

In Search of a Genealogy: Experimental, Avant-Garde or Prayoga?

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This is the text of a talk I had presented at the Annual Conference of Yale Film Studies Program on 6 February 2010 titled - The Avant-garde in the Indian New Wave.

Today I speak before this audience both as a filmmaker and a film scholar. Being an experimental filmmaker in India has not been without struggle. Working for more than fifteen years to create a body of work that does not resonate with the normative, that is antithetical to the conventional, is almost devoid of institutional support and most importantly without a community of like minded practitioner, has been to say the least, arduous. Simultaneously, to search for a credible genealogy to frame ones own artistic practice has not only been a professional compulsion but also an equally formidable foray into the domain of the fringe. Undoubtedly, I must admit, the thematic thrust of this conference emerges from my own subjectivity as a marginal film artist struggling to justify my own idiosyncratic practices. This conference is a product of my preoccupation both as a film practitioner and a film scholar to locate the epistemic, theoretical and the ontological valence of the experimental and the avant-garde in the Indian cinematic modernity. The impetus of this intellectual endeavor is to resuscitate if not excavate the preponderance of the avant-garde in Indian cinema - to locate its almost ephemeral trajectory and historicize its indubitable impression on Indian cinema, largely invisible today. In recent years, especially with the prominence of video works in the exploding art world of India, the necessity to historicize avant-garde filmic practices has become both a historical and a pragmatic exigency. To locate the impetus of a filmic avant-garde in Indian cinema has become imperative to comprehend the prevalence of its idiomatic imagination in all forms of moving

images in India – filmic, video and the digital. This conference is an attempt to explore a genealogy of the present. The genealogy of contemporary visual arts nested in which is my own filmic practice but also that of a group of young filmmakers and video artists. To an extent, this conference is also a political project to excavate the marginal practices and bring them into the domain of the history of Indian cinema, which in contemporary times has been fetishized and not without reason with the ocular spectacle of Bollywood.

How does one start talking about the avant-garde in Indian cinema or the possibility of the experimental? At what moment can we anchor the origination of this genealogy? Who can we ascribe as the primeval ancestor? Can we, analogous to the artful genealogists of the Puranic lore affix the originary moment of the Indian avant-garde to its most primordial father figure? Can the inventive progenitor of Indian cinema – Dhundiraj Govind Phalke be credited as the original experimentalist of Indian cinema? It's earliest avant-garde practitioner? A move that was consecrated during the 2006 Tate Modern exhibition in London titled 'Cinema of Prayoga'. This exhibition ingeniously attempted to locate the impetus of experimentation in Indian cinema to the creative artistry of Phalke when he sparkled the Indian cinematic imagination with the miraculous attractions of Puranic divinities. In a sweeping retrospective, the exhibition attempted to coalesce heterogeneous practices of filmmaking spread over a century from 1913–2006 under the conceptual hubris of the “experimental”. The divine confabulations of Phalke made at the birth of Indian narrative cinema, the subversive dexterity of filmmakers of Films Division who in the 1960s-70s at the height of statist propaganda produced evocative works that ruptured the bureaucratic realism of the state, and contemporary artists

turned video makers of early 2000 who exploited the malleability of the digital medium as a novel avenue of art production along with a motley bunch of contemporary filmmakers who stood firm on the onslaught of digital revolution and continued to make works on celluloid were brought under an indigenous framework of the 'Cinema of Prayoga'. This term coined by Amrit Gangar, attempts to establish in Indian cinema a practice



Etcetera (1997) by Ashish Avikunthak - 16 mm film Strip

of robust experimentation whose genealogy he locates in indiginity of Indian philosophy rather than the derivative mimesis of Western avant-garde. Although numerous important figures of the Indian cinematic avant-garde – Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Aravindan and others were missing, the exhibition was

successful in bringing diverse radical inflections in Indian cinema under a conceptual rubric of Cinema of Prayoga. Subsequently Amrit Gangar attempted to cover this gap in another retrospective screening held over six months at the National Council of Performing Arts, Bombay, in 2008, which included the works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani.

Through 'Cinema of Prayoga', Gangar effectively reconfigures the notion of the experimental and the avant-garde in Indian cinema by almost conjuring the term prayoga from

formally and metaphysically. This is a cinema that invokes music, poetry, myth and performance to examine the relationship between their status as filmic texts and the 'fictions-in-progress' of their subjects unlike similar invocation seen in mainstream cinematic formulation. For Gangar, the ontological efficacy of prayoga as a theory of practice represents an epistemological alternative both to the conceptual hubris of the experimental and the avant-garde and it challenges other forms of film practice in India. He persuasively argues that the terms like avant-

but today in this presentation I argue, analogous to Gangar that the conceptual hubris of such western derivatives do not do justice to the erudite almost recondite filmmaking practices of Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, John Abraham, Aravindan and few others who have been often classified as the Indian cinematic avant-garde. Their oeuvre creatively oscillates between a range of idiosyncratic filmic strategies and characteristic stylistics located in the effervescent confines of postcolonial modernity and traditional Indian cultural practices. Especially in the case of Kaul and Shahani, it includes a formidable theory of practice and a determined aesthetic orientation within the framework of artistic politics that challenges the hegemonic representation of Indian cinematic modernity. These practices for instances not only adroitly mediate the formal empirics of Bressonian cinema, with its deep Jansenist theological imperatives, the Marxist-materialism of D.D.Kosambi's revisionist historiography of ancient India but their cinematic oeuvre also invokes the elliptical non-linearity of Indian classical music intertwined with deep metaphysical impetus of Indian philosophy. Although the definological grasp of avant-garde comes closest in comprehending the cinematic intransigence of these films, however, it's essentializing Euro-American epistemological ambit struggles to explain adequately their cinematic acuity, which orchestrates a modern practice but inhabits epistemological strategies firmly rooted in a pre-modern Indian substratum. I argue in this presentation that Cinema of Prayoga provides refreshingly interpretative framework that has the possibility of locating the radical move of their filmic practices not just as mimetic outcome of western derivatives but locates their vanguard practices in continuous tradition of innovation in Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. However as a cautionary



Still from Uski Roti

the effervescent confines of Indian philosophy. Etymologically, prayoga in Sanskrit, he suggests, refers to a theory of practice that emphasizes the excessive possibility of any form of contemplation – ritualistic, poetic, mystic, aesthetic, magical, mythical, physical or alchemical. It can be defined as an intensive process of 'fore-action' of any act. In cinema, he argues that it is a practice of filmic interrogation that is devised as a quest toward a continuing process in time and space. Here representation usurps reality. Cinema of Prayoga, Gangar argues thus has the quality of being intuitive and congenial, capable of achieving a certain unity of emotions that is profound – both

garde, experimental or underground are ineffective to comprehend the complexities occurring at the radical margins of Indian cinematic modernity exemplified by some of the works that we are watching in this conference.

Cinema of Prayoga is a radical gesture in the history of Indian cinema. For the first time a cogent exegesis located in the Sanskritic intellectual universe is articulated to explicate a distinctive cinematic form of postcolonial modernity. This cinematic representation might be classified as experimental or avant-garde as has been, for a lack of a better epistemological configuration,

note, I must state that Cinema of Prayoga is not a romantic gesture to delineate an unproblematic genealogy of contemporary cinematic practices with pre-modern Indian traditions, as a matter of fact its critical impetus is the opposite. It provides an interpretative framework of a film theory that untangles the relationship between the Euro-American modernity with Indian premodern tradition that has fused in postcolonial modernity.

For Cinema of Prayoga its genealogy originates with Phalke and his religious proclivity towards the devotional allure of the Epic and the Puranic theology at the infancy of cinematic modernity – a form of filmic **Bhakti**, with its reverential **darshanik** gaze. With Ritwik Ghatak, there is a astute assertion of the folkloric, informed by subaltern consciousness as an alternative discursive injunction to the post-partition nationalistic hegemony and its Marxist/Maoist hostility. For Ghatak his invocation of premodern sensibility was a form of an epistemic rupture in Indian cinematic modernity. The subaltern ontology as explicit in films like *Ajantrik* or *Subarnarekha* works as an epistemological disruption that interrupts the teleology of modernity that overwhelms Indian cinema. This politics is an astringent critique of neo-realist hegemony that had taken root through the successes of Satyajit Ray. It gave birth to a discursive cinema that excavated the empirics of premodern consciousness to embody an iconoclastic imagination that was both a critique of the nation and neo-realism as its favored representation idiom. In the wake of the Indian New Wave, Ghatak's students Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani ingeniously moved away from the conventional cinematic form and produced radical cinema that was a critique of postcolonial modernity. They eruditely located their theoretical roots in Indian philosophy and culture. Taking a step forward, Kamal Swaroop's idiosyncratic and ebullient *Om Dar Badar*, and

Amitabh Chakrabarty's formidable contemplation on morbidity in *Kaal Abhirati*, took the project initiated by Kaul and Shahani firmly into the domain of Tantric and Buddhist philosophical epistemology. The films of Cinema of Prayoga are esoteric and even mystical contemplation that necessitates an equally robust critical tradition to comprehend their meaning making mechanism. For nearly thirty years these films along with few others made by Vishnu Mathur, Nirad Mahapatra, Sanjiv Shah, Fareeda Mehta have at best been categorized as an aberrant avant-garde and at worst

are more comfortable employing the transcendental philosophy of European thinkers than traditional Indian thought in our critical arsenal. Although this statement is true to a great degree, however I would like to show that in the works of filmmakers of Cinema of Prayoga, there is disciplined maneuver of premodern Indian epistemological thought to critique the postcolonial condition. These films are a consequence of a cultural modernity that is unquestionably located in the postcolonial moment but unlike other filmic works are in conversation with Indian epistemic traditions, or to put



Ritwik Ghatak

an abstruse confabulations. This acrid reception of the films, I argue is more a reflection of an inadequate critical framework rather than the inherent impenetrability of these films, as has been often argued.

Dipesh Chakrabarty in his programmatic '**Provincializing Europe**' bemoans the break brought about by European coloniality on pre-modern Indian epistemology. He emphatically notes that categories that were ones subject to rigorous theoretical contemplation do not see similar deliberations. He contends that we as social and cultural critics have lost the genealogy of Indian epistemological traditions and today

in Ghatak's words, these films engage in *Jukti* (reason), *Tarkho* (debate) and *Gappo* (gossip) with Indian epistemological traditions.

For instance, I would argue that any interpretation of the films, for instance, *Khayal Gatha* and *Siddeshwari* within the epistemological confines of Western critical thought as solely a product of modernity or even avant-garde will not sufficiently be able to uncover the cultural and historical complexity that these filmic works explore. Cinema of Prayoga proposes that we have to take the recourse to Indian pre-modern philosophical traditions to fully unearth the complex universe that these cinematic narratives, meandering

between modern, medieval and pre-modern histories attempt to negotiate. This move, I must note, is not a regurgitation of Indian aesthetic theories epitomized by application of **rasa** theory or the epic traditions to make an uncomplicated mimetic connection between past traditions and a contemporary representation practice. Neither is this project a naive romantic nostalgia of a valorized pre-modern past and neither indeed, a sophisticated version of Hindutva revivalism. As a matter of fact Cinema of Prayoga as a theoretical apparatus is a critical response to cinematic practices that Kaul and Shahani evolve. It is

cinematic representation that cannot be critically interpreted without recourse to Indian epistemological practices. Although, Dipesh Chakrabarty correctly points that the pre-modern tradition of the Sanskrit epistemological saw the greatest rupture with the rise of European colonial modernity in India, however the core of the philosophical and the critical knowledge were retained in numerous forms - not just confined to the dominant classical Indian art, dance, music, architecture, but also in folk articulation of art, craft and culture. It is exactly these forms of knowledge that Kaul and Shahani

today have been an essential basis for Indian cultural practices. This theoretical framework builds upon on a new breed of Indian philosophers who since the second half of the twentieth century, in stark contrast to those of the Indological school, initiated a programmatic project of a conversation between Indian epistemic tradition and Western philosophy. The key architects of this program - Bimal Matilal and J.N.Mohanty along with their students- Purushottama Bilimoria, Jonardon Ganeri, Arindam Chakravorty and J.L.Shaw have consistently demonstrated that the rational and discursive veracity of pre-modern Indian epistemic tradition was at par with Western thought. Rather than an exposition, their project is to provide a synthesis of Indian philosophical thought, but maintaining the heterogeneity of the complex philosophical world of Indian thought. They have been able to show that a productive dialogue is possible between Indian epistemic traditions and post-structuralism as articulated within phenomenology and hermeneutics. Taking their work as a substratum, Cinema of Prayoga creates a theoretical apparatus that employs the cognitive framework of Indian philosophy to negotiate the complex meaning making enterprise that Kaul and Shahani have initiated. Employing the logical epistemology of **Nyaya-Vaisesika** and **Navya Nyaya**, Jainism and Tantric school, especially in conjunction with the phenomenological approach of Husserl through Deleuze, Cinema of Prayoga provides an interpretative framework that does not discard the critical tradition of Western philosophy but provides a discursive edge to it by summoning Indian epistemic traditions to grasp complex texts of postcolonial cinematic modernity that not only challenge the hegemony of prevailing modes of representation but are radical enough to create a new mode of postcolonial cinematic modernity.



Kumar Sahani, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Rajat Kapoor shooting *Khayal Gatha*

an epistemological echo to a cultural practice. It is a hermeneutical move - a theory that has emerged as a response to a practice to interpretatively expound the nuances of that very same practice. And I make this claim not just of the basis of the cinematic works that these filmmakers created but also on what they have widely written and spoken about.

The project is fundamentally a concerted attempt at the deployment of classical Indian epistemology in conjunction with post-structural critical thought to elucidate the postcolonial forms of cinematic representations. It argues that postcolonial cinematic modernity inaugurated by Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani within the political and historical context of the Indian New Wave gave birth to a complex form of

deploy in the making of their cinematic modernity and are indebted to both Phalke and Ghatak. The first such cinematic narratives were produced by Kaul and Shahani in *Uski Roti* and *Maya Darpan* respectively. These were most importantly critique of postcolonial cinematic representations epitomized by narratives that were products of nineteenth century novelistic traditions that heavily relied on the tropes of realist and neo-realist ideologies.

of Prayoga proposes a theory of film for Indian cinematic modernity that attempts to provide a robust alternative to the interpretative rubric of Western critical and philosophical thought. It puts forward a framework that deploys theoretical concepts that although not in common parlance