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# Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

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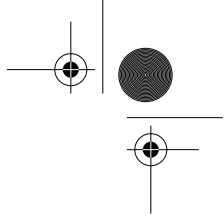
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# Apotheosis or Apparition? Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

• Rashmi Sawhney

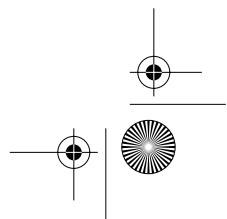
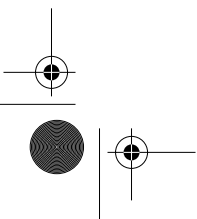
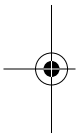
In the text *City Flicks* (2004), Moinak Biswas suggests that contemporary Indian cinema puts an end to the representative tropes of east/west, city/country, police/criminal.<sup>1</sup> Ravi Vasudevan expresses a similar view, stating that the 'image of a depressed and dystopian urban subjectivity only conjures the most fleeting of residual utopian energies in its reference to a country idyll as an object of longing'.<sup>2</sup> The changing representation of village and city in Indian films over the last twenty years or so has roughly coincided with the state and corporate-led drive towards a 'globalised' and 'liberalised' India. In Indian films, the city and the village have 'performed' the narrative of national identity, particularly within a developmental or modernising role. This paper examines the representation of urban and rural India, and therefore of the Indian nation, in two films made by women at the turn of the decade marking liberalisation.<sup>3</sup> Aruna Raje's *Rihaee* (1988) and Sai Paranjpye's *Disha* (1990) are films which, by virtue of their thematic and formal treatment, to some extent, enable the conceptualisation of the aesthetics of women's cinema in India. The two films thematically bridge a moment of disjuncture in Indian socio-cultural history in the late 1980s and early 1990s, recreating an imaginary cinematic nation combining past and future visions of development. This paper argues that *Disha* and *Rihaee* portray a vision of modernity which is markedly feminised in the Indian context through their visualisation of city and village. By way of discussion of these two films, it raises questions about the theorising of Indian women's cinema and hopes to draw attention to the frequently overlooked

perspectives of women filmmakers on the much studied issue of the modern Indian nation.<sup>4</sup>

## Nation and Theories of Indian Cinema

Cinema and the nation exhibit a strange relationship in India. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to conceptualise an Indian national cinema, in the way it is conceptualised in many Western nations.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, most Indian films, across the twenty odd languages of production, display a significant engagement with visualising the nation.<sup>6</sup> The nation as seen by Indian cinema is an entity which results from, as well as enacts and contains, the dialectic between modernising and traditionalising forces. Madhava Prasad uses Fredric Jameson's term 'ideologeme' to describe the pervasiveness of the tradition-modernity binary in Indian films.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, much of the scholarship of Indian cinema has emphasised the dominance of viewing cinema through the framework of the nation-state, and therefore, as an enactment of the process of modernisation.<sup>8</sup>

The viewing of Indian cinema as a contestation over the form of the nation-state is supported, either directly or tangentially, by, what could be identified as the three main schools of Indian film criticism: the experimentalists, the traditionalists, and the third, for want of a better word, the specificists. The first, represented by film-makers and critics like Chidananda Das Gupta, Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Kumar Shahni, aspires to an 'evolved' form of film-making that draws from the realist as well as the avant-garde traditions of Western films, along with influences from Indian folk traditions. Their concept of





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1 cinematic sophistication is influenced by a desire  
 2 to be locally grounded, yet at the same time  
 3 to fashion a cinema in line with the 'national'  
 4 avant-gardes of Europe. The second group,  
 5 spearheaded by political scientists and  
 6 psychoanalysts like Ashis Nandy and Sudhir  
 7 Kakar, see the Indian cinema as a 'slum's eye  
 8 view' of Indian politics<sup>9</sup>, or as the enactment  
 9 of a collective democratic fantasy<sup>10</sup>.

10 The third group, whose role in the last fifteen  
 11 years or so, in pointing out the specificity of  
 12 Indian cinema has been very significant, has  
 13 instilled a new contemporariness to the study of  
 14 Indian films, freeing it from the association  
 15 between a 'pre-modern' form and a 'third world'  
 16 aesthetic, as well as from the romanticising of  
 17 tradition.<sup>11</sup> In the work emanating from this  
 18 group, the cinema has been seen as a formal  
 19 encoding of national identity using theories of  
 20 modernity, and linking politics and history with  
 21 aesthetics. While a number of scholars have been  
 22 associated with this venture, the work presented  
 23 by Madhava Prasad and Sumita Chakravarty is  
 24 particularly significant for this essay. Prasad  
 25 and Chakravarty both identify a site of struggle,  
 26 unresolvedness, in the form of Indian films –  
 27 Chakravarty describes this through the metaphor  
 28 of the 'bahurupi' or the masquerade, a changing  
 29 and fluid entity;<sup>12</sup> Prasad calls it the process of  
 30 'passive revolution' – a condition that generates  
 31 (or tries to) an equilibrium through the  
 32 opposition between the drive to modernisation  
 33 and a simultaneous disavowal of modernity on  
 34 an ideological plane.<sup>13</sup> Both authors emphasise  
 35 the form of the nation-state as the form in  
 36 question, which reveals (and is revealed through)  
 37 the form of the Hindi film. The nation-state,  
 38 therefore, is seen as a constituent of a number of  
 39 forces that endow it with a fluidity, a transitoriness  
 40 – however, one that withholds the process of real  
 41 change, which has the potential to bring about a  
 42 transformation in the form of the nation-state.  
 43 However, it can be debated that the micro-processes  
 44 which generate fluidity and impermanence, also  
 45 generate new sites of meaning within the larger  
 46 umbrella of national identity, which eventually  
 47 lead to the evolution of newer political formations  
 48 as well as newer forms of expression.

### Migration, Modernity, and Transitions

One such process is the process of migration. Migration has been one of the central themes in the social history of India over the last century or so. When migrations acquire significant volume, they trigger off corresponding social transformations in a society, affecting the character of the nation-state, demography, civic society, politics, economy, culture, language and people. The act of migration in cinema, or the journey from the village to city, and from the city to the village, is a narrative device which performs the complex negotiations involved in arriving at a fictive understanding of national modernity and identity. The protagonist's journey is a crucial component of narrative cinema and has been pictured as traversing geographic barriers, boundaries of nationality, race, class, caste, or gender, metaphysical encounters with the self, or fantastical forays into outer-space and imaginary lands.<sup>14</sup> Journeys have played an especially critical role as mediators between familiar and unfamiliar territories, including those between tradition and modernity, self and other, real and imaginary. It is for this reason that the representation of the rural and the urban, as well as the representation of migration by women filmmakers becomes exciting in its potential to generate a women's notion of self and society.

The conventional idea of progress in cinema is of moving from village to city, and more recently, from India to the West, or to 'modern' East Asian locations like Singapore and Hong Kong. The village, as bearer of tradition, takes on a dual symbolism – first, as that which must be left behind to attain a modern state of being, and second, as the psychological fantasy of the innocent state of existence, the paradise lost. The city, on the other hand, symbolizes the attractions and threats inherent in discovery, isolation, uprooting, and the adventure of illicit romance. The upward mobility or *sanskritisation* that the move from the village to city promises is visualized through greater material possessions – accrued through the loss of innocence, through hard work, as well as physical and emotional exploitation. Within the city-village binary, the

1 matter of romance and sex takes on much  
2 significance. The men (and sometimes, women)  
3 who go out into the city are permitted, often  
4 expected, to engage in amorous or sexual  
5 relationships, while the village and its residents  
6 are imagined as naturally chaste, at least in the  
7 memory of those who once belonged to it.

8 For Hindi cinema, Bombay is *the* city of fantasy.  
9 The two hundred year history of modern Bombay,  
10 a relatively young city in the Indian context, from  
11 a cluster of fishing villages (reclaimed to form  
12 a single land mass in the first part of the  
13 nineteenth century) to a centre of colonial  
14 trading power, and later, as the commercial and  
15 entertainment capital of India has established  
16 Bombay as the ultimate urban location for Hindi  
17 cinema. Over the years Bombay has come to be  
18 seen as a multicultural city, having been  
19 influenced by the cultures of the Parsi, Christian,  
20 Muslim, Sindhi and Hindu communities, as well  
21 as by the Portuguese and the British, which gives  
22 rise to a synthesis that is uniquely 'Bambaiya'<sup>15</sup>,  
23 and for the purpose of cinema, glamourised.  
24 Moreover, some of India's biggest working-class  
25 and trade union movements developed in the  
26 textile mills of Bombay and the large flux of  
27 migrants from villages all across India has  
28 further strengthened its working-class  
29 characteristic.

30 Both films under discussion here look at the  
31 social and ethical issues generated by economic  
32 migration; however, instead of evoking the  
33 conventional binaries between modern/  
34 traditional, hostile/nurturing, or masculine/  
35 feminine these films re-arrange such hierarchies  
36 to present an alternative vision of modern India.  
37 Significantly, in comparison with other urban-  
38 centric films made around the same period, and  
39 subsequently in the 1990s, *Disha* and *Rihaee*  
40 represent the city as the periphery of the Indian  
41 village, marking a shift in the location of  
42 development and modernity. The structural shift  
43 in the hierarchy of location, modernity, and  
44 therefore of power, suggested by these films  
45 enables migration to be seen as a fluid concept,  
46 a journey between old and new, loss and  
47 discovery, and the consequent transformations  
48 enacted thereof.

An emphasis on the *process* of transformation  
can open up the nation to readings which inhabit  
the spaces between new/old or loss/discovery  
inherent to migration. The journey itself contains  
multiple viewpoints which open up plural  
interpretation. Such spaces are what Homi Bhabha  
describes as 'liminal' or 'interstitial', occupying  
a space between contesting cultural traditions,  
historical periods, and critical methodologies<sup>16</sup>.  
Bhabha suggests that these liminal spaces are  
hybrid sites that witness the production of cultural  
meaning. Although his arguments are made in  
the context of essentialist readings of nationhood  
which attempt to define and naturalise 'third  
world' nations by means of homogenous, holistic,  
and historical traditions that define and ensure  
their subordinate status, they could also be useful  
to look at the nation as a microcosm of  
demographic power structures. Bhabha's  
argument can be appropriated in the Indian  
context to highlight the dynamic between city  
and village and the 'liminal' spaces between  
them as sites where identities are performed and  
contested. The journey between village and city  
assumes importance as a trajectory of 'performance'  
of change, as seen in the case of *Disha*.

#### ***Disha* ('The Uprooted Ones')**

Sai Paranjpye's film *Disha* (1990) is inspired by  
a real-life incident in Naigaom, a village in  
Maharashtra, where a man who spent sixteen  
years digging a well on an arid patch of land was  
declared mad by his fellow villagers. When at last  
he struck water and transformed the economic  
possibilities of the village, he was lauded as a  
hero. While Paranjpye identifies the source of her  
story-idea as a real incident in the village of  
Naigaom, the screen name chosen for the  
cinematic village is Bakuli<sup>17</sup>. *Disha* is a film about  
two migrant labourers from Bakuli who go to  
Bombay in search of work; one of them  
(Vasant/Nana Patekar) stays on in Bombay, while  
the other (Soma/Raghuveer Yadav) returns to  
Bakuli when his brother (Parshu/Om Puri) strikes  
water in his well (Figure 1). The film depicts the  
conflict between a longing for home and the  
compulsions of economic migration.



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• Fig. 1: 'Parshu's Well', *Disha* (1990).

The title of the film means 'direction' and it offers a critique of the industry-based model of socio-economic development adopted in the early years of independence by the Jawaharlal Nehru led Congress government. Any historical account of Indian cinema is testimony to the immense bearing of the Nehruvian era on Indian cinema.<sup>18</sup> New post-independence films began the project of visualising the nation in alignment with Nehru's developmental philosophy, and this trend in cinema was dominant until the student unrest and anti-corruption movements of the mid 1970s. In 1975, the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi imposed an emergency, which lasted for almost two years. By this time Indian cinema reflected the citizen's loss of faith in state machinery, and films where the protagonist took the law in his/her hands became popular.<sup>19</sup> The industrial sector was not functioning as promised and this resulted in a community of

disillusioned workers. Further, industrialization had spurred rural migration to cities, generating new problems for civic governance. At the same time the success of the green revolution had renewed the hope of developing India as a strong agriculture-based economy. In the Punjab, the Green Revolution had created prosperous farming communities. Many of these communities then migrated to Canada, on the invitation of the Canadian government, which wanted to benefit from the knowledge of these farmers. Such social circumstances had in a way, compelled Rajiv Gandhi to re-examine Congress policies and public propaganda by the mid-1980s. As a result, the Congress government began to consider a more humanistic approach to development. The new vision of the Indian government can be captured through Rajiv Gandhi's foreword to the Seventh Planning Commission Report, published in November 1985:

1 In the final analysis, development is not just about  
2 factories, dams and roads. Development is basically  
3 about people. The goal is the people's material, cultural  
4 and spiritual fulfilment. The human factor, the human  
5 context, is of supreme value. We must pay much greater  
6 attention to these questions in future.<sup>20</sup>

8  
9 *Disha* develops this idea of a people-centric  
10 development, rather than an economic or  
11 industry-based model of development by  
12 positioning the village as the site of action.

13 Although the idea of village India being the  
14 'real' India has been a feature of Indian discourse  
15 and policy for a long time, the socio-economic  
16 trend that emerged in the late 1980s and early  
17 1990s had put this belief into question, and this  
18 perception also influenced films. According to  
19 film historian Firoze Rangoonwala, the period  
20 between 1981 and 1992 represents the 'age  
21 of violence' in Indian cinema<sup>21</sup>. The genre of  
22 the 'vigilante women films' of the 1980s  
23 subsequently gave way to other violent films  
24 like *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Tezaab* (1988),  
25 *Parinda* (1989), *Tridev* (1989), *Ghayal* (1990),  
26 *Agneepath* (1990), and *Satya* (1998) towards  
27 the end of the century, almost all of which  
28 emphasised urban anger. In this context of film  
29 production, as well as in the socio-economic  
30 context made imminent by globalisation, *Disha*  
31 can be seen as being representative of a  
32 feminised perspective on national modernity.

33  
34 *Balkuli* is a symbol for the progress possible  
35 across village-India as imagined by the film-  
36 maker. The title shots of the film show a barren  
37 land breeding thorny bushes of the Bakuli plant;  
38 the yellow flowers of the Bakuli are beautiful but  
39 non-productive. The lack of markets for  
40 agricultural products and the diminishing  
41 sustainability of farming in Bakuli results in forced  
42 migration of the unemployed village youth to  
43 Bombay. Although Bakuli is a barren village,  
44 Parshu's well brings new hope and promise  
45 for sustaining a healthy agricultural economy.  
46 The symbol of the well, at first barren, and then  
47 filled with water, conveys the thought that real  
48 development lies in the revival of the agricultural  
49 sector in villages. Yet, the progress is not  
50 instantaneous; it needs to be toiled for. The film  
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• Fig. 2: 'Shoma and Vasant in Bombay Chawl'.

presents Parshu's obsessive interest in the well with an element of humour; he is generally accepted as a madman by other villagers as well as by his family. *Disha* suggests that villages can achieve sustainable development only through such obsessive passion.

Paranjpye's film belongs to the genre of realist sociological cinema which had rid itself of the 'excesses' of commercial Hindi films. The film demonstrates influence by Soviet realism, and especially by the concept of montage. The director attempts to represent the workers' lives by depicting mundane tasks such as bathing, getting ready for work, taking lunch breaks, working in the mills and such like (Figure 2). In a Kafkaesque reminder of the disease and degeneration in the city, Paranjpye shows us shots of cob-web covered machinery, symbolising the destruction and death to come through industrialization and migration. The influence of Soviet realism can be further glimpsed in scenes of drably-dressed workers doing mundane jobs in the textile mills of Dadar. One sequence in the film shows a non-functional mill through a montage of images, a result of the impasse in negotiations between mill-workers and the government, which crippled the textile industry in Bombay in the 1980s. There is no background sound to this montage and Soma comments on the morgue-like appearance of the mills; in the last frame of this sequence he exits the factory after exclaiming 'Ram Naam Satya Ho', a chant that is uttered during Hindu death rites.





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1 The only joy in the lives of the workers is shown  
 2 to be the time that they share their lunch-boxes.  
 3 Their nameless, faceless, existence in Bombay is  
 4 depicted through a single shelf in the workers'  
 5 house that has one peg for each man, where they  
 6 can hang possessions – clothes, bags, calendars –  
 7 suggesting that the only recognition of an  
 8 individual in Bombay is through his material  
 9 belongings. In another scene, as Vasant is being  
 10 introduced to the men in the house – where each  
 11 man has limited space and must sleep in shifts –  
 12 the voiceover of the men's names is overlapped  
 13 with images of cattle in a village shed through  
 14 unsynchronized sound-image editing. By  
 15 juxtaposing unrelated images and sounds, and  
 16 using fades and wipes for editing, Paranjpye  
 17 overlays the images with symbolism.

18 The village and the city of *Disha* are not fixed  
 19 entities frozen in time. The film highlights  
 20 the changes taking place in each location  
 21 and the complexities of social and economic  
 22 relationships. The act of migration involves  
 23 the generation of memories of that which is  
 24 left behind. Such memories are imaginary and  
 25 subjective. In Vasant's case, the gulf between  
 26 the Bakuli of his memory and the Bakuli he  
 27 encounters on his return is vast. Vasant  
 28 remembers Bakuli as a warm, nurturing place,  
 29 evoking deep connections to the soil and its  
 30 nostalgic connotations. On his return he finds  
 31 that the maternal solace of the village is  
 32 threatened by the discovery of his wife's  
 33 (Phulvantibai/Rajshree Sawant) affair with the  
 34 manager of the 'bidi' factory where she works.  
 35 His difficulty results in a narrative turn; he  
 36 reluctantly returns to the other life in Bombay.

37 Phulvantibai's new-found economic  
 38 independence and her entry into the public  
 39 sphere symbolize the changing face of the village  
 40 that exists in simultaneity with the change  
 41 brought about through Parshu's well. Paranjpye's  
 42 depiction of Phulvantibai's affair stresses guilt  
 43 rather than expressing women's economic and  
 44 sexual freedom. Phulvantibai's embarrassment at  
 45 the discovery of the affair by Vasant, her father-  
 46 in-law's worried letter to Vasant, and the  
 47 manager's licentious behaviour suggest that the  
 48 affair is a result of economic compulsion more  
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than anything else. In the scheme of the film's  
 plot, Phulvantibai's affair serves as a narrative  
 device to enable Vasant's return to Bombay.  
 In an article on the realist turn in Hindi cinema,  
 Madhava Prasad suggests, citing the example of  
 Shyam Benegal's film *Nishant* (1975), that certain  
 impasses in narrative are encountered because of  
 the inability of cinematic realism to cope with the  
 'demand' for an explanation of the characters'  
 conduct<sup>22</sup>. In Prasad's opinion, certain kinds of  
 realist narrative cannot spin themselves out  
 without a speechless core, and this inability is  
 responsible for the narrative element of the silent  
 subaltern. He suggests that the 'aesthetic of  
 realism splits the melodramatic unit into its  
 component parts: image and meaning, and  
 assumes the burden of meaning, leaving the  
 image in a raw state'.<sup>23</sup> Phulvantibai's affair  
 represents one such impasse, allowing the realist  
 narrative in *Disha* to develop to completion.

Paranjpye seems to suggest an alternative  
 model of development which foregrounds rural  
 development through the agricultural sector and  
 small-scale industries. Even as Bombay retains its  
 status as an 'expansionary force, devouring the  
 other and reconstituting its own image'<sup>24</sup>, the  
 village undergoes a simultaneous change,  
 bringing it closer to Paranjpye's ideal of  
 development. Although the dominant  
 perspective is clearly grounded in the village in  
*Disha*, the film also addresses the complexities  
 generated by an economic situation that compels  
 migration. It can be argued in the context of this  
 film that the idiom of representation of the  
 city-village trope is affected not only by changes  
 in film technology (enabling more realistic  
 images), or by socio-political discourse about  
 the nation-state, but also by a gender-specific  
 perspective. The urgency with which the image  
 and memory of the village haunts the narrative  
 is indicative firstly of the 'minor' tradition that  
 women's films constitute, and secondly, of the  
 place of memory and migration in a feminised  
 world view.

The image of the nation in this film can be read  
 as utopian or dystopian fiction; such a reading  
 being enabled by the emphasis on spatial  
 characteristics and geographies. The utopian

1 or dystopian view presented takes critical  
 2 cognizance of the social context where the  
 3 contradiction between social reality and the  
 4 imaginary nation in *Disha* works to foreground  
 5 social crisis; the film acquires a political view-  
 6 point through its social critique. Alison Butler's  
 7 idea of a 'minor cinema' is useful in elaborating  
 8 this point<sup>25</sup>. The idea of minor cinema originally  
 9 comes from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's  
 10 concept of minor literature<sup>26</sup>. As Butler explains,  
 11 a minor literature is not a literary genre or period,  
 12 nor is classification as minor an artistic  
 13 evaluation, adding that Kafka, Joyce, Beckett,  
 14 and Godard, who Deleuze and Guattari place in  
 15 this category, are all canonical writers. The three  
 16 defining features of a minor literature as listed  
 17 by Deleuze and Guattari are displacement,  
 18 dispossession, or deterritorialisation; a politicised  
 19 experience; and a bias towards collective values.<sup>27</sup>  
 20 They define a minor tradition in political terms,  
 21 where the viewpoint of the deterritorialised  
 22 group is foregrounded in its social context to  
 23 generate a sense of collectivity, and this notion  
 24 of collectivity is used in Aruna Raje's *Rihaae* to  
 25 present an alternative view of development  
 26 where the nation is in sympathy with women.

### 31 *Rihaae* ('Liberation')

32  
 33 In Indian society, national development has  
 34 sidelined and distanced women's issues; the  
 35 progress of women has frequently been seen as  
 36 antithetical to national identity and development.  
 37 This relationship is particularly foregrounded  
 38 when nationalism becomes a significant concern  
 39 and women are seen as symbols of national  
 40 identity.<sup>28</sup> Film enables this distance to be  
 41 addressed; it allows the imagining of a non-  
 42 patriarchal nation, or of fictional national histories  
 43 of equal opportunities. Jyotika Virdi states:

44  
 45 The nation is constructed in Hindi cinema through  
 46 a complex apparatus of metaphors, discourses, and  
 47 modes of address. It is imagined through a stock set of  
 48 tropes, symbols, characters, and narratives that are  
 49 meant to first air, and then resolve, contemporary  
 50 anxieties and difficulties. The films iron out tensions  
 51 among various constituencies in the nation and play  
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out utopian ideals – ideals embraced by audiences from  
 diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.<sup>29</sup>

What distinguishes the way the nation is  
 imagined in *Rihaae* is the idiom of representation  
 and the narrative strategies through which the  
 two conflicting entities of 'woman' and 'nation'  
 are either brought together as Virdi suggests, in  
 a utopian ideal, or differentiated using political  
 idioms from popular film culture. The act of  
 migration and the depiction of village, city, and  
 nation, operate as a means to create this fictional  
 space where mutual interests and conflicts can  
 be addressed. That is, issues of national  
 development addressed in *Rihaae* include a vision  
 of women's participation in this development.  
 The conflict between nation and woman is  
 negotiated in the film by re-interpreting the  
 forces that place woman and nation as  
 oppositional constructs, in particular the gender  
 associations of the urban and the rural. Indeed,  
 women become synonymous with the imagined  
 nation in this fiction.

Many of Raje's films have dealt with the issue  
 of women's bodies and sexuality. In *Rihaae*, she  
 reveals the moral hypocrisy towards sexuality in  
 a feudal set-up and uses the city-village binary  
 to represent this conflict. Like *Disha*, *Rihaae*  
 is a story about migrant labourers who work  
 as carpenters in Bombay. The most significant  
 aspect of the lives of the migrant men is the  
 'left behind' village and their women. Raje moves  
 the narrative between the city and the village,  
 showing parallel depictions of life. Life in both  
 locations is made distinct by the moral,  
 hierarchical, social, and cultural impositions  
 forced upon men and women, as well as those  
 that divide urban and rural people.

Raje presents an imaginary village and  
 city through the use of codified settings.  
 Geographical location in the film is symbolic and  
 lacks localization. The city is named as 'Bombay'  
 at one point in the film, but Raje chooses not to  
 use any of the images commonly associated with  
 Bombay in cinema. Bombay is introduced verbally  
 to the viewer by the village postman, who  
 comments that the migrant men have left behind  
 a village full of women, children, the disabled





• Bombay and the Village in 1990s Women's Cinema

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• Fig. 3: 'The Prostitutes and the Migrant Men'.

and the elderly. The introductory shot of the city captures men working as carpenters in an apartment. The customary images of the Gateway of India, the trains, the skyscrapers, or Marine drive are all absent in this introduction. The lives of these men are pictured without reference to any external indicator of life in Bombay. The depiction is restricted to the narrow lanes and alleyways that the men live and wander in. For the migrant men the city is constituted out of their immediate surroundings – their sense of adventure and discovery only extends as far as the prostitute's chambers (Figure 3).

Prasad points out that fictional stories can be located in real cities, but not in real villages. Prasad suggests that this is because unlike in the city, which is 'experienced as a space inhabited by a *population* . . . whose mutual relationships cannot be easily specified', a village with its clearly defined social networks has no 'dummy places, no empty seats, where fictional characters can be placed'; the fictional village has to be invented.<sup>30</sup> Vadner is a village that is marked by a large banyan tree ('Vad' means banyan). The banyan is the symbol of the village. But since the tree is a part of nature, Vadner's identity is shared by numerous other villages in India, most of which have large banyan trees as the centre-point of the village plan. The dress and language of the villagers suggests that it is situated in the state of Rajasthan. However, Vadner recreates fictional representations of the village from film and literature; stereotypical features become symbolic of 'Indian village'.



• Fig. 4: 'The Cinematic Village: Taku, Mansukh and Astrologer'.

The portrayal of village life incorporates women's tasks such as washing clothes, filling water from the well, or tilling farm land. The women's attire is traditional, yet colourfully ethnic. The allegorical village, recreated through the film sets, is iconic in its appeal (Figure 4).

To the binary of the village and city, Rajee introduces a third symbolic entity – the foreign or 'abroad'. The presence of the foreign element draws the politics of the village-city into a larger framework, endowing the contours of the nation with more clarity in the process, and also subverting the power hierarchy of village and city. Mansukh/Naseeruddin Shah, who returns to Vadner after spending several years in Dubai, is the protagonist of this narrative ploy. Mansukh is the symbol of the foreign land, an imaginary place par modernity. His physical get-up and appearance reflect his modern positioning; he wears western-style clothes, smokes imported cigarettes, wears sunglasses, and possesses a cassette player. In other words, Mansukh imports the modern into Vadner; the conventional journey from village to city undertaken by Hindi cinema's protagonists is here reversed by Mansukh whose difference from the villagers, material belongings, and perception as a desirable young groom by the village women endows upon him a position of power. Ultimately, however, this power is exposed as

1 being superficial and greed-driven, when  
 2 Mansukh chooses to marry the daughter of a rich  
 3 landlord, a narrative act that reinstates the  
 4 supreme position of the nation as defined by  
 5 geographical boundaries. Raje establishes the  
 6 hierarchy of the foreign-city-village triad within  
 7 a structure that generates unconventional  
 8 combinations of location-gender-modernity. This  
 9 difference is visualized using theatrical modes  
 10 through exaggerated and artificial symbols of  
 11 representation. While the village remains the  
 12 centre of narrative logic and action, the journeys  
 13 between the village, city and the foreign land  
 14 raise questions of relative values.  
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16 At the core of Raje's film is the focus on  
 17 sexuality (and its moral associations) and  
 18 women's rights to their own bodies. She uses the  
 19 power-structure of the topographical triad to  
 20 enact this drama. Mansukh's arrival in Vadner  
 21 results in a series of intimate encounters between  
 22 him and some of the village women. Popular  
 23 discourse structures village-women-chastity in  
 24 a paradigmatic relationship, each being  
 25 substitutable among themselves, and operating  
 26 as a binary with the paradigm of city-men-sexual  
 27 liberty. The film attempts to break this structure  
 28 by playing around with the linear equation (or  
 29 syntagm) of the position of the subject in the  
 30 transition towards modernity, the associated  
 31 sexual freedom, and gender. A central part of  
 32 the attempt to deconstruct this linear relationship  
 33 is organized around the allegorical imagining  
 34 of the village-city. In representing the village  
 35 women as sexual individuals, and not as chaste  
 36 wives-in-waiting, the so-called modernity of  
 37 the city is transferred onto the village and hence  
 38 its women.  
 39

40 The film breaches typical boundaries between  
 41 private and public, and between the inner and  
 42 outer worlds<sup>31</sup>. The female body, ordinarily a  
 43 subject of secrecy and shame in middle-class  
 44 India, is liberated by the village women in *Rihaee*.  
 45 Raje uses the female body as the material object  
 46 through which revolt is staged (Figure 5).  
 47 Mansukh's sexual adventures result in two  
 48 pregnancies in Vadner. One of these women,  
 49 Taku/Hema Malini, insists on keeping her child  
 50 based on the claim that destroying the foetus  
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• Fig. 5: 'At Work'.

would be a perversion of her own body and self. The film links moral hypocrisy and sexual oppression to the demands of a capital economy and the resulting migration and breaking up of community. Two of the oldest feminist organizations in India, the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) and the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD) have emphasized the connection between biology-based and labour-based oppression of women. These activists claim that while the root of women's oppression lies in the biological differences between men and women, it is only as the mode of production and reproduction changes historically that these biological differences became important enough to subjugate women.<sup>32</sup> An unpublished manifesto of the 'Stree Sangarsh' cited by Radha Kumar encapsulates this opinion: 'One of the first dualisms in human history was the sexual division of labour, which developed due to women's reproductive ability; the appropriation of control over women's bodies has been one of the most significant forms of oppression under

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1 capitalism<sup>33</sup>. The manifesto describes how this  
2 control is exercised by confining women to  
3 domesticated units which emphasize child-birth  
4 and rearing, and as societies industrialise, by  
5 privatising women's work around the duties of  
6 maternity and childcare.

7 The control of women's bodies by feudal  
8 agents whose powers are strengthened by a  
9 capitalist economy is visualized as a problem that  
10 is a combination of sexual hypocrisy and  
11 economic circumstances in the film. *Rihaee*  
12 depicts the confusion of a nation that is  
13 grappling with migration resulting from a capital-  
14 based developmental vision and the demands  
15 made by a social support system that is often of  
16 a feudal nature; a condition that results in the  
17 classic conflict between traditional and modern  
18 value systems. The village women's fight for  
19 sexual equality and a right to their own bodies is  
20 represented in the film through a mass protest  
21 against the village 'panchayat'<sup>34</sup>. Taku's refusal to  
22 abort her child draws the attention of the  
23 'panchayat', which rules that she must leave the  
24 village if she desires to continue the pregnancy.  
25 Her protest is taken up by the other village  
26 women, particularly by the older village women.  
27 The scene of revolt stages the solidarity of the  
28 village women; to this extent the film makes its  
29 expectations and demands explicit.

30 Raje visualises a 'modernised' village, one  
31 where the conventions of oppression are resisted  
32 and countered. In order to represent this village,  
33 she creates an iconic village setting, constituting  
34 an allegorical component of the nation-state.  
35 Further, a literal injection of modernity is  
36 introduced through Mansukh's arrival in the  
37 village. Having thus transformed the village, a  
38 consciousness of women's bodies can be played  
39 out in the new setting. Bombay functions at  
40 a similar allegorical level as a constituent  
41 component of the national whole. Rather than  
42 situating the discourse of modernity in and  
43 through urban images, Bombay provides a  
44 narrative anchor to the modernising village. The  
45 dialogue between the urban and rural takes place  
46 through letters and physical journeys; these  
47 journeys bring about and highlight the process  
48 by which the new nation is evolved.

### Towards an Understanding of Women's Cinema

The two films discussed here are marked by the visual, referential, and imaginary mobility they enable between the city and the village. In *Disha* and *Rihaee*, this movement takes the form of actual journeys. Paranjpye uses a classical approach bridging the journey between the village and city with a song in the folk style of the 'tamasha',<sup>35</sup> that pre-empts the adventures of the city before the visual transition of cinematic frames takes place. Subsequent journeys to and fro enable different viewpoints to be represented; a woman's perspective of Bombay through Phulvantibai's eyes, the changes in the village through both Vasant's and Soma's eyes. In *Rihaee*, Raje highlights the rupture between the migrant men and their wives through the exchange of letters, which are repetitive and predictable. These letters enable an imaginary link to be retained between the city and village. The most significant journey in *Rihaee* is the one undertaken by Mansukh, whereby the village becomes transformed through this bearer of a foreign-bred sophistication. The subsequent arrival of the migrant men in Vadner creates the ground for confrontation between a stagnant feudal patriarchy and a changed village. While the imagination of national progress in both *Disha* and *Rihaee* is based on other dominant discursive traditions in Indian political history, these films make a significant contribution to the understanding of nation and development from women's perspectives.

This essay has tried to emphasise that these two films challenged the dominant ideas of progress and modernity in the 1980s and 90s, and the linearity commonly associated with these, by reorganising the syntagm between nation-gender-modernity through narrative and form. The locus of modernity is shifted from its conventional place in the city to the Indian village, which assumes the location where 'progress' is performed. Even as these films generate a utopian vision of the nation which is in sympathy with women, they can be read as texts in the 'minor' tradition by virtue of the

1 combination of utopianism and social critique  
 2 that they present. The blurring of boundaries  
 3 of location as distinct encoders of modernity  
 4 or tradition, and by extension, the blurring of  
 5 the distinction between the modern and the  
 6 traditional itself, represents the 'feminised'  
 7 aesthetic in these films – an aesthetic which can  
 8 be read as being 'feminised' in the context of  
 9 Indian philosophies of perception.<sup>36</sup> These films  
 10 express an alternative vision and language in the  
 11 socio-political context of their thematic content  
 12 and period of release, but the feminisation of this  
 13 language through the subtle reorganisation of  
 14 power-structures is seen to be a characteristic  
 15 feature of women's filmmaking in India right  
 16 across the thirty odd years of active film  
 17 production in the Hindi and English languages.  
 18 The observations about the aesthetics of *Disha*  
 19 and *Rihaae* outlined in this essay, therefore,  
 20 generate a more pressing need to explore Indian  
 21 women filmmakers' treatment of binaries beyond  
 22 those of city/village, to include perceptions of  
 23 self/other, as well as masculine/feminine, which in  
 24 turn, may generate new possibilities within  
 25 Anglo-American film theory to conceptualise the  
 26 association between gender and cinema outside  
 27 the Western tradition.

### Notes

- 34 1 M. Biswas, 'The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and  
 35 the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s',  
 36 in P. Kaarsholm (ed.), *City Flicks: Indian Cinema  
 37 and the Urban Experience* (Calcutta, Seagull Books,  
 38 2004) pp. 40–59.
- 39 2 R. Vasudevan, 'The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre,  
 40 Narrative Form and Film Style in Contemporary  
 41 Urban Action Films' in *City Flicks*, pp. 223–36.
- 42 3 It can be argued that India became attracted to the  
 43 idea of liberalisation much before the 1990s, but for  
 44 the purpose of this paper, the 1990s marked the  
 45 moment when this idea began to occupy much  
 46 prominence in public discourse and policy and  
 47 became a visible influence on cultural production.
- 48 4 'Women's cinema' is a term that Indian filmmakers  
 49 have persistently avoided and film theorists and  
 50 critics have seen as being of marginal interest within  
 51 the larger context of the study of Indian cinemas.  
 52 However, since the 1980s, women have contributed  
 53 in large measure to all aspects of film-making, and  
 in spite of denial by women directors, it is possible  
 to look at this body of work as a collective

demonstrating specific aesthetic and thematic  
 features. Both, film studies and postcolonial feminist  
 studies, would potentially benefit from such an  
 exercise.

- 5 Andrew Higson states that some of the factors  
 which identify a national cinema include the  
 inheritance and circulation of notions of national  
 identity, negotiation of conflicts experienced by the  
 imagined community, production of new  
 representations of the nation, and the construction  
 of a collective consciousness of nationhood through  
 specialised cultural referents. See Andrew Higson,  
 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30:4  
 (1989), 36–46. For various historical, political and  
 aesthetic reasons this definition becomes  
 problematic in the Indian context, not least because  
 of the multiple regional film industries that compete  
 with Bollywood, some such as those in the South,  
 generating a larger quantity of films than produced  
 annually in Bombay. While Hollywood films have  
 posed a lesser threat to Indian films, there has been  
 a concerted effort on behalf of the Indian state and  
 some filmmakers and critics to produce a 'subdued'  
 and realist cinema, different from the excessive and  
 fantastical films associated with Bollywood,  
 generating a question as to the nature of what  
 constitutes a national cinema.
- 6 The nation is being considered here more as an  
 'imagined' community in Benedict Anderson's  
 words, rather than a socio-political formation.  
 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections  
 on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London,  
 Verso, 1983).
- 7 Jameson defines ideologeme as the 'minimal unit' of  
 organisation of class discourse – 'an amphibious  
 formation, whose essential structural characteristic  
 may be described as its possibility to manifest itself  
 either as a pseudo-idea – a conceptual or belief  
 system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice –  
 or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class  
 fantasy about the "collective characters" which are  
 the classes in opposition'. Cited in M. Prasad,  
*Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*  
 (Delhi, OUP, 1998), p. 6. Prasad suggests that the  
 binary tradition/modernity indicates one such  
 'conceptual belief system which regulates thinking  
 about the modern Indian social formation', in  
 addition to being a central theme and organising  
 device in popular film narratives. *Ideology*, p. 7.
- 8 See theories of modernisation as outlined by Gyan  
 Prakash, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Partha Chatterjee in  
 this context, for example in, G. Prakash *Another  
 Reason: Science and the Imagination of a Modern  
 India* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999);  
 S. Kaviraj *Politics in India* (Oxford, OUP, 1997) and  
 'Modernity and Politics in India', *Daedalus*, 129:1  
 (2000) 137–62; P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its  
 Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*  
 (Delhi, OUP, 1994).

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- 1 9 A. Nandy 'Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye  
2 View of Politics', in A. Nandy (ed.), *The Secret  
3 Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability  
4 and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi, OUP, 1998),  
5 pp. 1–19.  
6 10 S. Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian  
7 Sexuality* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990).  
8 11 A large number of scholars in different parts of  
9 the world have contributed to recent developments  
10 in the theorising of Indian cinema, but it would  
11 be worthwhile to indicate that *Deep Focus*  
12 (1988–2005) and the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*  
13 (1983–99) seemed to provide a launch-pad for  
14 these enquiries in the early years.  
15 12 S. Chakravorty, *National Identity in Indian Popular  
16 Cinema, 1947–1987*, (Austin, University of Texas  
17 Press, 1993).  
18 13 Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, pp. 6–14.  
19 14 Ashis Nandy, for example, suggests that 'certain core  
20 anxieties of the Indian civilisation have come to be  
21 reflected in the journey from the village to the city  
22 and the city to the village. Travel through space and  
23 time, the known and the unknown, and ultimately,  
24 the self and the not-self get subsumed through  
25 these two humble forms of journey'. A. Nandy,  
26 *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: the Village  
27 and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian  
28 Imagination* (Delhi, OUP, 2001), pp. 7–8.  
29 15 The term Bumbaiya is affectionately used to describe  
30 the slang-ridden Hindi spoken in Bombay, and which  
31 has become a major feature of the Hindi language  
32 as used in cinema. The word Bom Bahia ('the good  
33 boy') was originally the name given to the islands by  
34 the Portuguese who sailed here in 1508. Later, in  
35 1661, these islands were gifted to Charles II of  
36 England as part of Catherine of Braganza's  
37 wedding dowry.  
38 16 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London,  
39 Routledge, 1994), p. 2.  
40 17 In the Marathi language, Bakuli is the name  
41 of a weed that has small yellow flowers and  
42 grows on arid land.  
43 18 For a range of views on this subject see  
44 C. Das Gupta's, *The Painted Face: Studies in India's  
45 Popular Cinema* (Delhi, Roli Books, 1991); E. Barnow  
46 and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York, OUP,  
47 1980); A. Sircar, 'Framing the Nation: Languages of  
48 Modernity in India' (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation,  
49 University of East Anglia, 1997).  
50 19 Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar who worked as a team  
51 in writing many scripts for Hindi films in the 1970s  
52 and 1980s have often put to use the energies of  
53 unrest in Indian society during this time, and were  
54 instrumental in the creation of Amitabh Bachchan's  
55 star persona as the 'angry young man'.  
56 20 Rajiv Gandhi, 'Foreword', *Seventh Five Year Plan  
57 Report*, Vol. I (Planning Commission, Government of  
58 India, 1985). Available online at [http://](http://planningcommission.nic.in)  
59  
60 21 F. Rangoonwalla, 'The Age of Violence', *Illustrated  
61 Weekly of India*, 4–10 September 1996, pp. 27–29.  
62 22 M. Prasad, 'From Speech to Voice: a Note on a  
63 Realist Turn', *Deep Focus*, 7:3–4 (1997–98),  
64 pp. 51–54.  
65 23 *Ibid.*, p. 53.  
66 24 Kaarsholm, *City Flicks*, p. 6.  
67 25 A. Butler, *Women's Cinema: the Contested Screen*  
68 (London, Wallflower, 2000), pp. 19–23.  
69 26 Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20. Originally from G. Deleuze and  
70 F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*  
71 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986).  
72 27 Deleuze and Guattari elaborate that 'in a minor  
73 literature, every individual issue matters: its cramped  
74 space forces each individual intrigue to connect  
75 immediately to politics. The individual concern thus  
76 becomes all the more necessary, indispensable,  
77 magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating  
78 within it. Because a minor literature emerges from a  
79 deterritorialised group, its function is to conjure up  
80 collectivity, even in the absence of an active  
81 community'. Cited *Ibid.*, p. 20.  
82 28 See P. Chatterjee 'The Nationalist Resolution of the  
83 Women's Question', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds),  
84 *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*  
85 (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1987) pp. 233–53;  
86 U. Chakravorty, 'Whatever Happened to  
87 the Vedic Dasi?' in *Recasting Women*, pp. 27–86;  
88 K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the  
89 Third World* (London, Zed, 1986).  
90 29 J. Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular  
91 Films as Social History* (New Jersey, Rutgers University  
92 Press, 2003), p. 9.  
93 30 M. Prasad, 'Realism and Fantasy in Representations  
94 of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema', in *City Flicks*,  
95 p. 83.  
96 31 The politics of the inner and outer worlds as used by  
97 Indian nationalists has been described by Partha  
98 Chatterjee in *Recasting Women*, pp. 233–53. The  
99 segregation into tradition bound inner domain, of  
100 which women became symbols in history, and the  
101 changing/Westernising outer domain inhabited by  
102 men may have been a useful defence mechanism  
103 during colonial times, however, its limitations from  
104 the perspective of gender have been extensively  
105 documented. See also U. Chakravorty in *Recasting  
106 Women*, pp. 27–86.  
107 32 R. Kumar, *The History of Doing: an Illustrated  
108 Account of Movements for Women's Rights and  
109 Feminism in India 1800–1990* (London, Verso,  
110 1993).  
111 33 *Ibid.*, p. 109.  
112 34 In villages in India the panchayat has been  
113 established as a medium of local governance and is  
114 comprised of village elders and influential persons  
115 who resolve local and domestic disputes through the  
116 method of negotiation and consensus.  
117 35 A musical folk drama tradition developed in the early  
118 eighteenth-century in Maharashtra.



1 36 In *Women's I/Eye*, I have argued that one of the  
 2 defining characteristics of Indian women's cinema is  
 3 the aesthetic of non-dualism. In this tradition, the  
 4 'other' is experienced as a projection of the self, and  
 5 this outlook influences the manner in which points  
 6 of identification are set up through the narrative and  
 7 through filming and editing, which in turn  
 8 influences spectatorship. The viewing relations set  
 9 up by women's films in India are influenced by larger  
 10 perceptions of bisexuality and gender transgression,  
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as well as by the sub-culture of gender transgression  
 evident in mainstream Indian society. Therefore,  
 frequently, one finds that in women's films,  
 conventional binaries are subverted or applied  
 to a different grammar of cinema, inviting  
 interpretations that are unconventionally feminist  
 within the Anglo-American theoretical context.  
 R. Sawhney, *Women's I/Eye: A Critical Study of  
 Women's Cinema in India* (Unpublished Ph.D.  
 dissertation, University of Limerick, 2006).

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