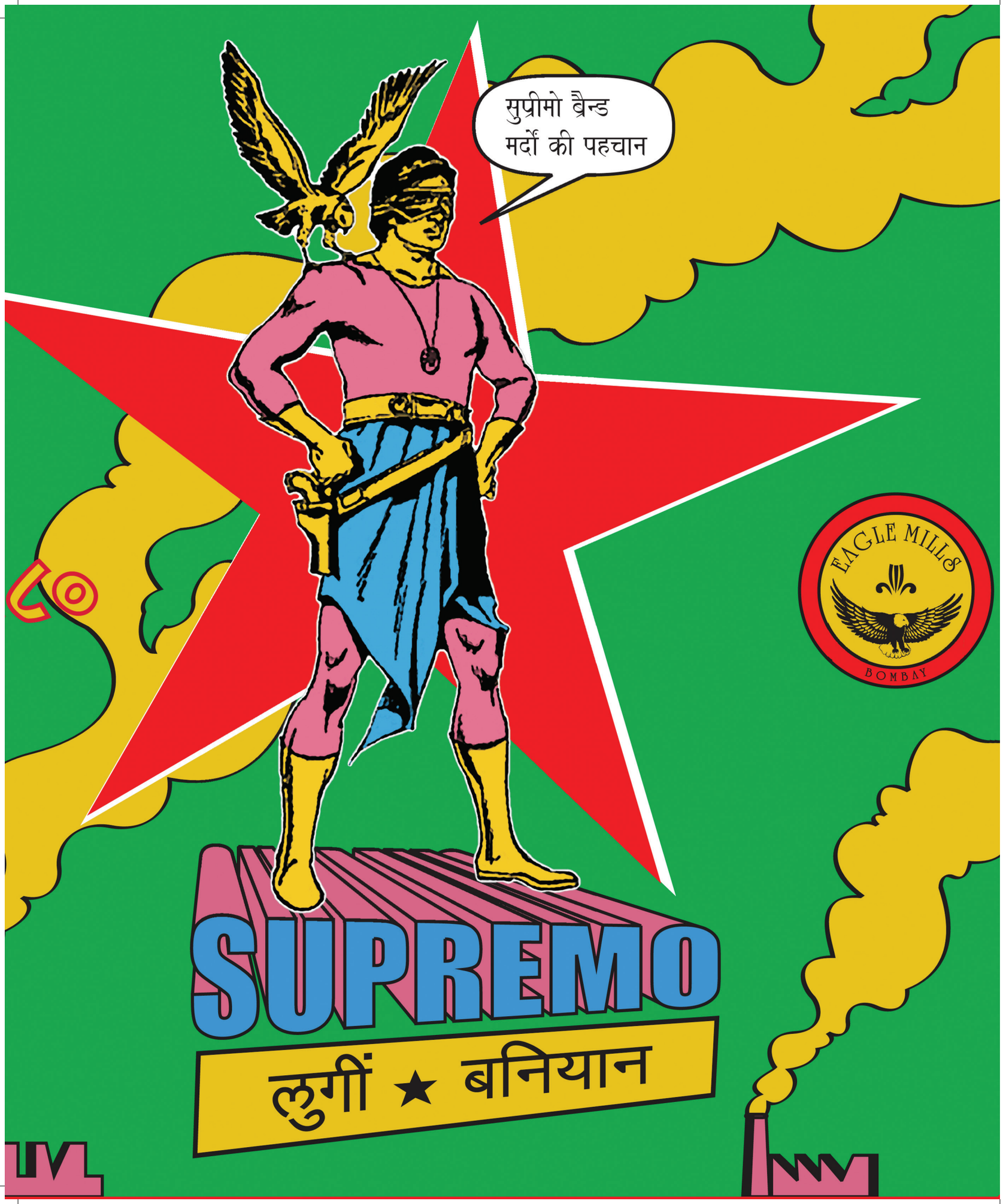
सुप्रीमो ब्रैन्ड
मर्दों की पहचान
EAGLE MILLS
BOMBAY
SUPREMO
लुगीं ★ बनियान

WEAVING FILMS, SHOOTING COTTON THE CINEMA-MAKING FABRIC OF MALEGAON

SUBHASHIM GOSWAMI

'YOU ARE UNDER THE JAIL NOW'

The opening scene of a film. A random group of people gathered around a building without any reason, standing straight as if transfixed by their own non-expressive gaze. Heavy rhythmic music of 'suspense' playing in the background. Two policemen on bicycles enter frame. One of the bystanders walks up to them and speaks his memorized lines absolutely straight-faced: the dreaded dacoit Veerappan has captured his father, mistaking him to be Raj Kumar – the erstwhile 1960s' Bollywood hero. Veerappan with his hostage is on the third floor of the building, and is apparently chewing tobacco of the local brand 'Hira' and spitting at everyone below. The senior of the two policemen, fooling around with his baton, hits his own hand, jumps up and asks the man if his father is carrying a phone. The man says, 'Yes, there is a phone but since he has not paid the bill, it's not working.' The policeman then instructs his junior to fetch the microphone, which the junior wheels in on a bicycle. Taking the microphone, the policeman starts hollering: 'Hello, hello, hello! Can you hear me, can you hear me?' The microphone characteristically echoes in shrill mechanical tone before one can hear the policeman's voice. He continues hollering, imitating a roadside vendor selling 'cool oil' for hair and moustache and asking those who are interested to come down.

The scene continues. 'Veerappan dacoit' mutters something illegibly in a hoarse falsetto while his crony holds the hostage's neck, leaning at a comical angle against the wall – fixed and motionless. Veerappan has a string of sachets of 'Hira' tobacco slung across his shoulder. The policeman mumbles instructions to his junior and is about to walk up, proclaiming 'Operation Veerappan begins!', when a bystander stops him and tells him to be careful as the dacoit may spit (tobacco) on him. Unruffled, the policeman takes out two sachets of another tobacco brand called 'Baba', and says he will spit 'Baba' on Veerappan before Veerappan manages to spit 'Hira' on him. The policeman then animatedly climbs up the stairs of the building and swoops on Veerappan from behind. He crouches on his haunches and catches hold of Veerappan's foot, screaming: 'Caught you, caught you! Veerappan is caught, Veerappan is caught!' Veerappan stares straight into the camera, shakes his head, or rather bobs it left to right, in an apparent attempt to escape the policeman's grip, yelling repeatedly: 'No, no, no, this is against the law, this is against the law … this is not as per rules.' He turns around, points his rather large-looking rifle at the policeman and says: 'There are no bullets here.' The policeman aims his pistol directly at the camera as if pointing at the audience, and says: 'But there are bullets in this one. Veerappan, you are under the jail now' – an obvious pun on 'you are under arrest'.

MALEGAON CINEMA: CONTENT VS. PRODUCTION

The scene described above is one amongst many of what has become well known as 'Malegaon cinema'. Malegaon[1] is a powerloom town eight hours away from the glamour and big city lights of Mumbai. Despite the proximity, however, Malegaon cinema is neither representative of nor similar to the cinema Mumbai produces, though it seeks its inspiration from big-budget Bollywood films; it draws on Mumbai's blockbusters to create its own localized version with a 'twist', as is often argued. Of late, a lot has been written about Malegaon cinema in newspaper articles, accounts circulated on

1 Malegaon in Maharashtra is set in the heart of the cotton production region of the country. Occupying a relatively small area of only 12.9 sqare kilometres, Malegaon produces almost 1 crore metres of cloth every day through its more than 1 lakh powerlooms spread over 6,000 units. The entire town is divided along lines of Hindu and Muslim settlements separated by the river Mausam, which cuts through its centre. Most powerloom units in Malegaon are situated on narrow lanes which are extremely noisy because of the constant loud rhythm of the looms at work. Most of the filmmakers of Malegaon are workers in these powerloom units.

the internet, and other kinds of features and snippets. People from outside Malegaon suddenly seem to be interested in this phenomenon of a low-budget, improvised cinema made by a 'bunch of powerloom workers' in a back-of-beyond, communally sensitive industrial town. All these accounts usually talk about how most Malegaon films are a take on well-known Bollywood films with 'localized' references and contexts, or how these movies are made by 'improvising' locally available or possible technology – for instance, by replacing a crane shot with a bullock cart, an oft-cited example of Malegaon's ingenuity and uniqueness.

However, even though Malegaon cinema has caught the fancy of a larger public imagination with everyone seeming to 'appreciate' it, what this appreciation stands for or amounts to, is a fraught issue. At the risk of inviting the wrath of all those who vouch for the Malegaon films, I am compelled to state that I do not particularly enjoy watching them. To me, they seem tacky, poorly put together and clichéd beyond words; the actors are always up to bizarre antics and the films drag on with their in-your-face, loud and brazen humour. Yet, although I do not appreciate what I see, I am still fascinated by Malegaon cinema. What do I mean when I say something as seemingly contradictory this? What compels me to engage with these films even when I don't like what I see? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that my engagement is with Malegaon *and* its cinema, not Malegaon cinema itself. Pushing the register beyond the content of this cinema and broadening the understanding of Malegaon films beyond what they portray without engaging in laudatory representation is the key thrust of this essay. Here, I would like to talk about Malegaon cinema in terms of the context within which it is embedded: a firmly working-class location that remains constant with or without its cinema.

From the perspective of this dilemma of not being able to appreciate the content of Malegaon cinema vis-à-vis my inability to undermine its significance, I would like to argue that localized cinema with mass appeal ought to be seen and understood through the lens of not its content *per se* or what gets produced, but through the conditions of its production. Taking this view of 'Malegaon', the quintessential working-class town, as my point of departure, I would like to argue that Malegaon's cinema has flourished and managed to thwart the onslaught of large commercial enterprises – much like its textile industry – because of its unique working-class cinema-making fabric. Starting from this point of engagement, this essay, through a brief ethnography of a cinema space in an industrial setting and the accounts of two individuals who belong to this space, attempts to understand Malegaon cinema in terms of its construction, its coming into being and the conditions that allow it to become what it is. This process of the making of Malegaon cinema is what interests me – the 'unaesthetic object' from my vantage point.

THE WORKER/FILMMAKER OVERLAP

In calling Malegaon cinema the 'unaesthetic object', I do not mean to comment on its content or to brand it without any appeal to subjectivity. Simply on the basis of my personal reading, I cannot reduce the entire genre of Malegaon films to some kind of 'auto-hypnosis of the masses without any aesthetic content which neither embodies nor reveals any element of universality'.[2] These films, like any other, certainly carry

2 Achille Mbembe, 'Variations on the Beautiful in Congolese Worlds of Sound', in Sarah Nuttall, ed., *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006: 62.

a subjective affect which not only leads to their production, but also a larger public endorsement that ensures their universality. However, my point of engagement with Malegaon cinema, looking at it through an outsider's lens, would be to argue how the entire process of making these films is a validation of a Malegaon imaginary that stems from the town, and its non-heterogenous and routinized working-class structure, viz. that of powerloom workers. While this working-class structure could be read as the base which leads to the production of such cinema, the cinema that is produced is not necessarily an escape from this reality. It would be erroneous to look at the 'aesthetic signification' of Malegaon cinema as a break from the everyday patterns of routinized work which allow a certain 'disaffection with reality'. Instead, it would be constructive to think of the cinema as reflective of the contradictory and paradoxical lives occupied by the people who make it – the simultaneous lives of being workers and filmmakers.[3]

My attempt here is to present this basic argument of how one can think of Malegaon cinema as working-class cinema in terms of the complicated overlap between the worker and the filmmaker, and is not concerned so much with how the content or aesthetics of the cinema makes it 'working class'. The movement in and out of these two roles of being worker and filmmaker by the same set of people is what one needs to appreciate and understand, rather than take a patronizing stand towards their efforts at making a 'unique' cinema. This kind of stand, tantamount to 'exclusion by homage' – to borrow an ironically beautiful phrase from the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere[4] – would tend towards romanticizing a certain kind of working-class identity by judging what we see from our own vantage point, and without necessarily being critical of what we see.

In talking about the appreciation that Malegaon cinema has garnered for itself, what is significant to recognize are the regulated structures of work the Malegaon worker/filmmaker embodies all the time, by traversing and transgressing the twin registers of work and filmmaking quite effortlessly. It needs to be acknowledged and accepted, first, that everything about life in Malegaon is determined by the structure of work the powerloom ordains. Thus, whether we view Malegaon workers/filmmakers as one or the other, the fact remains that they are all workers occupying structured, regulated temporalities and bodies particular to the dehumanizing conditions of powerloom work. Filmmaking, by the logic of this constant, becomes an extension of this life itself, ordained and structured by the work in a particular way.

NOISE ... GRIME ... FILMS ... NOISE ... COTTON

Powerloom work is extremely regulated and monotonous, and is subject to its own routine and mechanical mode of functioning. The intense and repetitive work pattern leads to a certain structuring of time and space that acts as a form of disciplining power, introducing a particular order of temporality as well as disciplining of the body. Everything within the powerloom work schedule is defined and marked. Days, events and activities besides work are directly linked to the structure that work ordains to life. Given such a backdrop, how do we understand the simultaneous filmmaking impulse among Malegaon's workers? One way could be that such ordered and regulated temporalities and bodies basically render the lives of powerloom workers in Malegaon devoid of any narrative surprise. If this be the case, it could be argued

3 I have borrowed the terms 'aesthetic signification' and 'disaffection with reality' from Achille Mbembe's extremely revealing account of Congolese music from Africa, where he tries to argue how the indigenous local music of Congo cannot immediately be read along the register of it being bad/ugly or 'low art', but needs to be read along what he terms the 'affect of sensations' that such music provokes amongst the Congolese people – and how the music is reflective of and emerges from the contradictory and difficult lives of everyday violence and disaffection that represents the lives of most people in Congo. Cf. Mbembe, 'Variations on the Beautiful in Congolese Worlds of Sound'.

4 Jacques Ranciere, The Philosopher and His Poor, Durham: Duke University Press, 1983.

that the demise of what could be termed the 'narrative element' in the course of their regulated work structures finds expression, and new life, in a narrative world they create for themselves through the cinema they make and embody. This, to my mind, is what defines and makes Malegaon cinema. Analysing whether or not its content is aesthetic may not be as important as realizing that the cinema of Malegaon, as working-class cinema, is the only narrative element in the life of the person who makes that cinema – a person who is simultaneously a worker and a filmmaker. He is a worker as one who misses narrative surprise within his monotonous, regulated existence; and he is a filmmaker as one who draws on this very state to create narratives of his own, which find resonance and appeal in the same patterns of life that the filmmaker, viewer and worker find themselves ensconced in at the same time. I would like to build on this argument of viewing Malegaon cinema as the 'creation of a narrative where there is none', in presenting an ethnography that attempts to take the reader through the structure and routine that powerloom work imposes on the Malegaon worker's time, space and body – a time and space that are nonetheless interspersed with filmmaking, more often than not.

A typical public space in Malegaon could be mapped aurally. A distinct vibrating rhythm pounds out of the innumerable lanes branching off from any of the already overcrowded main roads that crisscross the town, especially in its Muslim-inhabited areas. The noise on the main roads is largely that of traffic with the constant rhythm of powerlooms in the background. This background rhythm gets louder and noisier as one enters any of the lanes, reaching deafening proportions as one enters the sheds housing the looms. The lanes have powerloom units interspersed with residential quarters housing small to very large families. The people who make the Malegaon films are mostly workers from these powerloom units who work eight to twelve-hour shifts. The powerlooms in a sense act as nodes that weave the entire town together in a network of production and exchange, shaping its economy as well as its structures of living, which are dominated by the noise, grime and heat of looms in small tin-sheds constantly at work every day of the year.[5]

On one such extremely crowded and narrow lane in a particular Malegaon locality,[6] in a shack above a noisy and busy powerloom unit, is an empty room with a small television placed in the corner and a poster of Aditya Pancholi, an average Bollywood star of the 1980s, on the wall. This room serves as a community recreational space where men – workers/filmmakers – gather to watch their shot footage or other films, or to sit and discuss movies they like or do not like. Watching television in this rickety first-floor space is quite an experience as the room would be constantly vibrating to the mechanical sounds of the looms running below as well as down the entire lane. In the evenings, this otherwise empty room get filled with men who take time off to 'do movies' – during and around their eight to twelve-hour work schedules.

Malegaon is full of such loose gatherings of co-workers, friends, companions or neighbours who form themselves into groups to 'do movies'. The reasons for their affiliation could be varied, but what drives them commonly is their passion for cinema and knowledge of how skilled they are in what they do. Ahmed, a powerloom worker keen on making action movies, believes that nobody can choreograph action scenes better than him and talks about how people like him are meant to do cinema. He says: 'I have a shauq (interest), a junoon (passion). ... I feel this is an innate talent, an art

5 Not all the powerlooms are housed in small tin-sheds but a large number are. Most powerloom units in Malegaon are located along narrow lanes which are extremely noisy because of the constant sound of looms at work. The noise, heat and grime from left-over cotton produced in the units make Malegaon a typically filthy and dingy working-class town.

6 I do not wish to name this particular locality as there was no explicit discussion with the respondents about me writing about their space or about them. All names of particular areas have hence been left general or suitable alternatives given. Even in the case of respondents' names, pseudonyms have been used as no formal or informal consent was sought by me to reveal their identities in my writing.

that not everybody has. If we don't use it, we feel we are wasting a talent given to us by god.' Ahmed is not alone in thinking along these lines. Riding on such drive and passion, most of these groups that take on the task of making cinema have their own ways of functioning. One person in each group usually takes on the role of the leader: as an actor, a director, as the person whose opinions matter or who is always listened to in the course of shooting. It is interesting to note that this person who leads is never the producer of the film. Most individuals who are part of a filmmaking group would not be able to finance a movie, however meagre the required amount may be. Usually, the person who in a sense is the 'brains' behind the movie seeks out producers who can fund the film, or tries to generate funds from various quarters. Though this is not the rule, the exceptions only prove this rule. Once the funds have been garnered, the process of shooting begins; this is improvised on a daily basis following a simple, broad framework or plan that the group chalks out at the start. Actors for various supporting roles are scouted; usually friends and acquaintances, or recommendations on the basis of past work fill the requirements. The leader of the group usually pitches in as the director, in addition to any other role he may be required to fulfil. The most interesting equation, however, relates to the work timings at the powerloom unit, which most of these people have to negotiate while 'working' on films. It is almost inconceivable for most of these filmmakers to take leave from their powerloom work as they earn anything between Rs 700 to Rs 1,000 a week from it, depending on the number of looms an individual worker runs. Thus work at the powerloom units rarely stops even when they are 'doing' films, as most of them cannot afford to be away from work. Working on films, though a momentary escape, is always done alongside the rigorous labour and difficult working conditions of the powerlooms, or any other profession that these workers/filmmakers might be engaged in.

Eishfaque Ehsaan, a veteran of Malegaon cinema, talks about the interesting overlap between powerloom work and film work, and how one feeds into the other even in terms of drudgery. 'No other work happens in a powerloom. The worker who works on a powerloom cannot say anything or hear anything; all he can do is think. He can only think of films while working on a loom and that's the reason why he makes films so well.'

Chandu Karamati, with whom we managed to build a relationship beyond that of a mere respondent or informant, exemplifies this duality of being a worker/filmmaker. Chandu, like most other powerloom workers and their families, migrated to Malegaon from Banaras in the north with his family when he was just about five years old. He soon started helping his father around the powerlooms since he was never really interested in attending school. About ten years later, he started doing plays with local groups in the town and developed a keen interest in make-up. He said he learnt much of what he knows about make-up by keenly observing a veteran make-up artiste of Malegaon's theatre troupes. Chandu managed to develop this interest and hone it as a skill to serve the filmmaking fraternity of Malegaon. Today, he is the only 'specialized' make-up artiste in Malegaon with a very busy schedule and demand for work; almost all the groups doing films in Malegaon approach him to do make-up for them. The make-up that Chandu does is also improvised and he makes do with the bare essentials. His kit is a small bag containing talcum powder, comb and a sponge face cleaner, along with a makeshift water sprayer that he uses with poise. To make moustaches

for cleanshaven faces, he uses tea-leaves stuck on with basic glue. Most of the film shoots we witnessed would wait for Chandu to finish his make-up before starting the day's shoot. Besides being a make-up artiste, Chandu is also a director and an actor, and has many ideas and concepts he wants to translate into film. But over and above all these multiple roles he performs, Chandu is an accomplished powerloom worker who can handle more than eight machines at a time, and he never misses his work schedule on the loom, mostly working the night shift. His typical schedule is to work through the night at a powerloom unit that runs ten to twelve looms and to get home by 7 or 8 in the morning to sleep. He is usually up again in a couple of hours as he always has some shoot or the other to attend to almost on a daily basis. The shoot, depending on the location and the scenes, could go on all day till dusk. Soon after that he reports to his powerloom unit and works the whole night through, only to get back to making movies the next morning after a short nap ... and so it goes.

Sohail Abbasi, also a powerloom worker, has a small television set tucked away in one corner of a very small room bang in the middle of large powerloom units in a heavily industrialized part of the town. The noise in the lane is deafening. The TV works as an editing monitor for Sohail who sits on his edits late through the night. He works an eight-hour shift at the powerloom as and when he can to earn his living; the remaining time he devotes to making films or dubbing and editing, which he is fond of doing. His TV has a microphone attached to it for him to dub, along with the editing system. He says he prefers dubbing at night as the noise levels are low – an incongruous statement, considering that his set-up is located in an overwhelmingly noisy lane that works powerlooms through the night.

Work, then, in Malegaon comes together in the form of both film work and powerloom work, and 'life' is pretty much defined, shaped and regulated by the strands of these forms of work. If the earning member of a family is dependent on powerloom work for his primary livelihood, the same individual does film work to fulfil his passion and drive for life. The doing of one kind of work informs and shapes the other, and one form of work cannot be understood without looking at the other. The simultaneous occupation of both these positions within one's single working life is what makes Malegaon interesting as a town that produces both cotton and cinema at such huge scales and at the same time. Work in Malegaon is intensive and rigorous. There is no escaping these conditions of work and its parallel drudgery. Filmmaking here, I would like to argue, should be viewed through the same lens. Malegaon as a working-class industrial town is characterized by a series of intensities supplied by cinema-making, which becomes an enframing device for us to talk about the work that defines and shapes this town.

IN CONCLUSION

Work on films in Malegaon is thus about the grain of cinema-making work in tandem with the powerloom work these filmmakers are a part of, as well as the general schedule of powerloom work which determines and structures their time and bodies in very particular ways. It is difficult to extricate one from the other. In talking about Malegaon films or the genre of Malegaon cinema, how they make these films or the content of the films, what I am eventually left with (and which becomes very hard to

ignore) is this overlap between the Malegaon worker and the Malegaon filmmaker – or, to put it in another way, between Malegaon work and Malegaon cinema. In talking about Malegaon films, I would rather talk about the worker and his work, than about the worker and the films he makes. The rickety recreational film-viewing space situated above a noisy powerloom unit, or working twelve-hour shifts at looms and then the next twelve hours on film shoots almost on a daily basis, or working on a dub amidst the deafening noise of a powerloom lane – for me, all this is as much about Malegaon cinema as talking about how the inhabitants of Malegaon do their films, and what these films portray or stand for. The three extremely brief ethnographic elaborations I have made to state my argument need not be viewed as exemplifying or validating the argument of worker/filmmaker simultaneity; rather, it would be pertinent to see how most Malegaon films and the process of constructing them can be viewed within the broad representational trope of these three narratives.

Hannah Arendt, in her whimsical and celebrated work The Human Condition, wrote about how labour and work are one amongst the three most fundamental forms of activity.[7] Labour, she argued, comprises all activity necessary to sustain life and nothing really more. The condition to which labour corresponds is sheer biological life. Whereas work, she noted, has a beginning and an end, leading to the creation of something. The condition to which work corresponds is the world at large. Labour, she went on to state, in fact corresponds to the biological life of man as animal. It is interesting to draw parallels from Arendt's work, written almost fifty years ago, to the contemporary life of labour and work in Malegaon. The Malegaon worker/filmmaker takes recourse to his labour whether he is producing cotton through excruciating powerloom work or producing cinema through impassioned filmmaking work. Whether it is employed to weave cotton or weave films, labour is pretty much what the Malegaon worker has at his disposal. It is this fact that we need to acknowledge and recognize, which leads to the creation and sustenance of the worker's life in Malegaon – be it in the world of powerlooms or in the world of cinema.

7 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.