. Through the 1990s until the time of the ban, a usual sight at dawn in the city was truck-loads of bar dancers in stale make-up and crumpled costumes being transported back home from their work places. The routine, the route and the timing were similar to that of wage labourers travelling across the city. It would be relevant to note here that the first campaign led by the state against the dance bars was launched in 2004, soon after the dancers tried to unionize themselves. The ban, coming just a year later, rendered 75,000 women jobless.³

BODY-DOUBLE

Reshma is a female stunt artiste in Hindi cinema; her specialization is horse-riding. When her face is not hidden from view, she plays the role of some minuscule character in the film's narrative. But when her face is hidden, she performs as the body-double of the main character, as a bodily fragment of the protagonist – the most memorable act in her repertoire being that in *Sholay* (dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975), as a double for Hema Malini. She was one of the first female stunt artistes to be given membership of an otherwise exclusively male outfit, the Movie Stunt Artists Association.

A highpoint of Reshma's career was when Hema Malini allowed her to wear a wig that was meant for the star, following a production goof-up where the duplicate wig was not available for the shoot. That was the closest she came to bodily contact with the person she doubled: wearing the same hair as the star. Otherwise, as the duplicate, she needs to go to the film set only when the star herself does not appear. Thus the two fragmented bodies are kept separate and the images of both are joined together later on a machine at the post-production stage, in order to contrive the desired persona/object.

Reshma's performances involve a high degree of physicality (jumping off a cliff, handling a wild horse, riding across treacherous terrain, getting hit by a heavy vehicle, being trapped in a burning house, etc.), and that too mostly picturized as fully visible, bright outdoor shots. So there is no ambiguity about the centrality of presence of her body in the final film. Yet, the separation of face and body makes her job comparable to that of workers in sweatshops who labour in small, discrete units of the production chain, oblivious of the end-product. Knowledge of the end-product in films is inscribed only on the face that delivers the dialogues and performs the emotions on screen – the star in this case. The iconic sequence in *Sholay* where Basanti, played by Hema Malini, drives her broken horse-cart with breathtaking skill and daring while being chased by armed bandits, is best known by the lines delivered by the star – 'Chal Dhanno, ye Basanti ki izzat ka sawaal hai!' ('Come on Dhanno, this is a matter of Basanti's honour!') – and best remembered for the stunts and antics performed by the invisible Reshma.

³ For the demography and social composition of the bar dancers, see Background and Working Conditions of Women Working as Dancers in Dance Bars, Report by Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University and Forum against Oppression of Women, Mumbai, 2005.

The sweatshop worker in Reshma – the body-double – earns double what Reshma the performer, the junior artiste, earns. 'Hume muh chhupane ko 2000 milta hai aur muh dikhane ko 1000, aaj ke din mein yeh rate hai' ('We get 2000 rupees to hide our faces and 1000 rupees to show our faces, that's the current rate') – she testified in 2005.⁴ While the latter performs only minor roles, the former is an essential ingredient of the central character, inserted within the narrative in order to create some extraordinary filmic moments. Unlike the body-double in an erotic scene, a stunt artiste's body itself is never on display, only her bodily movements are. The invisibility of the person and the visibility of the performance convert the persona of a stunt artiste into a location on which certain virtues of the character, played by the actual actor, can be projected. A location is neutral and merely potential until a narrative with a prologue and an epilogue is projected on it. At the same time, a location is also a mini-narrative with overarching associations – what Marine Drive is for romance, Reshma is for altercation. In the absence of a face to show and words to mouth, Reshma, unlike an actor, is always herself: a repository of skills – a jump, a roll, a ride – to be chosen from the shelf and inserted into the film narrative. In many films she is the in-house stunt artiste and plays the body-double of multiple female characters of different ages, body structure and stature; in other instances, she plays the same character in different language versions. In the cinematic convention of contriving the image of a character through multiple devices, it is Reshma who, as an insertion, gets to play herself – a proponent of physical actions.

Predictably, Reshma waits for a chance to become a heroine, a state when her performing body and emoting face will come together in full-screen magnification. This wait is what governs her long stint in the film industry as a body-double. The close proximity to filmmaking paraphernalia and repeatedly watching her faceless body in the magnification of cinema keep this desire burning. At the cusp of silent cinema and the talkies in the 1930s such an ambition would have been realistic, as stunt movies – especially female stunt movies – were a successful commercial proposition at that time. Before the arrival of dialogue-based dramaturgy and song-and-dance-based spectacles, stunts and special effects were the mainstay of cinema. Movies made then, in the cacophonous years between the two world wars of moving peoples, accumulated goods and hybrid cultures, also fuelled the speculative notion of the modern woman who could traverse public space and take part in public action, wearing the strangest of costumes. In the earlier genre of mythological films, valour and stunts resided in male characters; but with rapid urbanization around the decade of the 1930s, it was female bodies in unfamiliar movement and action in vigilante films that caught the public imagination.⁵ The legendary box-office success of *Hunterwali* ('Lady with the Whip') in 1935 was followed by *Bambai nu Billi* ('Wildcat of Bombay') and *Burkhawali* ('Behind the Veil' / 'Veiled Enemy') in 1936, *Chabukwali* ('Lady with the Whip') in 1938, *Cyclewali* ('Lady with the Cycle') in 1939, *Bombaiwali* ('Miss Bombay') in 1941 and so on. In the post-independence years, as feudal melodrama and polemics around nation-building became dominant in film narratives, and film dialogues took the place of sayings and adages, female action in films got reduced to inserts and stunt artistes turned into body-doubles.

Yet, as Reshma in her modest *salwar-kurta* rides a horse through moving traffic on her way to Film City studio, in a city that is dotted with memorials to warrior-kings

4 Excerpt from the film *7 Islands and a Metro*, dir. Madhusree Dutta, Majlis production, 2006.

5 For more on this, see Vitali Valentina, 'Women in Action Films in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

on horseback, the materiality of the cinema city threatens to overtake all other social memory. The horses that are supplied for film shoots are reared in a stud farm situated on a dark and narrow patch of land with a ghetto of skyscrapers breathing down on it. As the horse and its rider, Reshma, along with numerous other bodies and materials for cinema, emerge every morning out of the niches and crevices scattered across the vast metropolis, and proceed towards the assembly-line of the shooting location, the city itself – momentarily and repeatedly – turns into a phantasm of cinema.

Reshma and the bar dancers live in separate time-zones in the cinema city, and their work gets framed and evaluated by their positions at two ends of the temporality of cinema. Reshma is an ingredient and the bar dancers an ancillary of Bombay cinema – an insertion and an insinuation – but both are confined and framed within a similar refracted visibility, under constant gaze yet always off the centre of focus. While essential and obedient invisibility secured the survival of Reshma, the visibility evoked due to the congregation of their bodies threatened the existence of the bar dancers. They too were initially designated to be only a location where the patrons' memory, longing, fantasy, etc., could be projected. The location itself should have remained empty. But the dislocated amorous song and heterosexual dance performed by a collective of solo female bodies challenged the neutrality of that site. Like the inmates of the convent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), the congregation of women got multiplied in the city's public imagination to dangerous proportions, leading to the need to destroy the phenomenon.

SEPARATED BROTHERS AND RECYCLED OBJECTS

BANNER ARTIST

I too can make them – horses, pigeons, female nudes and stuff like that. But I keep them at home, in my private space. This is my work place and here I practise banner art. There cannot be any artistic ambiguity here.

– S. Rehman, one of the last exponents of hand-painted cinema hoardings in Bombay⁶

Rehman has a studio in the backrooms of Alfred Talkies, a single-screen cinema on Falkland Road. Alfred Talkies is part of a cluster of movie halls in the area that are older than cinema itself. They have metamorphosed from a Muslim graveyard (*kabrastan*) to shanties that hosted variety entertainment programmes, to play houses (staging musicals and Parsi Theatre productions) for a floating population from the nearby wholesale bazaars, to silent cinema halls, to talkies since 1850 in the zone marked out as Play House (hybridized by locals as Pila House) by the British administration. But the process of evolution stopped in the late 1930s, when films converted to sound. The later development of surround sound, digital projection, etc., in cinema went unnoticed as far as these theatres were concerned. The locality that had ushered in urbanity in the form of public entertainment when most parts of the city were either under water or pastoral land, stopped short in the tracks of urban development in the mid-twentieth century. Why these buildings, situated in the heart of the city, have been allowed to survive the recent onslaught of real-estate speculation is another story, and beyond the scope of this essay.

Rehman makes publicity hoardings for these establishments. Even as recently as 2002, when the more durable and much cheaper flex prints had already flooded the

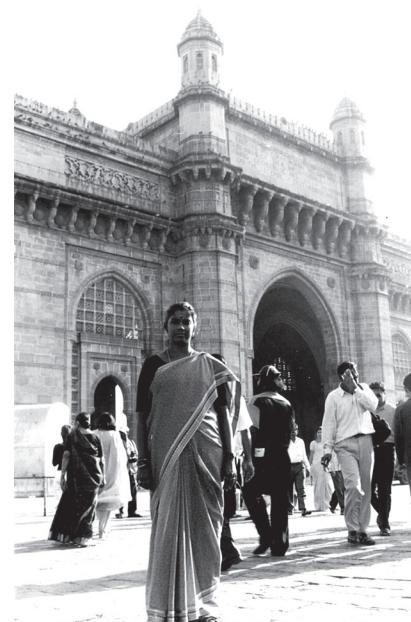
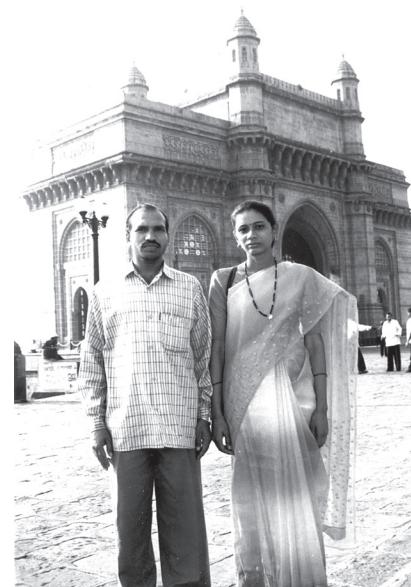
⁶ Excerpt from the film *Made in India*, dir. Madhusree Dutta, Majlis production, 2002.

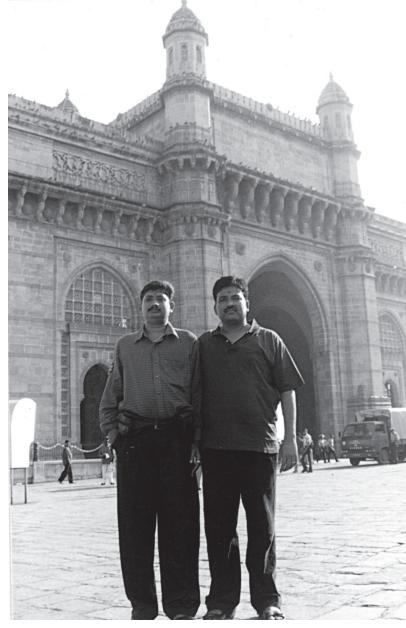
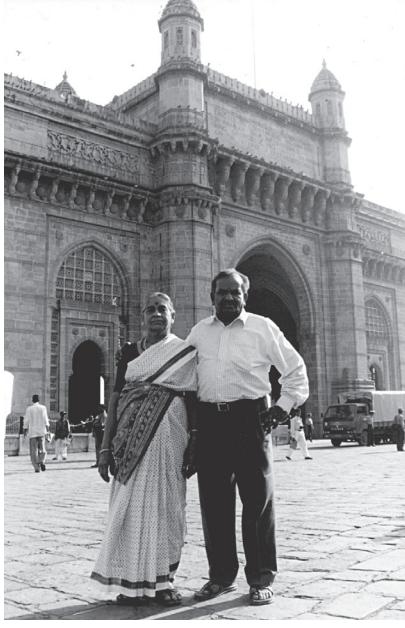
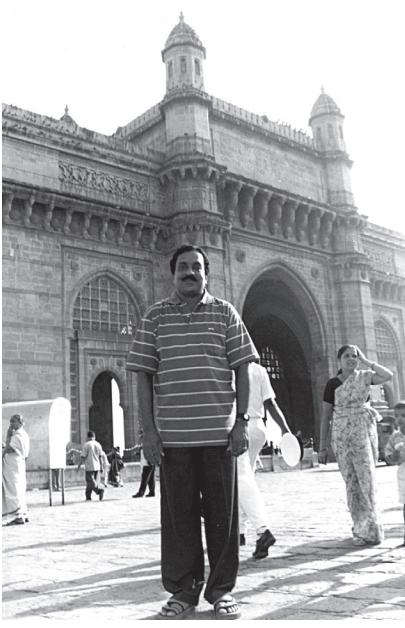
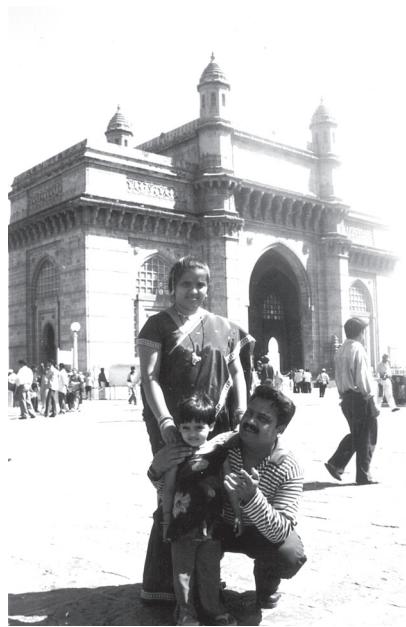
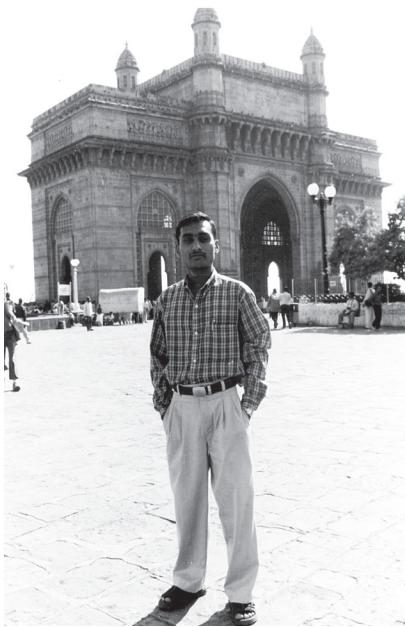
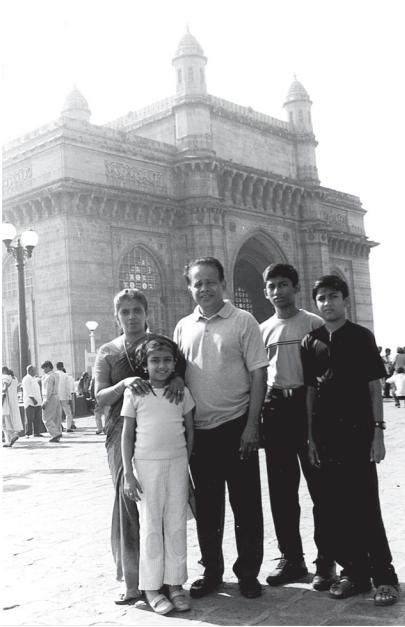
markets of the city, he was painting seven to eight large hoardings on canvas every week. He has continued to counter the popular Bollywood nostalgia and memorabilia market for films of yesteryears by producing hand-painted banners for half-a-dozen dilapidated cinema theatres that screen only old films. His work derives from the fact that digitally printable publicity banners for these old films are not available. But why do these theatres compulsorily show old films?

In terms of format, mainstream cinema has been quite conservative – for the longest period, 35-mm celluloid print was the standard exhibition format internationally. Only since the turn of this century have various aspects of production and exhibition converted to digital technology, drastically reducing materiality in the business of cinema, the latest addition to the list being centrally controlled digital projection in theatres. Under this system, digital prints (called DCP – Digital Cinema Package in this avatar) are stored centrally by a company (either the digital cinema encoding company itself or an intermediary) and then either sent via satellite signal to individual theatres or stored in theatre servers, according to their booking requirements. Hence there is no tactility attached to the exhibition process. Exhibition rights for a film are controlled by passwords assigned for each booking. Even when the film is stored in a theatre server it cannot be accessed or played without the concerned DCP holder assigning the exhibitor a Key Delivery Message or KDM, a device of strict control that determines the start and stop points for each projection.

Digitality, which has been celebrated in recent times for effectively dealing a death-blow to the private hoarding of moving images, in this instance, has brought in a new kind of control over the exhibition of films. The pivotal debate of the twentieth century on the social and cultural implications of original, copy and reproduction has been overturned as, in the absence of both original and copy, access to the set of digits that makes up the film is guarded by the market with mercenary zeal. In the absence of a 'body' for film, various projection room operations such as unaccounted-for late night screening, or special screening of uncensored adult film, or insertion of political footage within an innocuous film, or hurriedly made duplicate prints of rare classics (the way the National Film Archive of India was initially built), as well as issues of material decay of the print, loss of the negative, etc., become obsolete. This discussion, it must be noted, is restricted to the functioning of commercial movie theatres, and does not cover the scope of hacking philosophies and open source movements in the digital domain.

By 2012, we see that 98 per cent of the new films that are produced are not printed on celluloid but are made of digitized dumps. Some of the old film prints too have now been digitized, and those that are not available in digital format can no longer be screened in commercial theatres as most of these do not maintain a celluloid projector any more. Yet the theatres in the Falkland Road area in Bombay, along with a handful of others, continue to project film prints – which means that they can only show films whose prints are in circulation, films that are forgotten or discarded or available as cheap second-hand goods. The average ticket price in these theatres is Rs 12, which is fifteen to twenty times lower than the lowest denomination ticket in a multiplex. The audience comprises migrant wage workers from the numerous industrial workshops in the neighbourhood, loaders and other menial workers from the surviving bazaars, and low-end sex workers and their clients from the neighbouring red light





area. Tickets are hawked at the gates in a fashion similar to the selling of vegetables on the streets outside.

Amidst this chaos of technology and goods exists Rehman's studio, an ancillary industry of cinema, a service provider whose practice revolves around endangered materiality. As he paints in a backroom of Alfred Talkies, the sound track of an old analogue film running in the theatre fills his studio. The canvas hoardings announcing the film that will show from the next morning are put up on the theatre façades every Thursday night. A typical urban crowd of footloose males gather around the theatres at midnight to watch the spectacle of new hoardings going up. Large, colourful cinema hoardings being carried out of the studio across the dark street and then being mounted at a height is indeed quite a spectacle, a cinematic one. The hoardings of the previous week's films – paintings of an average size of 32 x 12 feet – are brought down and back to the studio, and the images on each canvas erased in a couple of minutes by interns, to make it ready for the next release. This weekly routine of painting, displaying, erasing and re-painting, an urban practice that mixes industrial and artisanal modes of production, can survive only as a rarity in the crevices of a century-old theatre.

In a less hybrid culture Pila House would have been termed a sub-culture, and Rehman's practice dubbed a note of dissent. But in this case Rehman is a part of that spatial history of the city where not only eclectic but opposing technologies and conventions, body-less film prints and hand-painted publicity banners – one traversing via satellites in the sky and the other moving through bylanes of the city – lie enmeshed to such an extent that it is impossible for its citizens to work out complete allegiances to one or the other.

Still, Rehman's delicately balanced location at Falkland Road creates a unique situation where he stops being an artisan / industrial producer and his skill gets rechristened as 'original', due to its virtue of being against the prevalent practice.

'See it for yourself, can any computer do this? Can the computer bring in these shades of colour on her cheeks? If I put green on her she would become a witch, if I put pink then she becomes a heroine. It is an artist's job and not of a machine that can make copies.'

– S. Rehman⁷

What was considered a semi-industrial production norm at the time of the analogue becomes an 'original' practice in the digital milieu. But the practice is not yet rare to the extent of being archival, and hence is merely marginalized. Rehman's statement foregrounds his desperation in the face of extinction, but it also betrays his resistance towards the new technology. Painting of hoardings is a family lineage for him. His father was a painter of backdrops for plays in Ripon Theatre, the earlier incarnation of Alfred Talkies. As the theatre metamorphosed from play house to cinema hall Rehman's family vocation took a slight turn, from backdrop-painting to banner-making – though the 'type-form', involving specific tools and skills, and the location of work remained broadly the same. But the current shift – from hand-painted banner to digital artwork – has altered the material conditions of his work to such an extent that it demands a fundamental change in tools and orientation. The journeys from plays to cinema and then silent films to talkies may appear as paradigm-shifting events in cultural history, but they breathed lightly on Rehman and his ilk, and did not affect the patriarchal studio structure of an artisanal mode of production where Rehman presides as

⁷ Ibid.

master craftsman. But the conversion from analogue to digital bears down heavily on Rehman and threatens to make his family-inherited skills redundant, beyond the scope of protection offered by the celebrated hybridity of urban living. Thus, perhaps, what Rehman is resisting is not technology but the apparent/imminent threat of the departure of patriarchy.

Interestingly, the durable material of flex used for digital printing cannot be recycled for further editions of image production, unlike the hand-painted canvas banners which can be reused. In the analogous practice of banner-painting, each time a new image is created the material base is recycled; whereas in digital printing, the image is reproduced each time on a new material base. The discarded piece of flex may be reused, but for purposes other than printing – such as to serve as protection for a roof in a shanty. Hence the painted canvas banner is both transient and possesses recyclability within the same practice. The printed flex banner is not transient in some sense, and can be recycled only as a different object of different utility, after being discarded from the realm of its first use. A discarded object is that which has exhausted the utility for which it was conceived and produced. It can yet come up in a second life, for another phase of utility – either in the same form, such as old clothes; or through reorientation, such as a flex banner on a roof; or through metamorphosis, such as film prints converted into sheets of plastic.

WASTE DEALER

Chiranjilal Sharma was a dealer in discarded film prints. An elaborate signboard hung outside the hut that was his workshop, next to the Western Express Highway, read:

Established before 1979 CTS Survey Number 344
 Shree H G Mutta Karkhana
 Chiranjilal Sharma
 Safety Waste Film Washing
 Dealing of Film Division, Government of India
 Opposite Sai Baba Mandir, Kulupwadi Lane
 Borivali (E), Mumbai 400066

The registration number indicates that it was a recognized enterprise with other people besides him engaged in it.

Chiranjilal started his enterprise around 1970 by collecting black & white film reels from waste material at labs and editing rooms, and discarded prints from distributors and the Films Division (the state-run documentary film unit). He extracted silver from the film prints.

Motion picture film is a strip of celluloid covered with a light-sensitive emulsion. In B/W this emulsion is silver halide crystals that when struck by light, that is exposed, change their properties. In the case of negative films, the exposed halides harden and become opaque. The silver ions then get converted into solid metallic silver in the chemical bath while processing. The density of silver on a film print determines the depth of grey or black in the image.⁸

Chiranjilal Sharma would burn heaps of discarded film reels into silver-rich ash and then painstakingly separate small pinches of silver from the ash. The 1970s and 80s, when colour prints swept the market and old black & white prints were discarded as scrap, were lucrative years for him. Besides, in the initial days of colour, many of

⁸ Bruce Mamer, *Film Production Technique: Creating the Accomplished Image*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2002.

the low-budget film producers would make cheaper black & white prints for editing and other post-production purposes, which they would then discard as soon as the final prints in colour were made. In Chiranjilal's rendition of the history of cinema, its days of glory ended with the fading out of black & white prints with their silver emulsion.

Till such time as these prints were still material that belonged to a recent past, they were simply termed obsolete by industrial standards and treated as junk to be made available to the recycling sector. Only abundant availability of objects past their utility can create a significant volume of discards. Easy availability disqualifies objects to be rendered into memories or as memorials of a lived past; they need to become scarce in order to be categorized as rare. Chiranjilal's enterprise survived at this cusp of post-utility, availability and extinction. With the passing of time, black & white prints did come to be declared as rare and therefore precious. In the dizzying pace of the evolution of cinema, this change took just a little more than ten years to occur: the Bombay film industry went fully colour in 1972; by the mid-1980s black & white prints were extinct – and deserving of the merit of institutional memory and memorialization. In the intervening years, until they became cultural artefacts to be archived, out-of-circulation black & white prints were only worth being burnt down to pinchfuls of silver in modest workshops like that of Chiranjilal Sharma.

In 1979, when the Working Group on National Film Policy submitted its report to the government, one of the recommendations it made was to set up a special cell in every lab to recover silver from film waste and the chemical bath. The colour negatives and prints have a silver layer that gets removed during processing and remains in the chemical bath. The concentration of the silver in the fixing bath could be 2 to 6 grams per litre. This recommendation of the Working Group, however, like the others,⁹ only gathered dust and eventually disappeared from memory. The Indian state could hardly be bothered with setting up small-scale recycling units in film-processing labs – this despite the fact that in the year 1979–80 India had produced 742 films,¹⁰ which means that roughly 222,600,000 feet of release prints and 66,780,000 feet of rushes¹¹ were developed in various labs. The state's imagination of small-scale entrepreneurship was restricted to engineering workshops in urban areas, and craft-based outfits and food-based initiatives such as animal husbandry in the rural areas. The industrial waste of film-processing units was a far cry from the official scheme of things. Chiranjilal and other such lowly entrepreneurs could not enter these labs – otherwise they would not have let such waste happen. Instead, then, they imagined and evolved another kind of enterprise to work on the material yielded by cinema.

The first plastics were actually developed during the last half of the nineteenth century. Paper is composed to a significant extent of the natural polymer cellulose and closely related substances. Treatment of paper with nitric acid produced the first (semi-)artificial polymer, nitrocellulose. Dissolution of nitrocellulose in alcohol/ether gave a viscous solution which forms a hard film upon solvent evaporation. The polymer thus formed is quite inflammable. An improved product based on nitrocellulose, termed celluloid, was moulded into useful objects.¹²

One hundred years after the invention, patenting and marketing of plastics and celluloid in Europe and America, Chiranjilal reinvented the process in Borivali in Bombay. Film reels were collected and bangles made out of molten celluloid. The afterlife of

⁹ Other recommendations of the Working Group on National Film Policy were: to set up an independent Department of Cinema under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; to liberalize policies regarding import of equipment and raw stock; and to provide incentives for the manufacture of raw stock and equipment.

¹⁰ From Ashok Mittal, 'Introduction', in *Cinema Industry in India: Pricing and Taxation*, New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1996.

¹¹ Calculated conservatively at a shooting ratio of 1:6 for an average of twenty prints for each film of roughly two-and-a-half hours duration, and not calculating dupes, wastage, etc.

¹² Arthur Greenberg, *Chemistry Decade by Decade*, New York, NY: Facts on File, 2007.

colour film prints appeared in the form of plastic bangles in routine romance scenes of successive films. In the year 1962, in the *Celluloid Bangle Works vs. The State of Bombay* case, the appellant argued that it should be 'exempted from the sales tax meant to be levied on plastic goods as the bangles are made of waste cinematograph films which in turn are made of celluloid'. The learned tribunal, quoting from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, observed that celluloid is a kind of plastic, and 'there is no evidence to show that a person going to the market for purchasing plastic bangles would not purchase bangles manufactured or prepared with celluloid of waste cinematograph films.'¹³ The case was decided in favour of the state and thus cinematograph films came to be officially recognized as recyclable plastics.

The German filmmaker Philip Scheffner structured his acclaimed documentary, *Halfmoon File* (2007), on sound discs that had recorded the voices of prisoners of war in German camps in 1916. He chanced upon this obscure sound archive at Humboldt University, Berlin, while researching for another film on Indo-German cultural exchange. The archive had hosted and preserved, for almost a century, ethnographic phonetic data of North African and Indian prisoners collected by German scientists and linguists. In Scheffner's film, Mall Singh, a Sikh soldier fighting in the Allied army during World War I and the protagonist in absentia, makes a journey similar to that of *Bomma* in Amitav Ghosh's seminal novel, *In an Antique Land* (1992) – from an archived notation to a speculative piecing together of a biography. Ghosh had found his protagonist, an Indian slave in twelfth-century Egypt, in the margins of letters written by the slave owner that were a part of accumulated old papers in the basement of a synagogue. The found sound disc in *Halfmoon File* and the found handwritten note of *In an Antique Land* are proof of authentication, in a way, for the political speculation that takes place in the rest of the narrative. The way in which Chiranjilal dealt with the materiality of celluloid challenges this radical practice of found authentication for speculative political anthropology. Ironically, the destruction of evidence that occurred in the workshop of the film scrap dealer causes the reproduction-happy twentieth century to lose its own footprints. Abundance of availability converted vital material evidence into mere objects of utility. Unlike the sound discs and handwritten letters, orphaned film prints possess too many qualities of material usefulness to be left alone so as to be chanced upon by researchers in later years. A significant part of the narratives of the twentieth century, so confidently encrypted in films by overruling other older forms of social memory, has evaporated as the material of the films metamorphosed, beyond any trace of the original, into silver powder, plastic bangles and other such products.¹⁴

By the late 1990s, the acetate base positive stock for the printing of film was replaced by polyester base stock the world over. This time around, India was quick to adapt to the change. The former acetate base stock had never worked well in the humid climate of this country as the material aspects of films meant for commercial circulation had been developed to be conducive to countries of drier and colder climates. For the first time, the unbreakable, non-degenerative polyester stock of films seemed durable and suited to tropical climates. In tandem with this, the post-production technology got converted to digital. This meant that even as there was less celluloid in the lab, there was none in the editing room. The crisis of availability of discarded film prints, which were fast disappearing, was compounded by the fact that

¹³ <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/1804939>

¹⁴ The legendary film archivist P.K. Nair who painstakingly built the National Film Archive of India, Pune, narrates an encounter in the late 1960s with Ardeshir Irani, the maker of the first Indian talkie – *Alam Ara*. 'I went in and saw him sitting in front of a big table and standing nearby was his son, Shapurji. So, I told him about the Archive and what we were trying to do and our keen interest in preserving *Alam Ara*. He said – "A couple of reels must be lying somewhere here, though not the whole film." He asked his son to hand over to us whatever material they had in the studio. So, when we were walking down the steps, Shapurji was also with me. He confessed, "I myself have disposed of three reels which my father mentions, after extracting silver from it." It was a kind of a confession from the son of the great pioneer.' From the film *Celluloid Man*, dir. Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, 2012.

the polyester base stock did not lend itself to being converted/recycled. But it could still be cut into strips. Chiranjilal Sharma, enterprising as always, adapted to the change in material conditions and renovated his workshop accordingly. He boiled the film reels in large drums to make the images soft, then scratched the images off the celluloid and dried them under the sun before cutting them into thin strips. The strips were then used as stiffeners for the backs of collars of shirts. Chiranjilal did this until he died in July 2010. Whether he could have induced some afterlife even into the new, anti-material digital practices will remain a matter of speculation.

Both Rehman and Chiranjilal work with their hands – one produces images, the other transforms objects. While Chiranjilal attends to every change in the material conditions of his *dhandha*, Rehman's survival strategy is to resist such change. These two opposite tendencies – of easy adaptation and adamant resistance – are actually part of the biography of the city of Bombay, where both flair and paranoia are born out of the desperate necessity for creative energy. With constant shifts in the socio-economic order, production processes and living environment, creativity becomes a touchstone to cling on to or to float with.

NOTATIONS

'Baby ka mundi kaatke neeche rakh do' ('Cut the baby's head and put it down'): an oft-repeated instruction on the shooting floor! What this actually means is, take the 'baby' spotlight off the stand and place it on the floor, in order to get a streak of low-angle light. Amidst the hustle and bustle of shooting a film, and to facilitate quick communication with the semi-literate, multilingual light boys, such notations evolve. Most production processes that need a degree of professional knowledge and education manage their primary work force through such notations or field-speak. Filmmaking, in that sense, functions along strategies of assembly-line production. But since the levels of anticipation and chanced possibilities are much higher in cinema, this form of cryptic knowledge plays a different role in the film industry.

A migrant in Bombay who works as a night watchman and whose aspiration is to write for films, says:

It took me fifteen years just to figure out what a screenplay is, what a synopsis means and how to write dialogue – but I have no regrets. ... You're only following a shadow; this city is a shadow, a dream. You're not to materialize a dream but breathe into it and keep it alive.¹⁵ This eternal query of 'what and how' is answered in tantalizingly small doses: like glimpses of gated zones through a crack in the door, like serving a miserly guru who refuses to part with the real gems of wisdom. A leather jacket, a nuanced phrase, a fraction of functional know-how, a found address, a social gesture, a chanced encounter, a long stint of apprenticeship – all these are notations in this *dhandha*, standing guard to the path of real access. The narrower the crack in the door is, the more outsider-insiders get glued to it, in the hope of finding the key to the 'else'. Many of these people reside on the fringes of the cinema city by habit, by desire, in prayer and in anticipation – with anticipation itself becoming a permanent way of living. Quite similar to the phenomenon of 'living in anticipation of the return of God', this mass of cinema-citizens lives in quiet unanimity without any palpable agitation, almost still. As various social theories, political movements

¹⁵ Excerpt from the film Dhananjay Kulkarni 'Chandragupt', dir. Rrivu Laha, Cinema City documentary series, Majlis production, 2009.

and state policies sweat it out to address the flow of human traffic from the hinterland to the metropolis – in contexts of industrialization, over-urbanization, development disasters, natural calamities, resource disparities, the sex industry, opportunities, aspirations and so on – a cult of worship of urbanity, of uncertainty and anticipation, grows steadily. The location of Bombay, perceived as a dream machine, only facilitates in loosely hinging the cult. The temerity of desiring is what the city validates, not the desire itself. Thus many of them live out their entire adult lives in this delirious state of anticipation that they believe urbanity is all about. A whole mass of people stands in trembling anticipation with Raj in *Shree* 420 as the notational Maya (illusion) blows clouds of smoke from behind her long cigarette holder and croons 'Mudh mudh ke na dekh' – 'Don't you look back!'

Living in anticipation is a condition that only a displaced person can enter. Most of those people, commonly addressed as Bollywood aspirants, escape from the landlocked existence of a kin- and community-based life to a city of anonymity only to be allowed a life of anticipation. The departure they make in order to enter the urban life of anticipation, a permanent residence in a transit camp, also makes them simultaneously solitary and normative – solitary because of their flamboyant rebellion against boundaries of class and community; normative in terms of the process of acquiring notational characteristics of appearance and behaviour that give them legitimacy in the cinema city. It is easy to spot aspiring actors in Bombay – 'strugglers', as they call themselves. More often than not, they can be seen wearing leather jackets in temperatures of 30°C and more, an essential marker to appear 'cool', a signifier of being 'a dude'. Many of these men, coming from small towns or semi-urban areas of northern India, desperately resort to some external trapping that they believe will fulfil the requirements of appearing urbane – leather jacket and high boots are high on the list.

There is a definite trajectory to where these 'wannabe' actors seek to reside in the city and how, in cases of moderate success, they move up the social ladder. The degree of success can be gauged by their residential location. To begin with it could be digs in the working-class Mahananda Dairy Complex in Goregaon East or the PMGP Complex in Andheri East, with the desire to move to the middle-class Saibaba Complex or Thakur Complex, still in the poorer east side of the city. Then the ambition reaches up to the Lokhandwala Complex or Yari Road in Andheri West – which are the final stops for middle-level character actors in films or steady assignees in daily soaps on television. Upon reaching there the migrant aspirants can finally sever their forced contact with the sinking working class of the city. Lokhandwala and Yari Road are not working-class locations that have transformed into a refuge for middle-class migrants in financial need, like the other localities are. Built in the early 1980s, these are media colonies in their own right – and hence this is where outlets of 'clothes for hire' open shop.

The leather industry in Dharavi suffered a serious blow when the international standards of leather-wear went up. Earlier, Dharavi workshops supplied consumer leather goods for international brands. They used a chemical called chromium to tan the leather. Since the late 1990s an influential campaign at the global level has been launched against the use of chromium in footwear and other personal commodities, on the grounds that it is a health hazard. The semi-formal and semi-legal industry

in Dharavi that depended almost entirely on the export market for consumer goods became impoverished overnight.¹⁶ This, coupled with the Hindutva-inspired movement against animal slaughter, environmentalists' tirade against tanneries and real-estate speculation aimed at the sprawling slum settlement, threatened the very existence of the local leather industry. Much of it disintegrated, but some small leather production and garment manufacturing units in Dharavi adamantly stayed put. It is a tiny market now compared to earlier, but still large enough to supply cheap leather accessories for film shoots and struggler actors. In 1905, when the market for export of cloth to China collapsed, Bombay's textile mills reoriented their products for the local market by adapting to the rising nationalist fervour. A century later, the much smaller leather industry in the city has reoriented itself to a niche market for its goods by creating a notion of style for newly arrived aspirants.

Dharavi at the production end and Lokhandwala at the consumption end are dotted with shops that sell and hire out leather accessories designed in the cowboy model of Hollywood westerns. The tiny unit of Ali Beg, an apology of a factory in Dharavi, is covered in large posters of cowboy films. Los Angeles Dresswala in Lokhandwala rents out jackets and boots not only to film units, but also to individuals who need to go to an audition or a social do.

As the cinema city conjures up fantasies of 'day for night', 'cutout for cityscape', 'extras for public' and so on, aspirants for unorganized labour continue to flock towards it. Around these masses come up more and more enterprises – situated in homes, garages, shanties, on footpaths and carts, at coffee shops, cinema foyers and train compartments – that vend and proliferate signifiers and notations: acting class, dance class, photo studio, grooming centre, physical trainer, styling parlour, botox centre, casting agent, astrologer, numerologist ... in turn creating more and more forms of dhandha yani kaam.

¹⁶ Video interview with tannery workers in Dharavi, available at <http://pad.ma/OE/player>