11 The Rise and Fall of Secular Realism

Notes on the Postcolonial Documentary Film from India[1]

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Abstract
In this chapter, I argue that a deeply influential turn in Indian history was signaled and influenced by a series of videos circulated by Hindu nationalists in the late 1980s. This turn in Indian history helped prepare the political sphere for its rejection of secularism, and for the onset of more exclusionary forms of nationalism. These videos conveyed a largely fictious history in the style of a factual film, with soundtrack and voiceover mimicking newsreel or documentary footage. Rather than treat this cinematic detour as irrelevant or epiphenomenal, as the prevailing scholarly division of labor has assumed, this chapter seeks to outline a series of mediatic forms that accompany the ascendance of Hindu nationalism, and to clarify the mechanism of their succession.

Keywords: documentary, Cold War, communication revolution, Global South

Postcolonial Documentary Film

Documentary film was conceived as a form of propaganda, but in the name of reality itself. The authority that reality exercised was not decisive on its own, to be sure. Visual realism, where the unaided gaze of the spectator yielded socially approved perception/knowledge, could not be self-evident without supplementation. In fact, where cultural and other differences had religious and ritual sanction, such as in the heterogeneous contexts of

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postcolonial society, the claim of an all- knowing perspective could only be external and superimposed. This was of course precisely what colonial rule sought to institute, and that postcolonial governments adapted for their own purposes.

The form of visual realism enacted in such contexts could not presume the incontestability of the viewing subject's own perspective. Rather it depended on the signs of what was originally colonial power, whose truth claims emerged and were certified in the metropole and subsequently introduced into the colonies. Assertions about the actuality of the world had to be adjudicated by referring not to nature so much as to the signs and stigmata of overarching authority, that might achieve dominance but rarely won consent. Realism, in other words, referred to the enunciating agent and its own authority rather than to a rationalized and disenchanted world where stable and replicable forms of knowledge could arise.[2]

Thus John Grierson remarked on the Indian documentary film in 1950:

> The problems are huge and not least the problems of education and national planning which affect the film medium most. It would take a brave man to write a plan for India at the present time, and Nehru, who keeps returning to the film problem when he can, is right to hold his hand until the native genius in the matter has sorted itself out.[3]

The native genius did not sort itself out in this matter as conveniently as Grierson had perhaps expected, unfortunately, India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's endorsement of the importance of the cinema for national development notwithstanding.[4]

In this chapter, I argue that a deeply influential turn in Indian history was signaled and influenced by a series of propaganda videos circulated by Hindu nationalists in the late 1980s. This turn in Indian history helped prepare the political sphere for its rejection of secularism, and for the onset

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2   This important argument has been made by Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 31-2 and *passim*. See also the excellent essay by Allen Feldman, "Faux Documentary and the Memory of Realism," *American Anthropologist* 100:2 (1998): 494-509.

3   John Grierson, "Reporting Progress," *Indian Documentary* 5 (March 1950). See also Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: a documentary biography*, 1979, pp. 38-39 and *passim*.

4   Jawaharlal Nehru, "Influence of the Cinema," speech at the inauguration of a film seminar, New Delhi, February 27, 1955, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, second series, 28 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 445.

of more exclusionary forms of nationalism. The videos in question conveyed a largely fictious history in the style of a factual film, with soundtrack and voiceover mimicking newsreel or documentary footage.

The choice to work within the documentary genre suggests the invocation of visual realist codes of interpretation, that depended on the veracity attributed to those perspectives. The memory of documentary realism can be traced to the Indian Films Division's decades-long circulation of documentary films, that essentially, provided state propaganda on national development. Cinema halls were obliged by the Government to screen twenty minutes of Films Division-approved documentaries prior to the main feature, in addition to paying one per cent of their net receipts to support these documentaries. Unfortunately, it also ensured that cinema hall owners disliked the practice and sought ways to evade it.

The omniscient voice-of-God soundtrack, with its narrative linking and framing of documentary evidence presented, had its own uses, however. Now, the documentary had been envisaged as a means of improving the public's critical reasoning, by connecting image sequences with ideas that appeared to be inscribed in reality as such. Such expectations presupposed a rationalization of the social world through scientific education, industrialization and urbanization. In independent India, documentary cinema sought to advance inchoate processes of rationalization, through filmic devices that became the emblems and heralds of a distinct form of authority. This form of authority asserted its basis in reason, although in ways that were not themselves available for critique. It was continuous with colonial power, to the extent that its acceptance was a prior condition for its pedagogical efficacy. Not surprisingly, the dramaturgy and scenography of claim-making were influential, while the pedagogical content became dispensable.

Thus the Hindu nationalist documentaries offered claims about the world that were pre-certified by faith, that required political struggle to actualize as worldly truth. Ironically, the calls for national revolution that Nehru regularly made, that built on the prestige of the ruling party's anticolonial victory, had made little impact during the heyday of state-led planning. It was the conservative opposition's later attempts at mobilization, that gave the idea of revolution a new life, and a wholly different meaning.

Rather than ignore these Hindu nationalist videos or treat them as irrelevant or epiphenomenal within the history of Indian documentary film, I try in this chapter to clarify the mediatic forms at work. As should be clear, I am suggesting that the political shift towards Hindu nationalism was accompanied by a broader set of perceptual transformations that created the

conditions of possibility for the reception of Hindu nationalists' arguments
as both viable and ideologically dominant.

The genre of the documentary film played a specific part in postcolonial
development, at least until the end of the Cold War, which also accompanied
the onset of market liberalization in India. Investment in documentary
films, alongside other forms of communication, reflected the government's
effort to institute fact-setting protocols aimed at legitimating its authority
and instituting economic growth, albeit while espousing a kind of power
that as a recent study has shown, could appear quite like that of the colonial
government in the one-way character of its communication.

Not only the fact of religious diversity, which acquired a politically
explosive character with independence, but the unreformed character
of the religions involved, notably the majority Hindu religion, meant that
state secularism lacked hegemony. The political eclipse of secular realism
and the rise of Hindu nationalism in its place, while it has many facets,
is unintelligible without an interrogation of media history more broadly.
Film has a role in this history, but so too do other media such as the press,
audio and videocassettes, and television. Any attempt to treat the category
of film apart from these other media leads to a partial and potentially
misleading account of historical developments. Film history may become
artificially insulated from social and political currents dominant in the
region; the task of understanding risks being sacrificed so the names of
cinema and film can be affirmed. Instead, in this chapter I argue that the
post- Independence history of Indian cinema, especially the dispersion of
the filmic language of documentary realism into other media, has enabled
new forms of popular visuality that have been crucial to the project of
Hindu majoritarianism.

Developmentalism and the Indian Documentary

The Indian documentary tends to be treated as a genre unto itself, but its
history is better understood in relation to that of the feature film industry.
The two together are a specific instance of the relationship between the public
sector and the private sector in India, with all the peculiar conditions applying
to each sector. The feature film business, as symbolized by the Hindi film
industry, evolved a formula that reflected both the scope and the limits of
national development: the police always arrived after the crime was solved and
the culprit apprehended. Indian society was self-regulating; the state merely
endorsed this self-regulation, being external to the actual functioning of

society, according to the formula.[5] Films Division documentaries, by contrast, championed the national revolution that the developmental state claimed it was driving. Documentaries presumed the centrality of the state, and affirmed the ethos of national development, which was future-oriented and as such, required a sympathetic imagination of their viewers. The fiction films reflected the lived truth of that development for their audience, together with the avoidance of social reform and the formulaic inclusion of minorities alongside a Hindu majority. Whereas the "factual" documentary films offered the vision of an orchestrated process of national development, that political leaders believed was a necessary fiction. Together, the two sectors can be understood as part of a passive revolution, in Gramsci's terms, with a ruling coalition advancing capitalist growth from above in order to thwart the possibility of change from below going out of control.[6] The different reception of commercial films and of Films Division documentaries, respectively, together reflects the mixed fortunes of the political project of secular national development.

Chroniclers of the Indian documentary have suggested that perhaps no other country produced more documentary films. By 1967, more than 40,000 35 mm prints of FD documentaries and newsreels circulated among Indian cinema houses, reaching as many as 25 million people every week in 5,400 cinema halls. Throughout its first two decades, the Films Division issued approximately 200 prints for theatrical distribution per week, half of which were newsreels and the other half documentaries. Each newsreel and documentary was dubbed into fourteen language versions: Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.[7] Although business houses, notably, Burmah Shell, commissioned numerous documentary films, the principal sponsor was the Films Division. The majority of the producers were "outside producers" or OPs, in government language, however.[8]

5   See Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

6   On the relevance of the "passive revolution" for post-independent India, see the essays by Partha Chatterjee, "On Gramsci's Fundamental Mistake," *Economic & Political Weekly* 223, no. 5 (January 30, 1988): PE 24–PE26; and by Sudipta Kaviraj, "A Critique of the Passive Revolution," *Economic & Political Weekly* 23, no. 45–47 (November 1988): 2429–44.

7   Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948–75* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91. See also https://www.mib.gov.in/film/films-division.

8   One indicator is an observation of the FD Controller-cum-Chief Producer K. L. Khandpur that more than three-quarters of the producers were external to FD. F. Da Gama, "Do Documentaries Communicate?" *Times of India*, July 16, 1972.

I refer to the documentary cinema to indicate a class of mediatic forms, incubated in the cinema, that subsequently morph across a range of media platforms. The documentary film genre claimed the authority of filmic truth, but it did so in a variety of ways. The claim of visual realism presumed that what was before the camera was what the viewer saw. The aesthetic processes of sense-making however, could vary, even if their political allegiances dovetailed. One chronicler notes:

> Films of every conceivable genre were made: biographicals, [...] art films, [...] education, instructional and informational films like *Naya Paisa* [on the reformed currency system] and *Metric System*; films on social education like *Pause and Think* [...] and *The Case of Mr. Critic*; export and tourist promotion films like *Hill Stations of South India* and *Taj Mahal*. [...] When one thinks of the number of films that the FD had had to churn out over the years, in different genres and often at short notice, one cannot but excuse the varying qualities of the documentaries made. Besides, the quality or novelty of the films was not always the criteria. Speed and quantity were also important criteria since a network of all-India theatres had to be fed with new films 52 times a year.[9]

Not only was the range of films produced wide, the name "documentary" was not uniformly applied to all of them. Rather, there was an abundance of nomenclature, suggesting a range of attempts to inscribe reality claims onto the cinema. There was little attempt to reign in terminological variety: short film, factual film, actuality film and government film, in addition to documentary, and in addition, there were provisional names such as quickie and filler. They were not designated as fictional or feature films, but the ways in which they distinguished themselves from the former was not rigorously policed. It hinted at the limited market: the Films Division was virtually the only customer for most of the films. Within its remit of serving national development, films could adopt a personal tone, and try to establish rapport with viewers. Or a voice-of-God accompaniment could be used to cue viewers to correlate images with the stated notions about the world. The latter feature, often observable in FD documentaries, was in part an outcome of the technology; once mobile cameras and sync sound became available, that is, by the mid-1960s, the voices of the person on the street or in the fields began to be heard. Here, too, though, encouragement and support from bureaucratic heads was crucial; the

9   Sanjit Narwekar, "Rewind to 1948," *Documentary Today* 1, no. 4 (2008): 8.

best FD films were produced when Jean Bhownagry led the division in the 1960s, with films directed by Pramod Pati, S. Sukhdev, and S. N. S. Sastry, for example.[10]

The militant Hindu videos that emerged in the late 1980s, reflected a new trend. Taking advantage of the cheaper technology that became available by the late 1980s, private producers began to circulate video cassettes to serve election campaigns, that often did not receive an exhibition certificate or approval from the censors but achieved substantial audiences nonetheless. The New Delhi-based J. K. Jain Studios, run by an entrepreneurial surgeon who succeeded in winning the favour of some leaders of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the now-dominant Hindu nationalist party), produced the bulk of these Hindu videos. They presented Indian nationalism as a centuries-old Hindu struggle against Muslim oppression. The overt themes in this sub-genre were of critique, exhortation, and recruitment—themes that featured in government documentary films also, although in this case the critique was not of social practices but of the government itself, and recruitment was for a cause against, not on behalf of the government. In effect, they adopted a kind of documentary realism but in the service of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the World Hindu Council, the para-political "cultural" organization that in the 1980s and 1990s, oversaw much of the Hindu nationalist mobilization.[11]

What Hindu militant videos included in addition, however, rule it out of consideration for most discussions of the documentary genre: reconstructed scenes of divine miracles performed by deities, set to voice-over and devotional music. The cinematic claim to realism however is the novelty here, carrying as it does the proposal to recalibrate political power with historical knowledge. Since these videos were first released, Hindu nationalists have shifted from an oppositional to a dominant position in India, and Hindu nationalism has become the backdrop and stage for an increasing proportion of Bollywood films.[12]

10   Paromita Vohra, "Dotting the I: The Politics of Self-less-ness in Indian Documentary Practice," *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 1 (2011): 43–53.

11   For the only book-length treatment of these videos, see Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

12   Haris Zargar. "How Bollywood Furthers India's Hindu Nationalism," *New Frame*, February 4, 2020, https://www.newframe.com/how-bollywood-furthers-indias-nationalism/; Sanjay Kak, "The Dangerous 'Truth' of *The Kashmir Files*," Aljazeera.com, April 13, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/13/the-dangerous-truth-of-the-kashmiri-files; Snigdha Poonam. "How Hindutvavadis Are Successfully Trolling Bollywood." *Caravan Magazine*, August 11, 2014, https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/how-hindutvavadis-are-successfully-trolling-bollywood.

The socio-technical mediation of Hindu nationalist imagery began with bazaar, or calendar art. Cinematic treatment of Hindu imagery alternated between realist and mythological representation. The birth of the Hindu nationalist film appeared relatively late in the life of the Indian nation—in 1990, coincidentally, the year that the Eastern Bloc collapsed. The tone and tenor of the Hindutva videos was of an independence movement, as if the struggle against colonialism would not be complete until the Congress Party was toppled.[13] If the government documentary aimed at nation-building, the Hindutva videos adopted the epistemological claims of that film form, albeit with an oppositional stance.[14] The context of the Indian documentary film's making deserves discussion for this reason if for no other.

The Strange Career of Documentary Realism

The long "deep freeze" of the Cold War, which led to stable political regimes in many parts of the world, was also a time when the cinema and other mass media became more widely available. Relatively long-standing frames of perception became established at this time, matching the official wisdom in a given nation with what was shown on screen, more or less. This was visual realism, usually defined such that magical and religious modes of perception, even if popular, lacked official sanction. Secular modernization was a shared horizon across many nations during the Cold War, but since "godless communism" made religion an ally of "freedom," no consistent position on secularism could follow.

The documentary film was the principal locus for the state's visual realism, the prosaic reference point amidst the effervescence of popular entertainment that formed the greater part of media production. Post-colonial societies the world over assigned the documentary film authoritative status, as a significant genre of communication of peculiar relevance for the nation state. They offered space for discursive engagement with a wide public, and hence became a genre of state discourse, where secular modernization was the rationale for nation-building. The documentary offered approved lessons in civics, history, and society, and it constituted an attempt by educated

13   This is the party that had led the country to freedom from the British, and that became the chief opponent of the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP.

14   Despite a ban on the Hindu nationalist video on their illegal attempt to attack the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, which was at the centre of their agitation, 100,000 copies of the video were circulated. See "Don't Black out Film on Ayodhya, govt. Told," *Times of India*, December 3, 1990, 13.

elites, usually in concert with state institutions, to shape understandings of the past and the future in ways consonant with the prevailing political regime. The protocols it devised for distinguishing fact from fiction, such as a male voice-over framing the images shown, influenced other genres such as newsreels and news telecasts, and, to an extent, the feature film, too.[15]

Documentary realism represented the masses simultaneously as an ethical force, a source of legitimation, and yet, as also needing social uplift and education. As such, the documentary was a political tool and implicitly, an aesthetic project of the early Indian state, viewing society as a space porous to state intervention, without obstacles hindering such intervention, such as religious practices that could challenge state authority. Reinforcing this way of seeing was a range of state instrumentalities, from requiring cinema operators to screen government documentaries prior to every main feature, to funding for alternative cinema, and measures to contain and orient public debates, including the state monopoly over the airwaves, government advertisements for the media, newsprint allocations and other forms of controls on the press. Cinema and other communication technologies projected the state as an entity over and beyond its numerous and discrepant activities, and as a unified and far-reaching system. Implicitly exaggerating its coherence and extent, media were thus crucial as a basis for imagining the state not only for citizens, but for the state itself. The National Emergency of 1975–1977 was the high point of representing state power in this way, identifying it with the then-ruling Congress Party as the undisputed leader of the anti-colonial struggle.[16]

The representational practices of the state could obviously not remain unchanged, but had to adapt to the evolving character of political dynamics. Certainly the secular realism underwriting documentary film belongs to a "past future," that is, to an anticipated future now declared moribund.[17]

15   Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 32–65; Priya Jaikumar, "Regulatory: The State in Films Division's Himalayan Documentaries," in *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (2019), 75–121; Sutoris, ibid.

16   See Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1988): 58–89. The National Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, 1975–1977, is a period when the kind of relation I note here, between state power and social perception, acquires heightened significance. See Arvind Rajagopal, "The Emergency as Pre-history of the New Indian Middle Class," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2011): 1003–49, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X10000314.

17   See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

A political theology of Hindu nationalism has taken its place.[18] Erstwhile devices of realism have been repurposed to attest to truths that oppose many of the old verities. For example, Hindu nationalists increasingly argue that secularism was a plot to subjugate the Hindu majority, conjured by colonial elites and India's minorities, and that only Hindu majoritarianism can ensure the well-being of both the majority and the minority. As a marker of how prevalent religious superstition has become, with market success providing sanction for all manner of concocted information, the following example is instructive. In 2008, a leading television channel, in its evening news report, conducted a "special investigation" in Sri Lanka to discover the "air force" of the demon-king Ravana, who is a mythological character.[19] The fact-setting protocols of the documentary genre were retooled for altogether different ends by militant Hindu nationalists, who, since the early 1990s, had sought to dominate the media space as a prelude to seizing power.[20]

Although many of the key contentions in the Hindu nationalist films contradicted existing evidence, their function was to mobilize a Hindu majority.[21] Rapid cuts of fast-moving images and sounds commanded audience attention, while a voice-over commentary clarified how to make sense of the assemblage. Scorned by most filmmakers as low-quality, historically fallacious, and violent in intent, we can classify them as documentary less for their content, largely a patchwork of montage and staged sequences, than for their style, which mimicked the newsreel and the documentary with voice-over. Videos such as *Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jaye* (*Commitments Endure Even If Life Is Lost*), *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* (*God Manifests Himself*), and *Ekatmata Yagna* (*Unity Ritual/Sacrifice*), were circulated in cassette form even as the government debated banning them for their incendiary character, during the height of Hindu nationalist mobilization in 1990–1992.[22]

18   Anustup Basu, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

19   Nalin Mehta, "Ravana's Airforce: A Report on the State of Indian Television," *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 4 (October 2012), 614–25.

20   The historical culture of Indian-language news provides a quite different starting point for the growth of fake news, in relation to, say, Breitbart in the US. Rumour and the printing press are closely allied. Western norms of objectivity and balance in news have historically been variously interpreted over time in the Indian-language press. As such, "fake news" although exponentially more voluminous than before, is hardly novel.

21   For an earlier discussion along these lines on the Hindutva videos, see Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra, "On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation," *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 7–20.

22   See Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

Within fifteen years, such content became normalized, and could air on mainstream television channels without remark.[23]

At the time of writing, India's Hindu majority appears set for political dominance into the foreseeable future. If media were central to the task of secular national development, what scholars did not foresee was how rapidly they could be repurposed for a very different conception of the nation, one in which Hindu upper castes could be reassured of their status, while the content of state communication was adjusted to suit this end. Older definitions of the documentary genre have in efffect, been left stranded by history.

Films Division as an Author of State Speech

Observers have often tended to assume that independent film constitutes the most important work produced in the documentary genre in India. Thus, international interest in the Indian documentary cinema has for many years, and until recently, focused mainly on independent film production. However, Hindu nationalism's widespread vilification and negation of Nehru and the secular style of nation-building he represented have been among the reasons scholars have begun to attend to what they took for granted before, namely the institutional bases of Nehruvian culture. Scholarship on independent documentary films began to address critical-realist interventions of a kind that appeared new in Indian cinema.[24]

In terms of mass outreach, the Films Division was the single most important. The Films Division of India, with several thousand titles to its credit between its founding in 1948 and the present,[25] was, in the pre-television

23   See Mehta, "Ravana's Airforce."

24   E.g. Rajagopal and Vohra, "On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film," 7–20; Anuja Jain, "The Curious Case of the Films Division: Some Annotations on the Beginnings of Indian Documentary Cinema in Post-independence India, 1940s–1960s," *The Velvet Light Trap* 71, no. 1 (2013): 15–26; Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948–75* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro, *A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016); Giulia Battaglia, *Documentary Film in India: An Anthropological History* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017); Shweta Kishore, *Indian Documentary Film and Filmmakers: Independence in Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Tilottama Karlekar, "Can There Be Another Vikalp? Documentary Film, Censorship Histories, and Film Festival Publics in India," *South Asian History and Culture* 10, no. 4 (2019): 422–42; Jaikumar. "Regulatory;" Tom Waugh, "Words of Command: Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary," *CineAction* 23 (1991): 28–39.

25   See https://www.mib.gov.in/film/films-division.

era, the largest producer of non-fiction films in the country. Preceded by the Film Advisory Board (1940) and Information Films of India (1943), colonial organizations for wartime propaganda, the Films Division, founded in 1948, had a charter that encompassed not only the films it produced, but reflected the state's communication policy of assisting and activating national development. The films pursued this mission not only with the content of their messages, but crucially, through their realist form.

The film historian Philip Woods has noted, "the government of independent India [...] set up what must have been the highest level of state intervention in the cinema industry outside the communist world."[26] Since every cinema hall had to screen a newsreel or a documentary lasting twenty minutes prior to every screening, the cumulative exposure for Films Division documentaries has been enormous. Although chroniclers and historians of the documentary have drawn attention to fine achievements sponsored by the Films Division, for non-specialists the dominant impression of the history of Indian documentary films is that it made no difference.[27] And since the effects aimed for were not achieved, there is little point in studying this site of state practices, or so it is assumed. The following quote is illustrative:

> The Films Division held a virtual monopoly on the documentary film in India during the first four decades of Independence, fattened by a regimen of omnipresent and compulsory (but little heeded) theatrical screenings. Only in the 1980s has its paralyzing grip—aesthetic, political, and economic—been eroded by upstart independents and television documentarists. [...] The Films Division has ensured at least one consensus among its independent successors [...]: Films Division fare has been [...] universally hated [...]![28]

This observation by an insightful commentator on the independent documentary in India indicates the extent to which one of the key branches of a major government ministry could be treated as nugatory. The significance of the government's investment in the Films Division, however, was not reducible to its products, whatever the quality.

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26   Philip Woods, "The British Use of Film Propaganda in India in the Second World War," *Indian Horizons* (January–March 2001): 23. My thanks to Peter Sutoris for this reference.

27   Most recent among these is Peter Sutoris, ibid. See also B. D. Garga, *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-fiction Film in India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

28   Waugh, "Words of Command," 29.

The government invested its documentary films with the sense of a political mission. Rather than ignore that mission or dismiss it as a failed enterprise, we should inquire into the character of the project, and what historical understanding sustained it. "Development" is the usual description, but the term conveys neither the energy nor the urgency that political leaders projected and sought to reproduce. Instead, we can refer to a word that swept across the world in the twentieth century, and was the focus of its most sustained geopolitical concerns, certainly in the West. That word was neither *capitalism* nor *communism*, not *development*, *progress*, or *modernization*, nor was it *freedom*, *markets*, or *commerce*. It was *revolution*, a word with an equivalent in every Indian language, a term indispensable for popular mobilization, one that is encountered on virtually every occasion of grassroots insurgency.[29] After World War II, the Cold War was the backdrop against which the spread of this word occurred. And the Cold War, of course, represented a battle between the superpowers over the fate of revolution in the rest of the world. Even if a communist revolution was not likely everywhere, revolution itself was an idea whose time had come, and political leaders found themselves obliged to claim the term to legitimate their activity. Here, for example, is India's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru:

> Addressing the third annual conference of the Technical Cooperation Mission personnel in India today, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru said that [...] in India, unlike in Europe or America, political revolution had preceded industrial or economic revolution. [...] By political revolution he [...] meant adult franchise—the political consciousness of 300 million people raising their demands for a better life—and most of these demands were justified.[30]

Simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of the category and reassuring his audience of foreign and Indian experts, Nehru was indicating the need for a balance between maintaining domestic order and satisfying urgent demands for change, already proven explosive in neighbouring China and elsewhere. The demand for political revolution could not be assuaged by incremental economic development alone, he was pointing out. The Cold War might be thought of as an inhibiting factor. In fact, the term "revolution" remained

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29   See Arvind Rajagopal, "Communicationism: Cold War Humanism," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 353–80.
30   "India's Efforts at Development. Role of Cottage Industries. Mr. Nehru Stresses Importance," *The Hindu*, November 22, 1957.

crucial in mediating the Cold War, certainly in nonaligned countries such as India.

Interestingly in India, the very name of the Cold War is a relatively rare occurrence in English-language writing. Hence the following mention, in an essay by a historian of the Indian documentary in the early 1960s, stands out. The author, Jag Mohan describes the period as "a time in our national history when there is a 'cold war' between the Public and Private Sectors in all industries and when the terms 'Free Enterprise' and 'State Ownership' have acquired peculiar connotations." What Jag Mohan's remark suggests is that national development, far from being a sovereign activity, in some ways reflected and reproduced geopolitics. Advocates for the private sector denounced state initiatives as socialist, while administrators and politicians could question the integrity or the developmental commitment of businesses. Parliamentary debates underlined this tension.[31]

Licences were granted by state authorities, but they were also tradable commodities within the nation's thriving extralegal and black-market economies, which meant that licences extended state power while also becoming objects through which state authority could be ingeniously circumnavigated. Jag Mohan goes on:

> At the very outset I must confess to the conflict within myself regarding my Socialist leanings and my close association with the Private Sector of the Indian Short Film Industry during the last two decades. [...] [I]t is my firm conviction that through the years the Private Sector, as represented by individuals who have got to be creative artists in this field, has played a dominant role and has even sustained the Documentary Movement in this country.[32]

What Jag Mohan's remark suggests is that national development, far from being a sovereign activity, in some ways reflected and reproduced geopolitics. He himself expressed no preference for one side or the other; his point was rather to survive the conflict, and if possible to make the most of it. In the historical survey of documentary cinema that he frames by invoking the Cold War, he provides a series of lists, of good films and directors, and of

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31   See, for example, the debate between M. R. Masani and Jawaharlal Nehru in *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. XLIV, cols. 1665–1682, August 9, 1960. See also Arvind Rajagopal, "The Cold War Era as a Rule of Experts: A View from India," in *Dipesh Chakrabarty and the Global South*, ed. Saurabh Dube, Sanjay Seth, and Ajay Skaria (London: Routledge, 2020), 122–39.

32   Jag Mohan, "Panorama of the Private Sector of the Indian Short Film Industry," *MARG* 2, no. 4 (1962): 9.

good and bad patrons organized around government failures. Despite his awareness of its structuring condition, his own survey only reproduced the antagonism between public and private sectors.

If "Cold War" signals an impasse, there must be other terms in use that oppose this impasse whether expressed as a geopolitical stalemate, or as a clash between public and private sector, that nationalist discourse uses as either a lens or a shield. Within the documentary scholarship, it is instructive to turn to another significant historian of Films Division documentaries, B. D. Garga, who criticizes what the public sector itself produced:

> None of the spirit of a nascent nation coming into her own or the new conception of citizenship found its way into [the work of the Films Division]. Their idea of expressing [...] national pride was too often treated in images of parades against a skyline with flags flying, and seldom in serious studies of India's people and their problems.[33]

Here we have some clues. National spirit and citizenship are needed; they must be shown. These are abstract terms and pose problems of representation, but the author treats them simply as missing ingredients, as if anyone should know how to depict them. Problems of representation turn into issues of fact once again when he complains about the Films Division's portrayals of national integration. They are, he writes: "more often aesthetic than sociological. It is the colourfulness of the costumes, the pageantry of the festivals and rituals, rather than the socio-economic [issues] [...] that have been touched upon."[34]

One could object that it was precisely *aisthesis* (perceptual revealing) that was needed, but the author wants socio-economic data that would be numerical and hence abstract, but they are implied to be concrete. Questions of representation are thus suggested but again deflected.

An influential official report on government publicity, on the failure of the documentary film, offers a term which seems to be the missing element in Garga's account as well as Jag Mohan's: "[K]nown playwrights are reluctant to devote their pens to Plan and Developmental themes. [...] There appears to be no emotional involvement on their part in the revolutionary development process under way."[35] Here I turn again to the most prominent theorist of

33 B. D. Garga, "A Critical Survey," *MARG* 2, no. 4 (1962): 15.
34 Garga, *ibid.*
35 Amarnath Vidyalankar, *Report of the Study Team on Five Year Plan Publicity* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965), 82–83, Sec 8.1.

India's national revolution, selecting from one of Jawaharlal Nehru's many exhortations on the subject, where the prime minister is speaking to a conference of newspaper editors: "There is nothing more dangerous in this new age of revolution when we are building up India and when the world itself is changing rapidly, than to relapse into complacency." Nehru went on to ask editors and reporters to convey the feeling of excitement and spirit of adventure to readers. In doing so, they would merely be expressing the true feelings of people around them, he said.[36]

The idea of "revolution" can be found in many government reports of the Nehruvian period. It confirms that even if we want to think of the state as a space of bureaucratic failure, we actually cannot understand the impetus for state actions without the concept. Here is the above-mentioned report on publicity:

> Our planners have spelt out the aims and objects of the new society we are seeking to bring into existence in which the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the mighty and the humble, the farmer and the factory man will equally share the benefits of modern science and technology. [...] It is our considered view that radical socio-economic changes that the Plans are attempting to bring about require publicity to be organized on a war footing. The strategy of Plan publicity should be aimed at the generation of an atmosphere of urgency in the achievement of desired national goals.[37]

The language is abstract; it indexes a rhetoric of exhortation that legitimates the activity of bureaucrats and leaders, and asserts equality in social outcomes without any evidence of it. Radical change on a war footing so that rich and poor can share alike is a fair description of "revolutionary development," the term used elsewhere in the same report. It is as if the idea of a national revolution were turned into a spectacle representing the state's oversight of nation-building.

The truth claims of the documentary film therefore had to be certified by the state before audiences were permitted to judge them; documentaries to be screened in cinema theatres had to receive the Films Division's approval. However, what the Films Division judged as suitable for the majority did not necessarily suit the majority itself. One author noted: "[N]ewspapers advertise

36   "Prime Minister Reaffirms Faith in Freedom of Press: Call to settle disputes by cooperative approach," *Times of India*, November 9, 1957, 7.

37   Vidyalankar, *Report of the Study Team*, 11. Sec 2.6 and p. 18, Sec 3.16.

the exact timing of the main features for the benefit of their patrons. [...] [This] has a grim story to tell about the popularity of the [documentary] shorts."[38] Audiences were being assisted by the press in sidestepping the documentary; meanwhile the Censor Board itself eliminated friendly allusions to East Bloc countries and to socialism, while presenting pro-American views.

Assuredly, non-aligned development, far from being a smoothly orchestrated process, involved conflicts between rival visions and interests within the nation. However, what is more noteworthy is how the state's media infrastructure provided the ground where the seeds of political division could be sown. People were liable to be mobilized for interests that they could not necessarily perceive, responding as they did to perceptual stimuli made available through new communications technologies. Infrastructures are the invisible basis of whatever common forms of life are available. They are meant to afford convenience and utility to all without discrimination, and arguably they usually do so in the West. But where demand far exceeds available resources, infrastructures may operate as switching systems, diverting resources according to prevailing constraints and conveniences. Thus, when describing the character of water availability, one resident of Mumbai noted, "See, if water comes, it's because of politics, and if water doesn't come, it's because of politics."[39]

Historians have documented the resistance provoked by projects to build infrastructures for electric power, when the people being served realized they were being divided and partitioned at the same time.[40] In contrast, the material infrastructures assembling and channelling public attention conjured something new into being, and did not necessarily become sites of political opposition. It's worth recalling that the arrival of television was typically welcomed as the onset of free entertainment. In a memorable remark, a Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting, justifying the government's reliance on the cinema, explained that if films ceased to be broadcast, "No one will watch TV."[41] If the people's attention could be harnessed, the government was going to do it. What was going to be done with that attention could be decided later.

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38   Panna Shah, *The Indian Film* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1950), 211.
39   Lisa Björkman. *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 222.
40   Fredrik Meiton, "Electrifying Jaffa: Boundary-work and the Origins of the Arab–Israeli Conflict," *Past and Present* 231 (May 2016): 231.
41   H. K. L. Bhagat, quoted in *The Indian Express*, June 22, 1983.

Secular Realism

Despite the typically polemical character of their content, independent documentary films shared with state films what I have called "secular realism," representational conventions that portray culturally and phenomenologically diverse domains (e.g. of different caste and religious communities), with state reason as an implicitly meliorative connection across them. Secular realism is a concept that has come into view after a historical setback, as a receding representational protocol allied to a now bygone political modus vivendi. It was a recognizable ideal even if it did not become a lived reality for everyone; it was meant to afford a public realm of rational adjudication across social differences, with coercion as a last resort.

Secular realism could not be a purely descriptive mode of representation. It was always proleptic, anticipating a future in which social parity and communal harmony would be achieved. The present by contrast was a time of preparation; no nation was built in a day after all. As such, secular realism was a promissory schema rather than a code for empirically depicting the world. It was part of the state's manifesto for change. We can understand it, in some respects, as the non-aligned Global South's analogue to socialist realism under Soviet communism. What was shared between them was the idea of the masses as a new political subject with a set of representational protocols or aesthetic practices best suited to the ethics of bringing them into visibility/viewership. Secular realism was an aesthetic principle for post-colonial nation-building in countries such as India, where religious and sectarian issues could inhibit class solidarity and national unity. We can clarify the use of the term by discussing the contrasting concept of socialist realism in the East Bloc, mentioned here.

Communism in the East Bloc presumed the need to define a collective in positive and universal terms. Although it upheld the party as the supreme arbiter of what that collective ought to be, it enunciated the need for a transnational politics that bridged national and imperial rivalries. Its aesthetics, articulated by Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky in 1934, ruled Soviet art and literature until the mid-1980s. Until recently, socialist realism was understood relatively straightforwardly as a representational mode for depicting the concrete reality of the Soviet revolution.[42] But since the revolution had to be imagined in order to be realized, the doctrine was

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42   Alla Efimova, "To Touch on the Raw: The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism." *Art Journal* 56, no. 1 (1997): 72–80.

subject to interpretation. How exactly artists did so has been subject to critical reappraisal over the last several years. In an influential account, Boris Groys has argued that the Soviet project was, fundamentally, an aesthetic one. In this conception, the real world was subsumed within aesthetic categories to constitute a perceptual order, rather than offering a mutely contradictory external referent. Soviet socialism was held to be a fait accompli; the task of socialist realist art was therefore to depict this accomplishment, judged by the accuracy with which the revolution's success was depicted, and by its ability to invoke feelings resonant with socialism's achievements.[43] While there are debates about the relationship between politics and aesthetics, not to mention the hollowing out of progressive potential of such art work with Stalinism, the main point to note here is that this twentieth-century revolution imagined the citizen-worker as someone whose mode of emerging into visibility was marked by a rupture or break in the order of bourgeois representation.

Secular realism by comparison did not have official status; it has to be reconstructed from partial and under-elaborated representations that circulated until the 1970s and are now relatively scarce. What we have here is an ideology that gave rise to a set of representational practices, as well as programming protocols in the media infrastructure, one that effectively established the state as a kind of sensorium.[44] Secular representation could extend beyond state communication to art and to cinema, as, for example, Karin Zitzewitz and Shyam Benegal have variously argued.[45] It's noteworthy

43   Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Arvind Rajagopal, "The Cold War as an Aesthetic Phenomenon: An Afterthought on Boris Groys," *Javnost—The Public* 26, no. 4 (2019): 370–74.

44   Secularism itself was a concept the Congress Party did not officially endorse until, in the midst of a political crisis, when the forty-second amendment to the constitution was brought in for the purpose in late 1976. The amendment changed the official description of India from a "sovereign democratic republic" to a "sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic." Further, the words "unity of the nation" became "unity and integrity of the nation." Hardly three months later, the Congress Party suffered a historic defeat and was replaced by a coalition government in which, for the first time, Hindu nationalists occupied power at the centre. The political landscape changed irrevocably thereafter, even though it would be nearly thirty-five years before the Hindu nationalist party achieved the absolute majority it has today. The forty-second amendment stayed, but invocations of secularism have grown increasingly marginal. For a discussion, see Rajagopal, "The Emergency as Pre-history of the New Indian Middle Class"; Arvind Rajagopal, "What Eventually Emerged from the Emergency? A Reply to Gyan Prakash," *Economic & Political Weekly*, August 3, 2019, 61–63.

45   Shyam Benegal, "Secularism and Popular Indian Cinema," in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, ed. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (Durham: Duke University

that these arguments about the prevalence of secularism arrive in the wake of its political retreat. The beginning of the retreat can be dated, roughly, from between the end of the Cold War, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, with the latter event occurring about three years after the former.

The concept of secular realism is in fact a disintegration product of state secularism when the latter proved unviable, since the ruling party lacked the strength to confront Hindu orthodoxy. Intended as state doctrine, it had to become oppositional to survive, amidst a programme of historical falsification that attributed all the failures of independence to it. Retrospectively, we can observe the ways in which forms of communication that latently or patently endorsed secularism had existed in the past, for example, in the avoidance of overtly devotional or religious themes in government documentary film, or in communication that signalled a conscious balancing act between religious communities, e.g. in public sector advertisements or for that matter in popular film.

We can recall that the state had to serve as arbiter between competing forms of knowledge, and to assess the worth of truth claims that could interfere with the tasks it set itself. This was not only an epistemological task but an aesthetic one as well, governing the appearance of state reason and the perceptual field it creates. This was unavoidably, a balancing act, between agenda that leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru wished to pursue, and the preferences of the majority of his party, who he himself acknowledged were sympathetic to the Hindu majority. Communal harmony and inter-religious solidarity were, for the most part, themes that were treated cautiously, verbally asserted rather than visualized; the fear of backlash deterred state experimentation in political aesthetics.[46] Apart from this, the "look and feel" that government communication acquired was utilitarian and functional.

Secular realism may have been enabled and supported by the post-independence state, but in relation to the sheer semiotic excess of Hindu ritual, it was anaesthetic. It was an exercise in elimination rather than in expressivity as such. Apart from a gesture of inclusion that usually consisted in mechanically aggregating different communities, it provided no symbols, for example, that could be claimed for a movement or identified with a

Press, 2007), 225–38; Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

46   The use of Buddhist-identified symbols from the reign of the Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE) marked the state's conscious distance from extant religious communities in the country, and its identification with Ashoka's renunciation of war, albeit after having conquered most of the subcontinent.

programme. It was an unelaborated fragment of a prospective future, a facet of state speech that invoked a goal without indicating how it was to be reached, besides supporting the ruling party.

Bhojpuri Documentaries

Even if the word "secular" remained untranslated and was hence marooned in the English language, the idea of secularism had a grassroots resonance in popular ideas of morality and tolerance, as can be seen in a Bhojpuri video that circulated after the sequenced explosion of numerous bombs along Mumbai's suburban railway network in 2006.[47] The vernacularized documentary form in the example I will discuss represents a demotic response to a contemporary event. It does not pretend to be objective by way of avoiding emotion or value judgements. The soundtrack is in fact largely sung, in the genre of a Bhojpuri *biraha* or lamentation song. A nineteenth-century Orientalist scholar locates the *biraha* genre using the words of a singer: "[I]t is not cultivated in the field, nor is it borne upon the branches of the fruit-tree. It dwells in the heart, and when a man's heart overflows, he sings it."[48]

Even as an emotional outpouring, the *biraha* in the video under review is notable for its ecumenism, its avoidance of exclusive rhetoric, and its insistence on addressing not only Hindus, who constitute the great majority of Bhojpuri speakers, but Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs as well. Against demands for communal vengeance at the time, that would have been one stimulus for the video's production, the presumption of a common humanity that transcends religious difference and the appeal to understanding and forgiveness rather than the likelihood of justice through the law mark this Bhojpuri documentary as constituting part of a hybrid genre, one that draws on secular realism and transcends it.

Bhojpuri is a demographically and politically minor identity; its minority status is compounded in the scholarly literature, certainly in anglophone publications. The audience for Bhojpuri cinema is estimated at 160 million,

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47 The bomb blasts eventually led to 189 deaths. "All You Need to Know about the 7/11 Mumbai Train Blasts," *The Hindu*, September 11, 2015, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/All-you-need-to-know-about-711/article60200196.ece.

48 G. A. Grierson, "Some Bhojpuri Folksongs," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 2 (1886): 207–67. For a more recent discussion, see Sandria B. Freitag, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 95–98.

and yet the research on this topic is slight indeed. The Bhojpur heartland which straddles western Uttar Pradesh and eastern Bihar, in northern India, as well as the Terai region of Nepal, generates enormous male migration of mainly unskilled labour, previously to Mumbai and Delhi but increasingly to all the major metros in the country. Disproportionately poor and lacking the vote in their émigré locations (one can only vote in one's registered address, which is hard to change), Bhojpuri migrants tend to be politically unrepresented and hence subject to discrimination. The emergence of a cinema industry reflecting the life of this previously impoverished and fugitive social stratum is actually a sign of a nouveau riche client base, relative to what had existed earlier. This in turn gives rise to a new visibility of a previously little-noticed class of citizens. The process of mutual accommodation and struggle with older and more well-established Bhojpuri migrants is a tale of aspiration and betrayal, of intimacy and disavowal, one with Balzacian resonance, that Bhojpuri cinema portrays with varying levels of artistry. However, the extreme minoritization of Bhojpuri culture, and the absence thus far of a political force that could respond in any way to the social problems of the migrants, leads to a strange effacement, and even self-effacement, of the issues faced by this crucial but underserved segment of the working population.[49]

Even within the Bhojpuri film industry, which provides a kind of cultural commons from which Bollywood has long drawn upon, the video cassette discs featuring documentaries is a minor and even fugitive form. They reflect the community need to respond to events overtaking them in their new metropolitan locations. I have found VCDs on floods in Mumbai, and on terrorism, that appear briefly at shops and then disappear after some weeks or months. Combining news footage, moral exhortation, and choral singing, they signal a desire for cultural assertion in a community that strenuously avoids seeking political distinction for fear of reprisal. Disowned or denied recognition by their wealthier and more established members who choose to "pass" as Hindi rather than as Bhojpuri, such cultural production seems unlikely to escape its ephemeral status soon.

Mumbai ki Train Yani Brain mein Dhamaka (*Mumbai's Train, or, Blast in the Brain*, published by Veena Music, Mumbai, n.d.) opens with a disclaimer about any connection between persons it names to actual individuals, but

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49 On Bhojpuri media, see Ratnakar Tripathy, "Bhojpuri Cinema," *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 2 (2007), 145–65; "Bihar Society, Polity and Culture," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 15 (2015): 26–28; Kathryn C. Hardy, "Constituting a Diffuse Region: Cartographies of Mass-mediated Bhojpuri Belonging," *BioScope* 6, no. 2 (2015): 145–64.

intersperses music with clips and discussion of successive bomb blasts in Mumbai, beginning with March 1993, followed by bomb blasts at Ghatkopar in December 2002 and across the suburban train system in July 11, 2006, or 7/11, as the caption indicates, reversing the customary Commonwealth date notation to suggest the event's resemblance to 9/11. But the video itself dissuades from identifying with a "war on terror" which became a prominent political response in India.[50]

Clips of news footage with captions, alternately in Hindi and in English, show crowds milling around the bombed trains, as policemen, medical workers, and journalists scour the sites, bringing out evidence, the dead and the wounded, and news for reportage. These scenes of forensic state apparatuses at work, drawing police lines, calibrating and repairing the damage, are intercut with victims' families mourning their loss. The sequence of images suggests a division of labour, of cogitation and lamentation, both being equally subsumed in the images' own circulation.

Yeh dharti banaya zamano zamano
Nafarat ki dhaara mein khud se hai dhalta
Kahin hindu muslim kahin sikh isai
Danga karaake rajniti karte
Woh tan ke hi rachchagar bhachchag bane to
Apne se apna chaman woh jalate

This Earth, made over countless years,
Is itself drowning in waves of hate.
Here [it is] Hindus and Muslims, there [it is] Sikhs and Christians.
They conduct politics by organizing riots
And consume each other in flames of hatred.[51]

Structured in an antiphonal pattern of call and response, a chorus shouts "Yes!" ("*Hai!*") as the singer finishes each line: the outpoured feeling of the singer is affirmed by the group. This has not only a musical and a dramaturgical structure; it also reflects a social and a juridical structure. Here the suffering expressed by the singer is recognized by the community, and a validating response is offered in turn. The antiphonal shout implies echo, response, and guarantee. The singer utters the discourse, and the

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50   I have heard the term "documentary" used in the market, although it is absent in notations on the product itself. I am grateful to Naresh Fernandes for pointing me to this genre of videos.
51   This and the following are my translations.

witness "hears" it in an active moral affirmation, rather than a passive act.[52]

> *Arre baap re baap ek ek karke*
> *Khar mein hua*
> *Mahim Matunga Jogeswari Bandra*
> *Borivali*
> *Mira*
> *Bhayandar mein hua sathiyon*
> *Gyarah minat ke andar mein*
> *aat dhamaka hua*
> *iske baad yeh dhamaka sunkarke wahan ke rehenevale, nagarvasi, nagar*
> *ke nazdeek ke log milkarke, janta ke saat saat kitna mehenat karte hein*
> *wahan ke log.*

> It happened in Khar, Mahim, Matunga, Jogeshwari, Bandra,
> Borivali, Mira [Road], Bhayander.
> Friends, in less than eleven minutes there were eight bomb blasts
> And after hearing these blasts, those living nearby came together and
> began to help.

The familiar geography of the city changes. Names of stations (Khar, Mahim, Matunga, Jogeshwari, Bandra, Mira Road, Bhayander) are signal bomb targets instead, and carriages become weapons, while railway lines trace a movement of violence faster than any train. The resulting destruction brings the people together, erasing distinctions between classes.

The album's name—*Mumbai's Train, or, Blast in the Brain*—the explosion outside is mimicked as a perceptual disorder in the collective mind—something that can only lead to a repetition of violence. Hence the need for healing, which accompanies the lamentation and the refusal to name an enemy:

> *Tamaam jagah pe yeh paapi bum blasht kar karke janta ko mar rahe hein,*
> *yeh aatankvadi sanghathan, tamaam sanghathan hai, kiska naam diya jai?*
> In so many places these sinners have set off bombs and killed people.
> These terrorist organizations, all these organizations,
> By what name shall we call them?

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52   C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago, 1991), 99-125 offers compelling analyses along these lines.

There is an explicit avoidance of a political response, dwelling instead on the moral plane, which frames the perception of the transgression and the nature of the recuperative task before the community.

> *Jo hona tha woh to ho gaya; lekin jo log hai, unhe bachana zaroori hai.*
> *Yeh sankat ki ghadi hai.*
> *Sankat mein ghabrakar ke kaam lena achchi baat nahin hai.*

> What had to happen has happened.
> But it is now essential to save those who remain.
> This is a time of danger.
> To respond to danger out of fear is not good.

The dissuasion from a violent response as it happened was out of sync with the times; the VCD is hard to find today, and responses like it, that stand aside from the increasingly aggressive public discourse of today, are scarce. I don't wish to idealize this ephemeral response as the sign of an organic moral community able to make whole what has been shattered; that is not my contention. They are themselves fragmentary responses. The tradition being enacted here is not fully within the epistemic space of the modern state. It reproduces visual realist codes and protocols, but its inclusiveness is moral rather than political—the instigators of the bomb blasts are called sinners, for example, and thus deliberately avoids criminalizing them, as was customary. When state-led secularism is not available, this demotic secularism is always available, but it lacks the will to cohere; This cinematic moral-secular realism (so to say) has been overtaken by the mythological realism of contemporary Hindu nationalism.

Mythological Realism

The flow of money into the electoral sphere, which signalled the assertiveness of upper-caste and business interests hostile to redistribution, has grown manifold since the late 1980s. The flow of this money undermined the decades-long hegemony of the Congress Party, in preference to the upstart Hindu nationalist party. The former countered the weight of the Hindu demographic majority with the idea of a multi-religious polity in which pluralism and diversity were treated as inherently valuable. This argument, which was a utopian vision of a better future, abruptly became obsolete. Anyone invoking it was automatically regarded as anachronistic.

Now, the Congress Party had its ideology, albeit one entailing a big tent where a range of differences could be accommodated. The mass media presence it sought was relatively limited, as seen from the more intensively media-saturated environment of today. It did not aspire to become a cinema presence at all, or even to cultivate something that could pass for a screen identity. It had no serious competition as a national party and, even if it foresaw one, did not anticipate the battle moving beyond the arenas already familiar to political parties. Commercial entertainment film constituted the single largest part of the culture industry, and it was discouraged by law to engage in political issues. Perhaps because of this ban, filmmakers envisioned formulas for their market on their own, with no overt state guidance. Revealingly, it was through film music that this formula gained the greatest acceptance, blending classical melodic frames with Western rhythms and beats, while accomplished poets wrote the lyrics. Narratives adroitly reconciling the enduring force of tradition with the unavoidable ascendancy of modern institutions became the norm. Any sense that capitalist urbanity introduced a break from the past was allayed, a process in which the soundtrack, and specifically film songs, were crucial. Visual markers of secular realism were scarce, only available negatively when there was an avoidance of devotional imagery. Revealingly, film stars seldom campaigned for political parties in the (northern Indian) Hindi language regions, unlike in the south.[53]

The introduction of television, and specifically, the introduction of devotional Hindu epics serialized for national audiences, transformed the relationship between media and politics. The Congress Party's decision, by choosing a Hindu religious programme, violated a decades-old rule of broadcasting policy, but it billed the serials as national culture rather than religious as such. Their reception, however, was overwhelming and unexpected. They were received as bygone political theology, and thus as history. The tele-epics were believed to index a time when a unifying moral order prevailed and the world made sense to everyone. A then-tiny Hindu nationalist party, which was in the opposition, launched a political campaign that built on themes from the broadcast and abruptly upended secular realism's precarious hegemony. The Hindu majority, till then usually latent, thereafter became the focus of an ongoing state-sponsored public

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53   The south was another world, one where cinema and politics came together more directly. See S. Theodore Baskaran, *History through the Lens: Perspectives on South Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009); Rajan Krishnan, *Cultures of Indices: Anthropology of Tamil and Other Cinemas* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009).

spectacle, and, for Hindu nationalists, leverage to claim to be the only legitimate political party for the country as a whole.

There was more to this development than merely the return of the repressed. A bygone political theology acquired new form with technology. Television coexists with other mediatic forms, but the fact of a mass audience alters the way in which the medium's effects are understood. It was as if a skin were stretched across society, connecting its different parts and bringing them under a single logic.[54] The simultaneity of millions of private viewings across the country connoted public power. It required political intervention to actualize, but such an event augured the prospect of hinduizing all politics, harboured for many decades. The inversion of the relation between the media and the world, where a virtual assemblage could signal reality as it was desired to be and could, sooner or later, be taken for reality itself, was a potential ripe with possibility. The counterrevolution could begin.

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54   For a discussion relating to the Indian political context, see my "Watching the Ramayan in Turbulent Times," *Scroll*, April 3, 2020, https://scroll.in/article/957801/from-mandir-to-mahamari-watching-the-ramayan-in-turbulent-times.

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