

It has often happened that the most creative works in a medium, at various times, have been made by outsiders to the medium, not by those who have practiced it for many years. This seems very true in the case of Anamika Haksar's [film] *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon*.

– Kabir Mohanty¹

Arvind Rajagopal

Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar



Film still from Anamika Haksar's *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis), 2018. Floating dead bodies: a recurring nightmare of an urban migrant worker.

Introduction

The title of Anamika Haksar's 2018 *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis) comes from a line of dialogue in the film: when someone off camera asks a horse-cart driver what he's doing, he replies that he's taking his horse to eat *jalebis*, a traditional Indian dessert more popular with humans than equines. While the driver's answer might seem sarcastic, it's very much in earnest. With scenes like this, Haksar welcomes viewers to a world in which laborers speak and dream in ways that one might not expect, creating a realism that goes beyond standard notions of reality.

The film opens with a shot of a leaky pipe, slowly dripping in the dark. Water collects in a dirty pool underneath, littered with garbage. Two voices argue, cursing each other. But when the camera zooms out, the scene doesn't reveal two people at each other's throats, but rather two men sleeping: two workers, splayed out on cramped handcarts under streetlamps. The camera pans vertically over the men and settles on two others, sleeping in an open structure above the handcarts. These men are in shadow; both move slightly in their sleep as they dream. The camera movement is slow and allows us, the viewers, to take in each scene until we feel we are a part of it; the camera's time becomes our

own. Suddenly a harmonium strikes up a tune and an animated sequence begins: we have entered the workers' dream-space. In the first man's dream, flowers fall onto a silk bed. The camera pans up to show a Hindu goddess seated on a lotus that rises above the bed; the colors are bright and artificial, like gaudy calendar art. The goddess blinks as if to assert that she is real, but then our collective *darshan*² is interrupted: the goddess is poked from the left by an expanding red flag that then envelops the screen. It is a communist flag held high above the ground by Lalli, a trade unionist, the other dreaming man. The two men's dreams are fighting with each other.

In Lalli's dream he is rallying the masses for his communist cause. Below him are hundreds of people, flickering like lamps in the dark, accompanied by a soundtrack of the Internationale in Hindi. The red flag ultimately wins out over the Hindu goddess. Then the men themselves wake up to continue their quarrel. The movie works at real and allegorical levels, without reconciling their differences. If there is a theme to the film, it concerns representation itself: what aesthetic form, Haksar seems to ask, can adequately stage and represent the daily lives of the urban precariat?

Continuing a long cinematic legacy from many parts of the world, Haksar wagers that if the lives of the urban poor can be suitably portrayed, then anyone can identify with them. In this sense, *Ghode Ko Jalebi* is a rigorous cinematic manifesto, told through the lifeworld of workers in the streets of Old Delhi (aka Shahjahanabad).³

To arrive at this experience of precarious life in Old Delhi, Haksar conducted seven years of ethnographic fieldwork in the city. Of course, research does not guarantee a good film, nor does it ensure genuine understanding of the context. Making art about a social world far removed from the lives of the audience is perhaps even more challenging than writing an essay or making a documentary about the same world. The urban underclass, scraping together a meagre existence on the wrong side of laws that protect property over people, offers no ready points of identification for middle-class audiences. Prevailing conventions of representation relegate the poor to being negative examples, unless they are objects of charity. In the bourgeois Indian media industry, "people like us" is a programming category whose self-congratulatory name forbids critique. Those who use it are nurtured and insulated from the chaos and discomfort of the wider world,

regarding "people like them," another industry term, as worthy of being portrayed in crime and sensational genres, but nothing more.⁴

This industry terminology in India is based on class and caste distinctions that are treated as self-evident. A parallel to this can be found in Hollywood's treatment of race, where white and non-white characters only ever meet in limited representational modes and in specific genres. In most Hollywood films, race, like caste in India, remains a metaphysical distinction that social reforms leave mostly untouched.⁵ Caste is like race and class combined, except that the combination creates a surplus, unique to caste – what B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit leader and chief architect of India's constitution, called a negative sociality, which prohibits ethics from operating across caste lines. In Hollywood, it's rare to see story lines that bring black and white people together in forms of solidarity across the segmentations that capital creates, because producers fear that they turn off viewers.⁶ Similarly, class and caste discrimination are usually taboo topics in Bollywood; characters in films are typically upper caste, and when social differences are presented in a story, crime or comedy usually enters to thwart further inquiry.

By contrast, Haksar's mode of inclusion is aesthetic, not argumentative; her philosophy is expressed cinematically rather than as a set of textual propositions. Her background as a theater director makes her attentive to issues of staging; for the viewer this registers as attention to form as such. The content of that form is the very fact of social heterogeneity.



Film still from Anamika Haksar's *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis), 2018. The Old Delhi tour guide (Lokesh Jain) takes a trip back in time through Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Indian presidential palace. Marshal Tito's presence symbolizes the nonaligned stance of the two countries during the communist era.

Haksar portrays what remains of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*, the melding of Hindu and Muslim cultures poetically figured in the confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna rivers. But scenes of working-class Old Delhi life clash with

an aggressive majority culture powered by another kind of confluence, between politics and business interests. Like the warring dreams of the opening sequence, characters in Haksar's film experience discordant temporalities that clash with each other. They navigate ancient traditions while trying to survive in today's brutal market economy.

"*Tamasha dekhne walon, khud tamasha na ban jaye*," sings Chaddami, a street-food vendor and Lalli's sparring partner, quoting a line from "Laila Majnu," a seventh-century tale of star-crossed lovers, familiar to Hindus and Muslims alike. Roughly translated, it means: "O viewer of entertainment, mind you don't yourself become the entertainment!" In other words, be prepared to act and intervene in the world.

The film displays the full range of work that migrants from India's heartland perform to survive in the big city. We witness the slow destruction effected by heavy manual labor (shown in the back muscles of a handcart-puller), the light-fingered moves of a pickpocket, the artistry of a street-food vendor, and the fall of a load-carrier with a heavy sack. The load-carrier, upon falling, is subject to a stream of abuse, but then, in a memorable animated sequence, his boss turns into a lizard trapped in a jar. Daily labor can be playful and generous too, whether it is an elderly woman who distributes rice gruel at her own expense, or the pickpocket Pathru, one of the key characters in the film, who masquerades as a tour guide and discloses wondrous things.

Despite the red flag and the Internationale, the film doesn't offer a workerist or ideological message in the conventional sense. Rather, Haksar invites us to build on her film, which falls somewhere between ethnographic documentary and magical realism. The range of persons and stories she assembles suggests Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "multitude": a plurality that does not yet have a name, a collective subject whose potential propels emancipatory politics in the postcommunist era.⁷ This subject seeks to emancipate itself politically without necessarily knowing in advance what it will become. The multitude thus points beyond existing politics, towards a global form that has yet to crystallize.

Several enthusiastic reviews were published after *Ghode Ko Jalebi*'s release, but they barely touched on what is distinct about the film. This might be because Haksar is doing something unprecedented. She is addressing a problem of representation that haunts Indian cinema: *How to portray a stratified society to*

itself? She bypasses conventional narratives and prevailing social codes to address the constellation of new and ancient cultures taking shape around her. While the composite *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*, with its old-world charm, is prominent in Haksar's film, her aim is anything but nostalgic. She tries to render the archaic and the new in equal terms, such as Mughal architecture amidst urban detritus. Labor, whether fugitive or entrenched, whether of cunning, craft, or muscle, is both epic and ephemeral.

03/09



Film still from Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone*, 1961. Accattone meditates on the River Tiber before plunging into it, with the statue of an angel looking over him.

Staging the Multitude

Since Haksar's film portrays manual labor, Dalits – who belong to the lowest caste in India's system – feature prominently. But Haksar circumvents what Anupama Rao calls "the caste question,"⁸ eschewing shock or shame as a mode of expression. Haksar rather is of a generation whose secular convictions have led them to treat caste as a moribund category, rather than as something to be actively dismantled. The politics of Haksar's film are found elsewhere – not in any explicit program but in its depiction of what Kristin Ross calls "communal luxury." For Ross, the urban underclass, usually regarded as the detritus of history, can instead offer "the energies of the outmoded ... [and] one way to think oneself into the future."⁹ Communism too might be regarded as outmoded, but if it can still inspire progress, then the flow of history itself might have to be refigured, "decentralized" in Ross's words.¹⁰ At a time when history and politics join to present a sense of "no exit" from powerful regimes, Haksar's film invites us to embrace "the flamboyant idiosyncrasies of [the world of the urban underclass]," as Kabir Mohanty writes, "with an artistic rigour that makes the individuals, the situations, and the mise-en-scène resonate with a grounding almost never seen in mainstream cinema."¹¹

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

Despite its many obvious differences, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961) offers a reference point for the way Haksar's film grapples with inequality. In both cases, the filmmaker focuses on the milieu of the subproletariat but without using the language of class or class struggle. And in both films the religious context of everyday life provides an iconography and a normative ethos that become artistic weapons.

Accattone is set in post-World War II Italy, when the Italian Communist Party and the Catholic Church were both influential. Pasolini, whose unorthodox Catholicism and Marxism caused his expulsion from the party, saw the relationship between the two as necessary, if difficult. Italian Communists were the party of the future, he felt, but like Gramsci, Pasolini believed Catholicism had to be accommodated, due to its deeply rooted presence in Italian pre- and postwar culture.

Pasolini's method for addressing the pervasive hold of religion on the populace was one of negative affirmation, through heresy and profane expression mixed with a profound interest in Catholic iconography. Thus, the film centers on a defiant wastrel, Accattone, who despises work, holding it as no less objectionable than slavery. For a living, he pimps his girlfriends and abuses them for their troubles. Eventually he dies during an attempted robbery, in a motorcycle crash. But in the figure of Accattone, Pasolini sees not a degenerate but a martyr.

Throughout the film, scenes of violence, sorrow, and humiliation are accompanied by classical music by Bach and Vivaldi. The final scene shows Accattone hurt, lying on the ground, assuring onlookers that he's fine, followed by a close-up of his face and the word *FINE* as the credits roll. Pasolini's portrayal of Accattone commemorates a people, an underclass who in his view had never been colonized, whether as Southern peasants migrating into the city or as the subproletariat of Rome.¹²

Phrased differently, Pasolini registered the absence of any ethical relationship between the Italian underclass and those above them in the social hierarchy. Accattone's unethical behavior indiscriminately affected almost everyone around him, but he was hardly alone in his transgressions. Pasolini's audience in fact understood they were viewing the indirect reflection of a larger crime whose explicit acknowledgment was forbidden: an elite that

cared nothing for the poor, and suffered nothing for their transgressions. To mirror their violations in a lumpen figure, a hero who could not be celebrated, was to compound rather than to resolve ironies, to shock rather than soothe audiences. Pasolini's enormous popularity, as well as the controversy he provoked, points to the fact that his methods were, at the time, effective. "The sign under which I work is always contamination," Pasolini once remarked.¹³

It has been said that when art no longer has the power to shock, then the social fabric has frayed so badly that even its violation evokes no response. André Breton invoked this view when he once lamented to Buñuel that they could no longer create a scandal.¹⁴ However, there are always dividing lines between the permissible and the impermissible; the point is to identify them.



Film still from Anamika Haksar's *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis), 2018. A cart-puller's dreams: images of family left behind and flooded lands.

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

Inside/Outside

Contamination, heresy, profanity, and sacrilege: these remain methods of representation that remind audiences of the power and the limits of deeply shared frames of reference. They also highlight twisted and knotted problems for which no easy answer is available. Haksar's approach is to avoid explicitly flagging or invoking contamination even while immersing viewers in life experiences that they might normally regard as contaminating or beneath their dignity. What worked for Pasolini will not necessarily work in the fragmented social context Haksar operates in, where religious-political consolidation has balkanized the culture. So Haksar foregrounds the persistence of a still inclusive and tolerant culture that survives against all odds, portraying it in a way that will resonant with viewers from different walks of life.

Haksar approaches the lives of her characters as an intimate space that is imagined differently from how it is physically lived. Just as people inhabit diverse historical temporalities, their imaginative worlds are multiple too. We are very far indeed from the poverty porn of popular Bollywood films like *White Tiger* (directed by Ramin Bahrani, 2021), where the mere spectacle of the poor is held as adequate critique.

Haksar's characters are enmeshed in each other's lives in ways that are not explicitly explained. Her cinematographer, Soumyanand Sahi, renders this existential interweaving as embodied and felt. We seem to experience space in the first rather than in the third person, moving freely and spontaneously.

Like Pasolini, the main touchstones for Haksar's film are religious tradition and communism. What Haksar aims to show can only be assembled through fragments, reconstructed from witnessing, testimony, and the work of imagination, since all possibility of self-representation by her characters, and thus any comprehensive positive account, is structurally inhibited and risks becoming a fetishizing narrative of marginality.¹⁵



Film still from Anamika Haksar's *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis), 2018. The trade unionist Lalli (K. Gopalan) waves a red flag above the streets of Old Delhi.

Postcommunist Aesthetics

Communism returns towards the end of the movie – it is the film's political thread after all. In a final dream sequence, the activist and wage worker Lalli ascends to a high perch and addresses crowds gathering beneath him, while the red flag extends above rooftops and unfurls across the city. There is no indication that he is dreaming.

Decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the “triumph” of capitalism, Haksar's invocation of communism, long treated as a

marginal presence in India, warrants discussion. Scholars once treated India as peripheral to Cold War conflicts, but that picture is changing.¹⁶ For example, Nehru, despite his anticolonial work and his socialist tendencies, became a favorite of Western powers for his steadfast opposition to Soviet communism. In supporting a left-leaning figure like Nehru, the rationale of the US was that the Non-Communist Left (“NCL” in official parlance) would be critical in stemming the tide of Soviet communism. That understanding was briefly tested when Nehru's daughter and successor, Indira Gandhi, formed a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union in 1971. (The architect of the 1971 friendship treaty between Mrs. Gandhi's government and the Soviet Union was P. N. Haksar, the director's father.) Communism was no mere figure of speech. It enlarged the political options in a nonaligned country like India, and the Soviet support underwrote this possibility.

The tangible threat posed by communism in India is most clearly registered by the fear it provoked in big business and Hindu nationalists. The fall of the Berlin Wall was greeted with relief by India's captains of industry, auguring the end of “Nehruvian socialism.” Communism's defeat meant that Nehruvian secularism was on its way out too. Nehru's achievement had been to attempt a third way, a nonaligned path between fully fledged capitalism and fully fledged communism, while advancing a program of secular development. This certainly won him praise, but the cost it entailed is less discussed. Nehruvian secularism was in fact part and parcel of an accommodation with a larger geopolitical context, one that depended on the Soviet counterbalance to Western capitalism. Once the Soviet Union was gone, secularism's time was up too.

Haksar's idea of communism is thus not arbitrary or idiosyncratic. It is not a casual synonym for progressivism but rather has real historical resonance in the Indian context, one that the presently ruling BJP was the first to perceive and to denounce after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Haksar's quiet suggestion is that Indian communism was not only crucial in inspiring pro-worker politics and attitudes of equality in the Cold War era. It remains important today as a way of signaling the potential of such attitudes and politics even after the eclipse of Soviet communism.

The following conversation with Haksar took place online in 2020. Much of it centers on her

training in theater in New Delhi and Moscow. After this training she produced a number of plays (Indian, Russian, and Western European) that established her at the forefront of the Indian avant-garde. Haksar discusses her struggle to include urban consumer culture within a notion of the folk, as propounded by her teacher B. V. Karanth. Karanth was a major theater and film director who, along with Ritwik Ghatak, pioneered the adaptation of indigenous artistic traditions for progressive theater and film.

Arvind Rajagopal (AR): You're experimenting with the medium of film as a newcomer, doing things that the old-timers are not thinking about because that's not their background. What traditions are you bringing to this encounter, and how can we understand their relation to your current work?

Anamika Haksar (AH): I was a student of B. V. Karanth. He had huge talent and understanding of music, of folk stories, of theater. It was like being with someone like Ritwik Ghatak. It was huge, like a banyan tree. Karanth had a very rich journey, coming from Bangalore, going to Banaras Hindu University to study Hindi literature, and then doing very varied theater. I don't think Karanth was very good in terms of methodology, but he insisted that as contemporary practitioners, we have to travel. We have to go from village to village to do the work we want to do. In our third year, he actually made us go and stay with folk drama practitioners or traditional theater practitioners, and each of us had to interview them, get to know about their lives, their practices, watch their performances. So, I think that kind of practice was very, very important.

I would also fight with him. Being a urban Delhi person, I would ask, "What is all this folk business?" I didn't know anything about folk. And when he was almost near his death, he said, you know Anamika, I'm going to answer the question you asked me thirty years ago: Think of the people on the streets of Old Delhi or Delhi. Their songs and their memories. Their *gaalis* (curses). The expressions of people walking on the road are the urban folk. And I find that a very important comment. And somehow, it's taken many years to even articulate this.

The Soviet Union was very rigorous in its theatrical training. Of course, we had five years of Marxism, but the whole emphasis there was on one's world outlook. Before you touched literature, before you touched anything, the question was: "What do you think of *your world*?" Or, what is the philosophy of your world? We had

no idea, we were all twenty-two, twenty-three years old. Our focus was on the self, the self and the home and the region, and the self and the pain.

AR: You studied at the Lunacharsky State Institute for Theater Arts in Moscow, now called the Russian Academy of Theater Arts. Can you explain how this informed your understanding of (socialist) realism?

AH: You can't work with the actor and tell them to move from right to left or top to bottom on a physical plane. The theater implies that the actors inhabit a mental landscape. And therefore, when I'm composing, I'm integrating the mind, the region, the rhythm of the actor with spatial relationships, and so on. What we were taught was different from, let's say, the Europeans. I think there is a very deeply ingrained link between Soviet intellectuals and their people. So a Tarkovsky or a Dostoevsky, they knew their people, their nature. They knew their writers. I think that was part of the training that we got was to know our writers. Of course, there were many things we disagreed with. I mean, we didn't agree with the way they were talking about realism. Our teachers were trained in Stanislavski and we questioned that.

In Moscow, we learned from the theater director Anatoly Vasiliev, who challenged realism and told us that realism is allegorical and metaphorical. It is not a physical depiction of life. We learned about the Georgian artist Stureva, the Lithuanian artist Nekhroshus, all questioning accepted norms of realism. There had been debates going on. Underground letters between Lenin and Gorky, where Gorky asks questions like: What is the world of the worker? What is it that he or she seeks? What is the landscape in their mind? These kinds of questions ensure that realism doesn't just minimize the workers' entire landscape to economic demands, that the artist doesn't judge it according to their own understanding. There were a whole lot of things that my generation was asking of Soviet socialist realism. It was not just about putting up the red flag and so on. But that doesn't mean that they were any less sensitive to the needs of the people. They were all very conscious. And now when I think about it, I know I sound like I'm something of a Soviet agent, but honestly, the respect for labor, for working, for understanding people, came from this ethos. And it was very powerful. Everyone's tired of hearing anecdotes like meeting your Soviet colleagues in the potato field. An intellectual like me would not pick up a spade and didn't know how to dig. But that's where I

06/09

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

met my classmates on the first day of class: in a Moscow potato field.

This brings me to the question of labor and how to represent it. We are looking at the character's psychological landscape rather than merely something physical. For example, in the film, we don't see the characters just sleeping. We see them through the crevices of some other person's space. The bodies are intertwined. The living is intertwined.

AR: It is interesting that over time, the knowledge of traditions in India is being lost, for example of Hindu epics like the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, in all their variations. Religious traditions used to require learning and practice; they represent a cultural archive that city dwellers no longer necessarily have. What would you say about that?

AH: We were asking the younger lot, let's say those younger than thirty-five: What do you recall about your village – any stories, any folk stories, or histories? So, in the particular places in Shahjahanabad [aka Old Delhi] we looked at, they were oblivious of history and even of things like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, except for the basic story. Now, in the older generation, people would know the epics and recite them. Many of them told stories fantastically and they carried strong memories of their culture.

When I was working in street theater in 1995, we had a little handcart with books from the Soviet Union translated into Hindi: Gorky's *Mother*, Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, as well as various other classic works. People devoured them. Some of the books were even stolen. Most people then were quite well educated. Today, many are very moderately educated and not as into reading. With the second generation in the city, cultural memory is disappearing. Amnesia is setting in. But still in [less developed parts of the country like] Bihar, they would have their religious songs from their village.

AR: The cinematic images you create do not necessarily reflect existing realities, but you stress the documentary character of this work. Can you explain?

AH: Through allegory or metaphor you can create a dual reality, a philosophical reality, rather than one of just a physical space. You can interpret each frame in many ways. The political connotations are deeply within the frame, and yet you're not actually mentioning anyone. No names are named. There's simply the juxtaposition that brings out a certain political subtext.

Indian realism, as we received it, mainly from the British school, is naturalistic. My film experiments with an Indian realism use metaphor and allegory and an understanding of the psychology of the human being, the psychological landscape of the actor, to create multidimensional meanings.

For me this is a way to respond to the inadequacy of the documentary genre; it's a way to bring this psychological awareness together with physical reality. We did many factual studies to prepare to shoot the film. We studied the diseases among the city's working people, how many gardens and fountains have now become car parks and malls and flyovers in Old Delhi, and so on. But then again, if it becomes a regular documentary, then no one's ever going to look at it.

One definite rule is that I am not inventing anymore. So even the fictional characters are based on very real people who we know. And all the dialogue is taken from real people. We have used all this as a way of getting into the reality. But reality is not self-evident. In our epics and our folk tales, we always tell a story from an example, from another story. We are never actually direct. The meaning is hardly on the surface.

AR: Folk traditions can coexist with modern representation, but at the same time it is a struggle to unearth them since they are under erasure. How do you address that in your work?

AH: By way of example. In my play *Raj Darpan*, one of the things I show is that in Calcutta, when the first proscenium frame came up, folk traditions were deemed obscene by the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, which still holds in Indian law. A preexisting reality, which was multi-perspective and polyphonic, was reduced to a single perspective. For the British there was only one way of perceiving things, to make it naturalistic rather than trying to bring in the dialectics of that reality. It's that kind of multilayered reality that I would like to convey in my work. It's not a simple reality. In one gesture, you connect to sometimes two or three thousand years of history.

For example, when you go to Old Delhi, you see the labor market. Where they are laboring is a medieval spice market. You are looking at old Mughal history. Then suddenly in the middle you find a plaque commemorating the 1857 Mutiny, next to a water storage tank. Someone singing a folk song is from a village. In one scene we have a man having his bath from a plastic bucket standing under a Mughal arch.

You cannot show this through the kind of realism that Indian cinema on the whole uses. You know, Indian cinema does exactly what we

07/09

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

used to do in theater, which is a conventional realist approach, with a physical conception of space: the camera goes right to left. There's no inner dialogue.

One way we respond is with the specific ways we choose to use the camera. If you remember the scene where Pathru [Sahu, who plays the pickpocket Pathru] is against the wall, that's a psychological gesture. He is saying, I loved her, but she went for someone else. And he's against this cracked surface, trying to gather stability. It's not there, he's grasping at a reality that escapes him. I thought it was gorgeous to record. It has a completely different quality than if we had done it realistically.

Convention might consider workers to be poor and deprived. But there are people, friends of mine, folk artists, they will be living in some eight by four room. They may have only two sets of clothes. But there would not be a spot. Their two shirts will be impeccable. They will be ironed. The complete, complete dignity of people.

I'm connecting this to Raghubir [Yadav, who plays the character of the street-food vendor Chaddami]. When he's making that *kachori* he's sculpting it to perfection. For him that itself is a serious act and it is something I've seen in many people. I feel these are the things that are more important, you know, in teaching us really what labor is about, what life is about. And I feel these details are very important.

I want to also convey that dignity of labor. Very ordinary men are doing extraordinary things. Half of them don't even have muscles. But, you know, they're picking up hundred-kilo sacks. They're earning next to nothing and in some years, will have tuberculosis, arthritis. The compassion and dignity of people living such lives comes through again and again. What's holding this together? There is something essentially deeply compassionate and tolerant in our society, which is the point I want to make in this film.

And I think that point is coming through. My biggest victory is that a young man who's an RSS guy [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the country's major right-wing Hindu-nationalist volunteer organization] saw the film and he said to me, I'm making you my guru. I'm from a village. I understand the traditions and the difficulties that these people are coming out of, and yet they're very honest. I see what you are doing.

We have to find that idiom in which you cut across and find a way of saying something very important, in a language that has nothing to do with technology, that actually penetrates into people's psyches.

AR: The all-too-widely-stated notion that

the poor are obsessed with their material deprivation is very effectively dismantled in your film. What kinds of dreams did they talk about in your interviews with them?

AH: All the time people who we interviewed were talking about all kinds of dreams and aspirations that were not about subsistence. There was a great utopia and desire for people to do something larger than their own lives, even while being poor. I actually know a trade union leader who Lalli is based on. All his life, he goes to court and fights for someone who is being evicted, or for their unpaid wages. I wanted to bring out this being who is spending all his life in this way. He's actually dreaming of this new world, there's a dreaming quality of utopia. That's the best parts of communism in practice.

AR: It's an aesthetic and political dilemma: any attempt to overcome the fragment and make it something more complete immediately runs up against the threat of censorship, so the fragment becomes a way to preserve some possibility of intervention. But it is also necessarily incomplete because you would like to say more than you are able to say.

AH: We are dealing with the street, where every minute something is changing, the police arrive, you're being harassed, you're taken out of your situation. And good things happen too – someone has suddenly come in and announced their marriage. So why then have a structure that is palpable all the time, telling you all this is going to happen? The lives of the city are very random. So this random structure is something that is chosen.

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My thanks to Andreas Petrossiants for his wonderful stewardship and editorial input, and to the editorial team of *e-flux journal* in general.

Film credits for *Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon*:

Director and producer: Anamika Haksar
Screenwriters: Anamika Haksar, Lokesh Jain
Cast: Ravindra Sahu [Pathru, the pickpocket], Raghuvir Yadav [Chaddami, the street-food vendor], K. Gopalan [Lalli, the trade unionist], Lokesh Jain [Old Delhi tour guide], and 350 residents of Shahjahanabad
Executive producers: Gurudas Pai
Special effects: Soumitra Ranade
Director of photography: Saumyananda Sahi
Production designer: Archana Shastri
Costume designer: Sneha Kumar
Editor: Paresch Kamdar
Music: Tyrax Ventura, Ustad Daud Kahn Sadozai, Utsav Nanda
Sound designer: Gautam Nair
Sales: Gutterati Productions
Length: 121 minutes

Ghode Ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon first premiered at the Mumbai Academy of the Moving Image (MAMI) festival in 2018. It was also the only film to be selected to the Sundance New Frontier Festival in the year 2019.

08/09

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

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09/09

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Arvind Rajagopal
Postcommunist Aesthetics: A Conversation with Anamika Haksar

- 1
Unpublished note. My thanks to Kabir for sharing it with me.
- 2
Roughly translating as “viewing,” *darshan* is a form of Hindu worship.
- 3
Named for the emperor Shah Jehan, who inaugurated it in 1638, Shahjahanabad was the capital of the Mughal Empire. Today it is usually referred to as “the Old City” or “Old Delhi.”
- 4
The 2001 film *Dil Chahta Hai* (The heart desires), directed by Farhan Akhtar, is a standard-bearer of the trend. The film centers on the friendship between three handsome and well-to-do young men in Mumbai. Poor or lower-caste people, such as domestic servants, ordinary city dwellers, and passers-by, are nowhere to be seen. For an indication of the film’s importance, see Vatsala Devki Vats, “19 Years On, *Dil Chahta Hai* Continues to Remain A Masterpiece Film On Friendship,” *Indiatimes*, July 18, 2020 <https://www.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/19-years-on-dil-chahta-hai-continues-to-remain-a-masterpiece-film-on-friendship-518289.html>.
- 5
Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020).
- 6
A few recent films in the wake of Black Lives Matter depart from this rule, but it is too soon to tell how influential or lasting this trend will be.
- 7
Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 100.
- 8
Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (University of California Press, 2009).
- 9
Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015), 116.
- 10
Ross, *Communal Luxury*, 74.
- 11
Kabir Mohanty, unpublished note.
- 12
Pier Paolo Pasolini, “We Are All in Danger,” interview by Furio Colombo, *L’Unità*, November 1, 1975 https://irenebrination.typepad.com/files/pierpaolopasolini_furiocolombointerview_1975_byabattista.pdf.

- 13
Quoted in David Forgacs, “Dirt and Order in Pasolini,” in *Pier Paolo Pasolini, Framed and Unframed: A Thinker for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luca Peretti and Karen T. Raizen (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 21.
- 14
Luis Buñuel, *The Last Sigh*, trans. Abigail Israel (Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 283.
- 15
This classic critique of the bourgeois public sphere is from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi and Jamie Owen Daniel (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 16
See David Engerman. *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Harvard University Press, 2018); *India and the Cold War*, ed. Manu Bhagavan (University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Arvind Rajagopal, “The Cold War as Nightmare Envy: A View from India,” *Seminar*, no. 719 (July 2019); Arvind Rajagopal, “The Cold War as an Aesthetic Phenomenon: An Afterthought on Boris Groys,” *Javnost – The Public* 26, no. 4 (2019): 370–74.