# An Archaeology of Screenwriting in Indian Cinema, 1930s-1950s

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# Abstract

The Euro-American scholarship on screenwriting has produced elaborate histories of the development of the screenplay form with reference to extensive archival collections of film scenarios and scripts. On the other hand, the archival absence of early Indian film scripts has largely invisibilised practices of screenwriting and retroactively contributed to stereotypical descriptions of Indian film industries as unorganised. As a process of imagination and marker of industrialisation, screenwriting is often privileged as the most cerebral, analytical and rational process of film production. The stark absence of screenwriting histories in film cultures of the Global South makes it the absent technique of non-Western cinemas.

In the thesis, I critically engage with the archival absence as a heuristic to rethink South Asian screenwriting practices beyond the prescriptive model of manuals as well as Euro-American notions of screenwriting. It is an archaeological as well as a media archaeological project. As an archaeological investigation in the Foucauldian mould, it studies the contradictions of screenwriting practice and discourse in order to understand how perceptions of archival lack and technical backwardness vis-à-vis screenwriting in India gained the currency of truth. As a media archaeological project, it collates a disparate and discontinuous cross-section of screenwriting artefacts, discourses and practices in the archival absence of a formally evolving pre-cinematic text.

Despite its reliance on archival and ethnographic sources, my research does not attempt to construct a comprehensive, chronological history of screenwriting practices in Bengali and Bombay cinema. Instead, this critical history epistemically delinks screenwriting from universalist discourses, introduces regional specificities and cultural subjectivities, and presents an alternative non-linear model of film historiography beyond questions of archival absence and technical backwardness.

# Contents

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Rakesh Sengupta

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# Introduction

## This is Not a Manual

> If you're looking at the history of Indian screenwriting, all film schools including FTII should have your book as a prescribed text. I'll make sure every student buys it, so that you get enough royalty also. (Anjum Rajabali, personal communication, 2 January, 2019)

These were Anjum Rajabali's words of encouragement, with a touch of his kind humour, at the end of our interview. Rajabali is a veteran screenwriter in the Hindi film industry (or Bollywood, as the world knows it) who also teaches for screenwriting programmes at premier Indian film schools such as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) and Whistling Woods International. As I grinned from ear to ear at the prospect, I also wondered what kind of a doctoral dissertation Rajabali imagined I would write. Did he envision it as a textbook akin to a screenwriting manual, one of the many 'how-to' scriptwriting guides that have flooded book markets since the dawn of cinema? One simple search on Google Books testifies to the profusion of screenplay manuals in the market. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the screenwriting manual remains the quintessential study of the craft, inducting thousands of amateurs and enthusiasts into the promising yet precarious profession of screenwriting each year.

Screenwriting is the composition of a screenplay or script that becomes the anchor point of any cinematographic work. In early cinema, a screenplay or script was usually referred to as a 'scenario' before the terminology became more fluid. A film script is constructed in such a

way that the *screen idea* (Macdonald, 2013) is best represented through *verbal images* (Mitchell, 1986: 10), and the choice of words is more crucial for the composition of dialogues than the description of action. Therefore, a film script is recognised more as a technical document instructing professionals during the production of a film rather than a literary text intended for readerly pleasure. This combination of practice and pedagogy is central to understanding how screenwriting has developed across film industries in different parts of the world. A broad spectrum of definitions, implying anything from developing a story idea to the development of the final shooting script (Taylor and Batty, 2016), constitutes screenwriting as a complex (and largely invisible) process, which often elicits the production of pedagogic textbooks that attempt to demystify the process for keen amateurs.

In the context of Indian film industries, this definitional ambiguity is compounded manifold. Despite being the largest producer of films worldwide, Indian cinema has historically not enjoyed a reputation for full-fledged film scripts in pre-production stages. The Hindi film industry's historical over-reliance on bankable stars, on-set improvisation, 'discontinuous' narratives with elaborate song and dance sequences, plagiarist practices and informal financing has frequently contributed to the stereotype that Hindi films were mostly made without any scripts. In recent decades, however, processes of economic liberalization in Bollywood and other regional cinemas have significantly changed that perception. The emergence of multiplex cinemas in the new millennium and the more recent advent of digital streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon have refashioned script development as an indispensable process of making films due to a burgeoning demand for narrative over spectacle. As a result, scripting, as a practice as well as discourse (Maras, 2009), has gained wider currency in India in recent years. The demand for an authoritative and updated screenwriting manual, different from the

already available Hindi *patkatha-lekhan* books of yesteryears (See Joshi, 2000; Bhandari, 2006; Wajahat, 2011; Prakash, 2015), is palpable.[1]

This thesis is, however, *not* a manual. Like several Anglophone studies of screenwriting over the past two decades (Maras, 2009; Price, 2013; Macdonald, 2013; Conor, 2014), this research adopts a historical and critical approach to studying screenwriting in Indian cinema. Screenwriting is a vital industrial practice that entails a wide range of creative processes, from developing a story idea for the screen to pitching the screenplay to prospective financiers and stars, but the 'how-to' genre has largely obscured the complex and multifaceted nature of screenwriting as a pre-production practice that varies across film cultures. Ian Macdonald (2013: 7) has argued that screenwriting should be studied "as a local, social process without losing sight of its purpose, its documentation or its place within wider contexts." Nonetheless, due to the global popularity of manuals written by Hollywood screenwriting 'gurus' such as Syd Field and Robert McKee, screenwriting has largely been understood as a Hollywood craft with universal principles of cinematic storytelling. These manuals have invisibilised local practices of screenwriting through the twin logics of application and aspiration. Often based on 'timeless' tenets of Aristotelian dramaturgy, the universal rules of the craft should either be *applicable* to all contexts or become an *aspirational* blueprint for practitioners of every film and television industry, regardless of different cultural worldviews and pre-existing crafts.

Screenwriting manuals also represent "a type of psy-technology" (Conor, 2014: 84) that perpetuates myths of professional success (whose historical origins I trace in Chapter 2). This is not to suggest that Hollywood screenwriting manuals do not support autodidacticism. Based on my interactions with amateur screenwriters in Mumbai who are still looking for a 'break' in

[1] The dearth of authoritative Indian screenwriting manuals was discussed in a day-long screenwriting workshop I attended in Bandra, Mumbai in November 2018. During my interviews, two veteran screenwriters, Kamlesh Pandey and Anjum Rajabali, also expressed their long desire to write a manual for screenwriting students and enthusiasts in India as the American ones weren't helpful beyond a point.

the film industry, manuals constitute an essential pedagogic tool and often provide a significantly cheaper alternative to professional training in film schools. However, the problem with the screenwriting manual is its universalizing propensity, which is not reducible to its pedagogic functionality. The predominance of studies of screenwriting in the form of training textbooks renders the *practice* an ahistorical and deculturized *technique*. The perceived universality of Hollywood screenwriting technique as an applied and aspirational model obscures the plurality of local practices and epistemological possibilities. As I show in the thesis, this model has historically generated Indian cinema's cultural lag through Western pedagogic and local reformist discourses.

By contrast, this thesis departs from the prescriptive approach of manuals and introduces early Indian screenwriting as a site of technical and cultural difference as well as industrial heterogeneity. Arguably, the proliferation of 'how-to' discourse around Western models of filmmaking and screenwriting has significantly contributed to the commonplace historical understanding of cinema as a stable Euro-American medium that diffused itself from the global North to South. Conversely, film historians of the Global South have shown how early cinematic practices should be understood as complex processes of cultural and industrial transformation, inseparable from local specificities and colonial histories (López, 2000; Larkin, 2008; Dovey, 2009; Vasudevan, 2010; Obiaya, 2011; Naficy, 2011; Chan, 2015; Mahadevan, 2015; Ruppin, 2017).

In South Asia, the Cinématographe arrived as a European commodity in the late nineteenth century within several months of its first public screening in Paris. The arrival of cinema as a portable medium of images participated not only in the colonial environment of industrial modernization but also the established local economies of visual and print culture. The hybridisation of cinema in India went hand in hand with its indigenisation. South Asian film historians have shown how early cinema "underwent significant reinventions in order to

become culturally relevant and commercially viable" (Mahadevan, 2015: 4-5), illustrating why "the 'social life' or 'cultural biography' of mechanical objects needs to be understood in context and cannot be presumed to be uniform and universal" (Arnold, 2013: 5). The rich and growing body of scholarship on early Indian cinema has foregrounded geographical specificity (Bhaumik, 2001; Gooptu, 2010; Thomas, 2015; Mukherjee, 2020), socio-cultural specificity (Dwyer, 2006; Hughes, 2010; Srinivas, 2013; Sharma, 2014) and linguistic specificity (Sharma, 2015; Ravikant, 2015; Sen, 2020; Niazi, 2021) to destabilise notions of medium specificity. These alternative specificities deconstruct the old medium-specific query by André Bazin: 'What is cinema?'[2] If cinema is not a stable medium, what about its constitutive practices, such as screenwriting? If there is no singular way of knowing cinema (or even Indian cinema), can there be more than one way of *knowing* screenwriting, despite its dominant understanding as a standard technique rather than a set of cultural practices? This thesis will explore multiple ways of knowing screenwriting, from the social life of manuals to its intermedial interactions with theatre, literature and music. It will depart from prescriptive approaches to screenwriting and instead study the practice as an important epistemological resource for film history in South Asia.

Since my project is more interested in the epistemological possibilities of film and media history from the Global South, my critical focus is not on cinematic narratives which may be more closely aligned with the question of national identity production (See Chakravarty, 1993). An important distinction needs to be made here between screenwriting as a material practice vis-à-vis film and media historiography and screenwriting as a socio-

[2] Bazin (1967) famously argued that film's photographic realism gave the medium its unique quality of automatism in capturing and representing reality. Therefore, cinema required less human intervention than other 'plastic arts' such as painting and sculpture.

cultural tool for storytelling and representation vis-à-vis nation-building. My focus throughout the thesis remains largely on the former.

**Epistemology and Archaeology**

My research asks this epistemological question: How can we *know* screenwriting differently? My approach is an archaeological one. Of course, this should not be misunderstood as a kind of actual excavation work which entails digging into the surface of the earth to look for prehistoric bones, monuments and ruins. In contemporary Western philosophy, the notion of 'archaeology' is linked to Michel Foucault's deployment of the term during the 1960s.[3] As a highly flexible and versatile method, the conceptual ambiguity of Foucauldian archaeology (Krarup, 2021) has proved to be beneficial for historians, critical thinkers and philosophers. Archaeology is not an isolated concept in Foucault's work but part of his distinctly epistemological journey into the archive as "the system of discursivity, in the enunciative possibilities and impossibilities that it lays down" (Foucault, 1972 [1969]: 129). In other words, the Foucauldian archaeologist is interested in *statements* that have been made in a particular culture at a particular time; how they could have been made; how they operated and existed; and how they eventually changed. The task of the archaeologist is to identify structures of knowledge and power by questioning these statements in their own configuration and bringing to light their relationship with the *episteme* or *discursive formation* to which they belong.

[3] In *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Foucault defined his project as an "archaeology of that silence" (Foucault 2005 [1961]: xii) between reason and madness that constitutes insanity as a medical illness. His subsequent works, *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *The Order of Things* (1966) were subtitled as 'an archaeology of medical perception' and 'an archaeology of the human sciences' respectively. Finally, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault laid out the theoretical stakes of his decade-long engagement with the 'archaeological' method. It has not been possible, however, to derive a consistent and unambiguous definition of Foucauldian archaeology from this methodological treatise.

As Wendy Willems (2014: 8) has argued, media scholarship from the Global South should cease to be 'negative imprints' of the West and instead 'deal with the question of epistemology'. The archaeological account of screenwriting that I offer in the chapters of this thesis brings the discourse of Indian screenwriting into an epistemological dialogue with its practice. I approach the epistemological question through a comparative reading of screenwriting as a *discourse* as well as a *practice*. While Foucault did not distinguish between discourse and practice in his archaeological method, this distinction becomes necessary here for historiographic clarity.[4] In the thesis, *discourse* broadly refers to a wide range of plaintive, prescriptive and reformist articulations of Indian screenwriting as inadequate and backward, while my deployment of *practice* foregrounds an ethnographic understanding of scripting work within film production histories. The epistemological divide between screenwriting discourse and practice could be studied as specific oppositions between culture and technique or mapped on to broader conflicts between modernity and tradition respectively.

The first two chapters of the thesis introduce the epistemological limits of the conventional screenwriting archive. Chapter 1 critiques the archival search for 'bound' continuity scripts as a historiographic desire for a 'screenwriting modernity' that reorganises Indian film history around the logics of the Hollywood studio system, largely at the expense of pre-colonial scribal traditions. Chapter 2 studies the disjunction between screenwriting practice and discourse at the time of the first talkies by investigating the professional recruitment of Parsi theatre playwrights as screenwriters alongside the parallel circulation of screenwriting manuals aimed at amateur writers.

[4] Foucault (1969: 117) conceptualised discursive practices as "a body of anonymous, historical rules" – in other words, a matrix of processes of knowledge formation (or discourse) sustained through contingent mechanisms and operations across different periods and sites.

The third and fourth chapters of the thesis employ a transregional comparative framework to highlight the heterogeneity of film practices and plurality of industrial attitudes across Bengali (Eastern India) and Bombay (Western India) cinema. Chapter 3 traces the origins of the colloquial Bengali homograph '*boi'* (which refers to both book and film) in order to contextualise the invisibilisation of screenwriting in early Bengali cinema within a vernacular media ecology of literary adaptations, reformist film discourses and auteurist practices. Chapter 4 rethinks songwriting as a scripting practice. It explores how Hindi/Urdu film lyricists in Bombay cinema introduced parallel techniques of storytelling for mass audiences in postcolonial India, undercutting the elite and reformist understanding of songs as non-diegetic.

**Media Archaeology**

In the field of 'new film history', Michel Foucault's archaeological method has provided a strong philosophical foundation for scholars trying to challenge linear, chronological accounts of cinema's past.[5] Referring to the revisionist work of film historians such as Noël Burch and Tom Gunning "who began rethinking how cinema had emerged", Thomas Elsaesser (2016: 355) has argued that 'new film history' laid "the groundwork for what became media archaeology with respect to cinema". Elsaesser understands media archaeology to be "a response to various kinds of crises" (354) rather than a methodology or a discipline. Arguably, apart from "the crisis in history and causality" (360), media archaeology in the Global South also addresses the crisis in the archives. While film historians working in the expansive

[5] Since 1985, the field of film history has been marked by a revisionist turn. The 'new film history' is characterised by an increased methodological sophistication, an expansion of the range of primary sources, and an understanding of films as cultural artefacts beyond their narrative elements. (See Chapman et al., 2007)

archives of the West arrived at media archaeology after a period of disenchantment with positivist histories of cinema, film scholars in South Asia have had little choice but to take recourse to parallel histories of the moving image in the absence of early films (Mukherjee, 2013; Chatterjee, 2014). Likewise, as we shall see in this thesis, the failure of an archival excavation of the screenwriting *object* led to an archaeological inquiry into its *discourse* and *practice*. My approach is significantly informed by the increased understanding of film history as a media archaeological project of studying discontinuities, convergences and networks against the grain of teleological histories of industrial progress:

> The activity of recovering this diversity and to account for such multiplicity, to trace these parallel histories and explore alternative trajectories, is what is meant by 'film history as media archaeology': not just the excavation of manifold pasts but also generating an archaeology of possible futures. (Elsaesser, 2016: 25)

It is important to briefly discuss how this proposed archaeology of screenwriting as a media discourse and practice rather than a media object departs from radical/German media archaeology. Radical media archaeology, for Wolfgang Ernst (2015: 18), is an excavation of "the epistemological insights that can be derived from the close analysis of electro-mechanical media, electronic media, and finally computative machines". In other words, pasts recorded with "the coldness (lack of emotion or semantics) of the machine" (Parikka, 2013: 8) take precedence over historical narratives constructed by human beings. The criticism against this extreme form of media materialism is usually levelled at its anti-humanist approach. Scholars have expressed different reservations about this particular mode of media archaeology in the tradition of Friedrich Kittler, which endorses a thorough erasure of any trace of anthropomorphism in media histories (Huhtamo, 2012: 16–17; Parikka, 2013: 11; Mattern, 2017: xxiv). Such hardware-focused and object-oriented approach has been bluntly described

as "media studies without people" (Peters, 2010: 5). Mindful of these considerations, my own archaeological attempt is inspired by more socio-cultural excavations of media (Winthrop-Young et al., 2013), often referred to as 'cultural techniques'.[6] *Kulturtechniken*, or the culture-technical wing of media archaeology that explores interactions between humans and media, emerged as "a response to questions or quandaries that arose from media-theoretical work best represented by Kittler's contributions" (Winthrop-Young, 2013: 13).

The case against anti-humanism becomes doubly relevant in Southern contexts. A world lacking in technological inventors and pioneers is arguably rife with anonymised media histories. In the Global South, the archaeological radicalism lies in piecing together the pasts and presents of human practices through archival ruins and fragments. My ethno-historical approach and focus on practices introduces cultural agency through a number of human actors – the Parsi theatre *munshis* in Chapters 1 and 2, Bengali authors and auteurs in Chapter 3, and the Bombay film lyricists in Chapter 4. Practitioners of media archaeology from the Global South will also have to rethink some of the empirical assumptions behind media archaeological approaches emerging from the North. In his media archaeology of Indian cinema, Sudhir Mahadevan (2015: 15) explains the contemporaneity of old and new media forms in South Asia as an "obviation of obsolescence" – a condition markedly different from the planned obsolescence of media artefacts in the West. The old and the new co-exist, producing entangled media temporalities and uneven modernities.

[6] For instance, Markus Krajewski's (2018 [2011]) archaeology of the digital server is a refreshing critique of automation, charting out a long history of servants from their classical representations in erstwhile cultural forms to their increased objectification in more recent digital manifestations. In the field of screenwriting studies, Adam Ganz (2012) has linked the composition of descriptive passages in screenplays to the tradition of 'lens-based' writings, such as those of Galileo and Van Leeuwenhoek.

The question of modernity in relation to film and media history can be extended to world-systemic as well as decolonial thinking. In the 1970s, world-systems theory located the problems of development not as a systemic, organicist or functionalist totality but as a socio-historical totality that corresponded to a set of social relations of power based on continuities and discontinuities under the material and symbolic hegemony of capital. In particular, Immanuel Wallerstein's (2004) analysis of the world systems traced how Western Europe's expansion of industrialization and the capitalist world-economy resulted in unequal development and uneven modernity across the world. Through this mode of analysis, dependency approaches to development as well as the concept of the nation state were eschewed as societies were now studied in relation to the world system. Many scholars have extensively drawn upon the epistemological project of world systems theory. Decolonial thinkers from Latin America have argued that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive in their subjugation of alternative knowledge systems and cosmologies. The concept of 'modernity/coloniality' was first used by Aníbal Quijano and subsequently developed by Walter Mignolo. According to Quijano (2007), it is impossible to separate colonial domination from modernity since the latter is the very basis for an epistemic hierarchy that has historically privileged Western epistemologies over non-Western ones. Mignolo (2009) extended this argument by proposing 'epistemic de-linking' as a decolonial strategy wherein knowledge production from the Global South departs from Western universalist models of modernity, rationality and economic progress. Epistemes, in the Foucauldian sense, are the unconscious rules that govern the conditions of possibility of knowledge in a particular era. At the heart of decolonial thinking therefore lies the excavation of subjugated knowledges though a reappraisal of dominant epistemic categories along the geopolitical vectors of knowledge.

'Epistemic thresholds' (Parikka, 2012: 33) of old and new media also operate as heuristic tools of historical inquiry in media archaeology. The task of the media archaeologist

is an excavation of the hidden layers of media history along epistemic fault lines. Following the Foucauldian notion of archaeology, media archaeology serves both as a method for recovering forgotten media pasts and as a critique of dominant linear narratives of technical progress. While some media archaeologists have highlighted the epistemological centrality of human physiology in rethinking media-historical narratives (Crary, 1990; Doane, 2002), other scholars have stressed mathematical processes as more telling of contemporary media environments (Ernst, 2013, 2021). Both sets of scholars have, however, largely overlooked global power asymmetries in their media archaeological pursuits and appeared rather geopolitically insular and race agnostic in their epistemological reverse engineering. Therefore, both the temporal poetics of media archaeology and the spatial and racial politics of decolonial thinking have informed the alternative trajectories of film historical inquiry in this thesis. As I show in Chapter 1, my analysis of screenwriting discourses as 'modern' stems from its characterisation of parallel scripting practices and pre-existing scribal traditions as obsolete. Through a critical investigation of this 'modern' discourse of cultural lag, my thesis explores the possibility of bringing decolonial thinking into a dialogue with media archaeology.

It is important to briefly address the intellectual contradictions that might arise with my alignment of a Foucauldian framework and postcolonial setting with a decolonial approach. There are several differences between postcolonial and decolonial critiques of colonialism. Postcolonial theories are largely based on the experience of French and British colonisation, while decolonial thinking constitutes a response to Iberian colonialism. There are significant differences between the forms of domination and resistance in South Asia, Africa and Latin America. Moreover, postcolonial theory is largely influenced by European critical theory, especially French, and this influence results in a difference in geopolitics of knowledge between the two schools. While the decolonial school stresses an epistemological emancipation from Eurocentrism through indigenous cosmologies, the postcolonial school characterises an

epistemic indifference to traditions of the past as repositories of knowledge, whether Hindu, Islamic or Buddhist. This scepticism is derived in equal measure from tenets of poststructuralism and dangers of nativism in postcolonial societies.[7] Another important difference lies in their intellectual and political attitudes to the question of modernity. The postcolonial objective is to decentralize the universality of European modernity as well as Western forms of knowledge and representation, while the decolonial aim is to reject hegemonic narratives of modernity and emphasize the material and economic basis of inequalities. Therefore, postcolonial critique emphasizes attention to the ambiguities of modernity and is not primarily aimed at rejecting modernity. On the other hand, the critique of modernity in decolonial thinkers from Latin America represents a temporal and spatial corrective of the European conquest of the continent in 1492. The specific historiographic focus on Indian screenwriting does not allow me to bring the two schools into any serious scholarly dialogue, or even flesh out their competing visions in greater detail as other scholars have (See Bhambra, 2014). However, at the risk of some (productive) inconsistency, I will use concepts and strategies from both schools of thought to write this critical film history, without professing absolute loyalty to any one school.

**Interdisciplinarity and Intermediality**

The existing scholarship on early Indian screenwriting, except a few scholarly pieces (Yadav, 2011; Dharamsey, 2012; Mukherjee, 2015a), has been rather limited — a condition intensified by the archival lack of film scripts. Apart from Virchand Dharamsey's (2012) brief introductory article on the extant script of the 1924 silent hit *Gul-e-Bakavali*, Debashree

[7] The appropriation of decoloniality discourses by far-right Hindu nationalist groups in India and overseas, at the dangerous expense of South Asia's multireligious and multi-layered civilizational histories, is an important case in point.

Mukherjee's (2020) work is the only other scholarly work that reflects on early practices of screenwriting with reference to invaluable primary sources. Her broader project focuses on the modernization of Bombay film industry as a 'cine-ecology' of speculative futures, new hierarchies of labour, centralised cinematic practices and emergent technologies of film. Mukherjee (2020: 2) foregoes the older framework of 'media ecology' and posits 'cine-ecology' as a concept that privileges historical and geographical specificity over technological specificity. The framework of 'cine-ecology' encompasses everything from human bodies and film technologies to industrial energies and natural environments that contributed to the emergence of the Bombay film industry during the 1930s and 40s. Mukherjee brings all film practices and factors of film production into the fold of Bombay film history through the 'cine-ecological' framework, which ultimately contributes to a centripetal understanding of Bombay cinema's growth. Although the medium specificity of cinema as a technological object is avowedly eschewed, I argue that her study of screenwriting becomes medium specific to fit into this history of industrial modernization. Mukherjee's (2020: 117) understanding of screenwriting follows largely from Janet Staiger's reading of the script as the 'blueprint' of filmic production. Staiger's study of the script in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al, 1985), while acknowledged unanimously to be an influential work on the studio era, has been challenged by Anglo-American screenwriting scholars for its deterministic nature.[8] Accordingly, Mukherjee's discussion of the 'continuity script' draws on precious fragments of Bombay Talkies production files and sheds light on the studio's systematic management of risk and labour through scriptwriting. However, this study of screenwriting remains determinedly a medium specific account of industrialisation due to its singular focus on the 'continuity script'

[8] Steven Maras (2009: 42) has expressed his reservations about the notion of the script as a 'sovereign' document as it re-inscribes industrial binaries of 'conception' (scripting) and 'execution' (filming) in an attempt to tie down the industrial process with the representational practice. Steven Price (2013: 9) too, while appreciating Staiger's pioneering study of the script as a document imbued with industrial function, has unequivocally articulated the deterministic nature of her project.

as a modernizing tool that facilitated the planning of film production in Bombay. I return to this critique in detail in Chapter 1.

Raymond Williams (1977: 160) suggested that notions of medium specificity objectified the social and cultural contexts of media practices: "The properties of the 'medium' were abstracted as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means. This interpretation then suppressed the full sense of the practice". Therefore, the concept of medium specificity, with its epistemological roots in notions of purity (Greenberg, 1940), does not do justice to the interdisciplinary possibilities of screenwriting research in South Asia. Instead of reading screenwriting practices as medium specific or subsuming them into a centripetal, cine-oriented framework, this thesis studies the intermedial practice and discourse of screenwriting at the intersections of print, theatre, scribal, literary and musical history, without necessarily folding them back into a history of film production or industrial modernization. Some recent intermedial histories of film in South Asia ought to be mentioned here. Stephen Hughes (2007: 4), in the context of early 1930s, has studied the creative and cultural exchanges between Tamil musical drama, the gramophone industry and early Tamil cinema as "parallel and mutually constitutive media practices" in the material reconfiguration of the field of Tamil music. Sudhir Mahadevan's (2015) media archaeology of the origins of Indian cinema digs deep into the late-nineteenth century histories of photography, journalism, mobility, showmanship and piracy to reconstitute early cinema as a cultural assemblage of several commercial practices. Ravikant (2015) has discussed the possibility of a new historiography of Hindi cinema, radio and print vis-à-vis the vantage point offered by the contemporary web world of convergent media forms, allowing the present to give both meaning and method to the study of the past.

Arguably, intermedial histories are often generated from a historiographic engagement with extra-filmic sources. Stephen Hughes (2013: 79) has questioned whether an engagement with extra-filmic source materials tell us more than just film history: "How we excavate film

history raises questions about the degree to which it is advisable-or even possible-to isolate film as a unique body of history". The focus on intermediality does not deny a consciousness of the filmic apparatus in practitioners of cinema from the early years. Rather, it draws our attention to the extensive nature of cultural and technical practices which often exceeded their respective 'disciplinary' boundaries and entered into the operations of an otherwise invisible film practice like screenwriting. As Steven Maras (2009) has pointed out, the nuances of an interdisciplinary subject like screenwriting can often get lost in mainstream, integrative approaches within both film and literary studies. It can be argued that the lens of medium specificity in fact privileges a disciplinary "absorption of screenwriting into a pre-determined idea of film" (Maras, 2009: 8). The lens of intermediality can elicit more focused historical research on the points of contact that facilitated rich intermedial and multimodal practices such as screenwriting. These contact points were often obscured by the logics of the marketplace, which sought to isolate, fossilise and reify the fluidity of media practices, and it is important that these logics are not internalized by academic disciplines.

**Archives, Interviews and Ethnography**

When I embarked on this project, I was trying to fill a significant lacuna in the historical scholarship on Indian cinema – the absence of any writing on Indian screenwriting practices. As someone formally trained in literary studies with a research interest in film history, this lacuna not only piqued my intermedial curiosity but also resonated with my interdisciplinary interests. I soon found out that the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in Pune is home to thousands of digitized Indian film scripts from the 1950s till date. When I finally went through this colossal digital repository, I realised that these were actually 'censor scripts', which constitute a parallel, post-production history of transcribing cinematic content for the

convenience of the film censors.[9] It took me a while to realise that, unlike a literary document, the screenplay was generally a palimpsestuous document in flux and multiple hands may have worked on a script before and during a film's production.[10] During my archival work at the NFAI, I found a few censor scripts from the late 40s and early 50s which appear to be informally handwritten and heavily edited.[11] It could be argued that some of these were based on original shooting scripts which were used during the filming process and submitted to the CBFC without the intervention of a 'censor script writer'.[12] However, that remains purely a speculation on my part, and unfortunately the pre-production focus of my research does not allow a detailed textual study of these documents and how they may have facilitated censorship.

Despite the absence of an institutionalised archive of pre-production film scripts in Pune (unlike the extensive script collections in the British Film Institute in London, the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas or the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles), formal and informal archives in India and overseas have contributed significantly to this research. While

[9] Contrastingly, the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) censor scripts from the 1930s that I came across in the BFI archives in London were pre-production documents that British producers submitted to censors for approval before embarking on the production of a film.

[10] With the implementation of the Cinematograph Act, 1952, the censor script emerged parallelly as a post-production manuscript with a definitive format that tabulated the separation of shot descriptions from dialogues, indicating the work of multiple hands. There are a number of detailed scripts (both handwritten and typed) with edits. Most of these film scripts contain reel-wise scene descriptions with high detailing of the camera movements, while some display a trilingual mishmash of the Roman, Nagari and Nastaliq scripts, seldom interspersed with graphic illustrations for specific scenes.

[11] Some of these films include *Ramshastri* (1944), *Mere Bhagwan* (1947), *Gulnar* (1950), *Bilwamangal* (1954) and *Shevgyacha Shenga* (1955). These may have been working drafts that were actually used during the production of the film and submitted later to the CBFC without a great deal of formatting, especially in the event of a re-release after during the 1950s.

[12] From the late 50s onwards, most of the film scripts submitted to the CBFC have been neatly typed and formatted, and some even have the name and phone number of the 'typist' on the cover page. It can be assumed that by this time, with the film script becoming the site of censorship, there was an informal system of 'censor scriptwriters' who had learnt the tricks of getting a film script passed without too many cuts. The censor script, which till date follows a safe and standardized format to cleverly avoid cuts, is notorious for minimum detailing for problematic sections and extensive detailing for unproblematic ones. (See Khanna, 2005)

a deep dive into the censor script archive did not prove very fruitful, the NFAI in Pune and the Media Lab in Jadavpur University in Kolkata provided access to a wide range of English, Hindi and Bengali film periodicals. A study of the early discourses on screenwriting was only possible through extensive archival work at these two archives where dozens of film magazines such as *Chitrapat*, *Varieties Weekly, filmindia, Filmland, Filmfare, Screen, Chitrabani, Rajatpat, Chitralekha, Deepali* have proved to be invaluable resources. The British Library in London and the National Library in Kolkata house a number of screenwriting manuals from the 1920s and 30s, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2.

Additionally, published memoirs have been a significant archival source. Screenwriters are often considered marginal figures in film production, but what distinguishes this particular form of marginality from other kinds of filmic labour is the privilege of writing itself. The memoirs and autobiographical accounts of a number of screenwriters from the period of this research bear testimony to the spaces they successfully (or unsuccessfully) negotiated for themselves despite the formulaic demands of the film industry. For instance, Amritlal Nagar's anecdotal account of story pitching sessions in the 1940s illustrated the craft as well as the commerce of film writing, wherein writers betray their entrepreneurial qualities while professing a deep sensitivity towards the desecration of literary values and principles by *seths* (film financiers). Premchand, Saadat Hasan Manto and Upendranath Ashk articulated similar experiences of professional disenchantment in Bombay. Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay and Nabendu Ghosh revealed little cultural shock of working in Bombay cinema after a successful stint in the Bengali literary world. Conversely, Pandit Sudarshan's difficulties as a Hindi-speaking 'outsider' in Calcutta's New Theatres are well documented in his memoirs. Bombay Talkies' screenwriter Niranjan Pal saw the new recruit K. A. Abbas as competition, while Abrar Alvi boasted about replacing Raj Khosla as Guru Dutt's main screenwriter. As we will see in

Chapter 2, the memoirs of Radheshyam Kathavachak and Narayan Prasad Betab have been a great resource for information about their working conditions, wages and contracts.

During the course of this study, informal family archives in Australia, Canada, India and the United Kingdom opened up my research in serendipitous ways. The sporadic eruption of unexpected historical resources over the course of my research alerted me to another archaeological dimension of film history: archival excavation can never be foreclosed despite the dearth of relevant materials in formal archives such as the NFAI or the British Library. The filmic memory of state and colonial archives has to be complicated through transnational private collections generated by different forms of migration and mobility in the twentieth century. In Melbourne, I visited the collections of Peter Dietze, the grandson of Bombay Talkies' founder Himanshu Rai, who singlehandedly catalogues and maintains a family archive of Bombay Talkies documents, including continuity script files and dialogue script fragments.[13] I discuss Dietze's collections in detail in Chapter 1. Joanna Ezekiel, the great-granddaughter of Joseph David, screenwriter for India's first talkie *Alam Ara* (1931), reached out to me with an original screenplay by David, which I discuss briefly in Chapter 2. There are a number of other family archives which I managed to track down but have not been able to access in person yet. The Urdu screenwriter Aghajani Kashmeri's sons based in Canada, Zuhair Kashmeri and Sarwar Kashmeri, provided me with information about his untapped archive of script drafts and related documents. Screenwriter Vrajendra Gaur and lyricist Shailendra's families based in India are also in possession of similar materials. These personal collections revealed to me how South Asian film histories can be continually revised in the light of new materials surfacing from different parts of the world. In a context where such micro-archives

[13] I received Peter Dietze's contact from Debashree Mukherjee.

are largely filial possessions, I gradually realised the importance of combining my archival research with oral histories and interviews.

While more parallel and informal archives opened up for me, I also conducted six-month long interview-based fieldwork in Mumbai and Kolkata with veteran film professionals as well as contemporary filmmakers and screenwriters. During my archival work, I often had to comb through hundreds of pages of historical material for the mere mention of 'screenwriting', 'script' and 'screenplay'. Contrastingly, semi-structured interviews and participant observation offered me access to these subjects in direct ways. Over a three months' stay in Mumbai, I was able to interview a number of renowned as well as aspiring screenwriters, film directors, archivists and family members of film professionals. Additionally, I attended screenwriting workshops and competitions, and also eavesdropped on scriptwriting sessions in cafes in order to, as one of my interviewees had approvingly put, "get into the psyche of the screenwriter."

The Screenwriters' Association in Andheri, Mumbai turned out to be one of my regular haunts (See Fig 1). In Hollywood, the proliferation of American screenwriters' guilds from as early as the 1920s has long established a unionized identity of film writers (Conor, 2014; Banks, 2015). In contrast, the Film Writers Association (FWA), established informally in 1954 in Bombay, was initially a social club for screenwriters, directors and other artists to discuss films, literature and politics on Sunday afternoons.[14] Although beyond the scope of this thesis, the evolution of the FWA from its informal establishment in 1954 to its registration under the Trade Union Act, 1926 in 1960, is a short yet significant period for South Asian screenwriting

[14] Most of the founding members of this informal organisation were associated with anti-colonial, Marxist cultural organisations such as the PWA (Progressive Writers' Association) and the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). Their work in the film industry gradually aided in an extension of the radical literary sphere of the PWA and the IPTA through a conscious exploration of broader political motives of nation building through film story and dialogue. With the formation of the FWA, their creative energies were duly channelled into mainstream politics as the burden of radical literary activism was released into the indeterminate autonomy and appeal of commercial cinema.

history. Interestingly, threatened by the contract system introduced by Chimanlal Trivedi in the early 1950s, the FWA was forged out of the need to re-establish the flexible partnerships between writers and directors under the studio system, which they demanded to pursue in the freelancing era. During the course of my research, the organisation was renamed as the Screenwriters' Association (or SWA) and has today become one of the largest screenwriters' unions in the world with over 30,000 members. The SWA office in Andheri often doubled up as an archival and ethnographic site as I went through their dusty scrapbooks with old newspaper clippings about the organisation, while an officer in the same room routinely offered unsolicited advice to young screenwriters who had come to copyright their scripts before meeting prospective producers and directors.


Fig 1: Screenwriters' Association (SWA) office in Andheri, Mumbai

Gradually, I began to perceive screenwriters as part of a creative community engaged in a distinctive boundary work, not necessarily through disdainful declarations about the lack of professionalism in fellow screenwriters, but through references to what they read and watched, who they idolised, how they worked with difficult directors and fought legal battles against plagiarist producers. This ethnographic engagement helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of not only how screenwriting history was always already a part of the Hindi film industry's unconscious, but also the contemporary status of screenwriting in relation to expansive ongoing changes in film production, distribution and exhibition with the arrival of streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon. There is a lot of ethnographic information that will not find mention in this historiographic project, which nonetheless has given me a range of perspectives that have made many of my ideas and articulations in this thesis possible.

**The Chapters**

As mentioned earlier, the stark absence of early film scripts has posed not only a historiographic challenge to South Asian film scholars but also contributed to the 'myth' that Indian films till recently were produced without scripts. However, it is important to understand, as rigorous ethnographic and historical scholarship (Ganti, 2012; Thomas, 2015) has established, that it is not all a myth. Historically, all film industries from Hollywood to Bollywood, have been diverse in their production practices in varying degrees. It is, in fact, any monolithic idea of screenwriting that constitutes a myth, which makes it rather simplistic for scholars to take a singular stand on whether 'bound scripts' existed in South Asia. In that spirit, the thesis is more interested in how archival absences and industrial 'myths' construct what I will refer to as a 'screenwriting modernity'. The mythical object of analysis in the thesis is not the physical script but the associations of technical progress and aesthetic quality it invokes in the form of

a perpetual desire for ‘catching up’ with (equally mythical and monolithic) ‘Western’ modes of scripting. As my research will show, the desire for ‘better’ screenwriting practices, whether in the form of more detailed scripts or more medium-specific writers, has existed well before the neoliberal moment of the 1980s-90s. In fact, it has always been the predominant mode of articulating the practice of screenwriting. The historical existence of this material practice in South Asia has therefore largely remained invisible. There can be multiple reasons behind the invisibilisation of screenwriting in South Asia – the archival privileging of printed material over other perishable forms of writing, a discursive indifference for local forms of screenwriting, a conscious effort on part of some (literary) screenwriters to understate their own work in the film industry, and a historical process of mythmaking perpetuated by a self-fashioning film industry. Due to this archival problem, the analytical forays of Western screenwriting scholarship into the evolution of the screenplay form are not possible in the context of South Asian cinemas where we lack extensive historical collections. In each of the chapters, I therefore return to the epistemological question: How can we *know* screenwriting differently?

Broadly, my attempt in the chapters of this thesis has been to offer readers a way out of laments about archival absence and narratives of technical backwardness. The first chapter, titled ‘‘Bound’ Scripts and *Munshis*: Archival Determinism and Scribal Obsolescence’, connects the archival problem with the epistemological conundrum of writing an Indian screenwriting history. In this chapter, I argue that the archival discourse shapes the historiographic desire for a screenwriting modernity in early Indian film studios à la Hollywood, especially through a search for the ‘bound’ continuity script. Through a comparative study of the Hollywood continuity script and Bombay’s screenwriting *munshi*, I try to bring together two seemingly disparate histories of archival determinism and scribal obsolescence in South Asian film history. An investigation of the film script archive as the

*subject* rather than the *source* of film history reveals the construction of an elusive screenwriting modernity around which laments of archival absence of film scripts are expressed.[15] The chapter shows how this archive-oriented discourse has historically obscured parallel scripting practices and pre-existing scribal traditions in Indian cinema, and continues to perpetuate a similar epistemic misrecognition by privileging the continuity script as a harbinger of industrial capitalism in Indian film studios.

The second chapter, titled 'The First Talkies: Pedagogy, Precarity and the Parsi Theatre', distinguishes between the intermedial discourse and practice of screenwriting during the first Indian talkies. I focus on the short yet significant period of 1927-33 that was marked by the anticipation as well as arrival of talkies in India. These years witnessed a publishing boom in scenario manuals aimed at amateur screenwriters and the recruitment of professional Parsi theatre playwrights in Indian film studios. Screenwriting manuals have constituted important source material for Hollywood as well as Bombay film historians, although more recent scholarship in the West (Morey, 1997; Gritten, 2007; Tieber, 2012; Conor, 2014) has challenged the screenwriting manual's knowledge-making claims. Additionally, a critical investigation of early screenwriting manuals in South Asia uncovers unexpected historical intersections of pedagogy and precarity. The chapter shows that these 'how-to' books beguiled amateur readers with fictions of opportunity and offered them illusory invitations to join the emergent field of talkies. As a counterpoint, I highlight the enormous gulf between pedagogy and practice by discussing how Indian film studios strictly hired professional *munshis* from the Parsi theatre in the race for the first Indian talkies. The recruitment of playwrights as the first

[15] Through a sustained epistemological inquiry into the archive as the subject rather than the source (See Stoler, 2002), my engagement with different kinds of ephemera such as screenwriting manuals, advertisements and magazine articles acknowledges not only their "evidential status" (Dahl, 1994: 552) but also their material status. The extraction of information reduces any medium to a source, a mere informant, often ignoring its formal constitutive properties in historically shaping its subject. Instead, the thesis probes into the discursive properties of ephemeral documents in order to rethink the screenwriting archive and excavate the incongruities of discourse and practice. I demonstrate this archaeological method in detail in my study of screenwriting manuals in Chapter 2.

talkie writers and the origins of early talkie-writing as modified stagecraft reveal how the novelty of sound was utilised to its fullest through frequent songs and elaborate dialogues, which arguably laid the aesthetic foundations of popular Indian cinema. The chapter explores this eventful period of anticipation and arrival through a centrifugal understanding of screenwriting as a discourse and practice disaggregated across film, print and theatre history.

The third chapter, titled 'The Intermediality of *Boi*: Adaptation and Authorship in Bengali Cinema', studies screenwriting in relation to the predominance of literary adaptations in Bengal and the ensuing conundrum of attributing cinematic authorship. Focusing on the period from 1930s to 1950s, I investigate how authorial anxieties, medium specific aspirations and cultural assertions in Bengali film discourse and practice obscured the craft of screenwriting. The colloquial Bengali homograph '*boi*', meaning book as well as film, has for long irked *bhadralok* (male Bengali cultural elites) film critics for its intermedial entanglements. The chapter shows how the same critics have nonetheless persistently returned to Bengali literature as a narrative reservoir to prescribe best practices of screenwriting and contributed to similar terminological confusions. Beyond reformist film discourses, I also track early Bengali cinema's liaisons with literature, from Rabindranath Tagore's supervisory involvement with filmmakers who adapted his literary works to Satyajit Ray's auteurial practices of literary adaptation in his extant scripting documents. Film adaptation practices from Tagore to Ray unravel a history of screenwriting along the dialectical coordinates of film and literary authorship. The chapter also touches upon the afterlife of this literary film culture in the Bombay film industry, which accommodated a windfall of Bengali film professionals in the 1950s.

The fourth and final chapter, titled 'Scripting Songs: Cineliteracy and the Bombay Film Lyricist', focuses on the *scripting* of the Bombay film song during the period of 1947-60. By scripting, I refer to both the textual composition of the film song and its inclusion in the film

narrative as a planned segment of the script. The Bombay film song's growing popularity in the 1950s coincided with the emergence of 'cineliteracy' – an appreciation of film grammar vis-à-vis European realist and neorealist cinema among urban audiences in India, especially in Bengal. Film songs have largely been dismissed by 'cineliterate' critics as non-diegetic and disruptive, while more recent critical scholarship has studied songs as extra-diegetic components of cinema whose distinctive spectatorial address undercuts ideological powers of narrative cinema. Furthermore, the historical transmedial popularity of the Bombay film song across radio, gramophone, cassette culture and digital formats has created an expansive aural afterlife which detaches the song from its originally intended setting – the film narrative. Both the non-diegetic dismissal and extra-diegetic appraisal of the Bombay film song feed into a songless understanding of film diegesis, which perhaps finds its most unmistakeable manifestation today in the growing number of songless Hindi films as 'story' begins to prevail over song and spectacle. This chapter puts the 'film' back into the film song and introduces a typology of song *situations* that demonstrate the Bombay film song's diegetic and communicative functions. Through an ethno-historical study of film lyricists and music directors, I show how the composition of the Bombay film song was a collaborative process that *scripted* the song sequence in the film's diegesis and shaped alternative cineliteracies for mass audiences.

These rich histories unmistakably point to the plurality of screenwriting practices instead of a singular, 'scientific' understanding of screenwriting as merely the subject of training and application. It is therefore important not to study screenwriting as a cog in the techno-industrial wheel of cinema but as a complex set of cultural practices that resist technical determinisms of the manual. Furthermore, in the stark archival absence of early film scripts, my project plots the history of screenwriting in South Asia outside Western epistemologies of scripting and focuses on invisibilised regional practices whose histories do not necessarily find

a place in formal film archives. As I show in Chapter 1, the challenges of writing a history of screenwriting in India are not limited to problems of the archive. My archaeological approach in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 raises deeper epistemological problems around questions of film production, authorship and diegesis.

The thesis explores how screenwriting *practices* that shaped the historical relationship between text, image and music in Indian cinema were largely obscured by archival laments, pedagogic textbooks and reformist writings. As I have mentioned earlier, all these *discourses* constitute the modernity of screenwriting that characterises Indian film cultures as technically and aesthetically deficient. While my focus is on South Asia, especially Bombay and Bengali cinemas, I envision the project as one having significant comparative potential for other film cultures of the Global South, where similar archival constraints and epistemological challenges contribute to their marginalization in film history. As the first critical history of screenwriting from a non-Western context, my research excavates local film practices through intermedial and de-Westernizing lenses to imagine an alternative, pluralist history of screenwriting. For film historians of the Global South, the term 'Global South' does not imply a pristine geographical space for the extraction of historical knowledge but a critical window to explore orientalist, imperial and neo-colonial power/knowledge relations that continue to disregard Southern film cultures in the field of film history.

This thesis is an archaeological as well as a media archaeological project. As an archaeological investigation in the Foucauldian mould, it studies the contradictions of screenwriting practice and discourse in order to understand how perceptions of archival lack and technical backwardness vis-à-vis screenwriting in India gained the currency of truth.[16] As

[16] Foucault's archaeology of the modern episteme, emerging from early 19th-century Europe, was curiously divorced from its context of colonialism. (See Alcoff, 2007; Legg, 2007). However, my

a media archaeological project, it collates a disparate and discontinuous cross-section of screenwriting artefacts, events and practices in the archival absence of a formally evolving pre-cinematic text. Despite its reliance on archival and ethnographic sources, my research does not attempt to construct a comprehensive, chronological history of screenwriting practices in Bengali and Bombay cinema. Instead, this critical history epistemically delinks screenwriting from universalist discourses, introduces regional specificities and cultural subjectivities, and presents an alternative non-linear model of film historiography beyond questions of archival absence and technical backwardness.

project's critical emphasis on archive, discourse and knowledge production makes Foucauldian archaeology as important to this film history as its more relevant subfield 'media archaeology'.

Chapter 1

# ‘Bound’ Scripts and *Munshis*

## Archival Determinism and Scribal Obsolescence

### The Archive Problem

During my fieldwork in Mumbai, when I asked the veteran screenwriter and teacher Anjum Rajabali about the pedagogic value of an Indian screenwriting history, I was pleasantly surprised by his implicit reference to T. S. Eliot’s seminal essay through which he described screenwriting history as an encounter of the tradition and the individual:[17]

> I tell my students that you have to position yourself as a person who is part of a tradition. The tradition and the individual - that is what is combining for you to do what you do. Within this tradition of storytelling is also the tradition of Indian screenwriting and its evolution, and we are somewhere along in this tradition. (Anjum Rajabali, personal communication, 2 January, 2019)

While interviewing screenwriters from different generations of the Hindi film industry in Mumbai, I sensed their deep reverence for tradition, even if their only way of navigating history

[17] See Eliot, Thomas S. (1932). Tradition and the Individual Talent. In: *Selected Essays, 1917 1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

was through intersecting memories of first-hand experiences and received anecdotes. Nonetheless, such reverence for tradition and contestation in history among veteran screenwriters is curiously matched by archival apathy in Indian film cultures. It brought me back to a basic question with which I started thinking about my research project: Why do we know so little about early screenwriting practices in a country as obsessed with cinema as India? The Hindi film industry alone produces more films than Hollywood each year. While not as commercially successful as Hindi films, regional cinemas in India are made in at least twenty other languages. Yet we lack any substantial historical knowledge of this hundred-year-old practice despite textual production at such a massive scale for films.

Steven Maras (2009: 11) has defined the "object problem" in screenwriting studies as "the difficulty of both defining screenwriting as an object, and identifying an object for screenwriting." Strangely, the 'object problem' has a deeper resonance with the archival absence of early Indian film scripts since the very object under academic scrutiny is missing. How does one write screenwriting history without film scripts? And how can Indian screenwriting scholarship graduate from complaints and caveats of archival constraints to a more critical understanding of the material absence of writing? Writing, as we traditionally understand, leaves a material trail. In literary studies, textual scholarship thrives and survives on the accessibility of written material, whether in the form of popular printed books or handwritten manuscripts. The deconstructive appeal to investigate absences and silences *in* writing often presupposes that writing always already exists.

Nonetheless, the Derridean notion of *trace* as "the mark of the absence of a presence" (Spivak, 1976: xvii) becomes quite useful here if its project is turned outward to study the absences and silences *of* writing itself. In other words, if a form of writing does not exist, the conditions of its invisibilisation bear its traces. As Lisa Gitelman (2014) has pointed out, the

mnemonic function of writing is always extended to its material formats, beyond the act of writing itself:

> Writing is mnemonic, the history of communication tells us; it is preservative. And so are printing and bookmaking. . . If writing is preservative, these books preserved preservation. Their design, manufacture, and adoption worked to conserve patterns of inscription and expression. (Gitelman, 2014: 22)

It can be argued that it is *binding*, and not merely writing, that preserves memory. In Bollywood[18], according to Tejaswini Ganti (2012: 216), the use of a 'bound' script during a film shoot is understood to be a rare practice of distinction which allows a filmmaker to profess her exceptional sincerity towards her work and distance herself from other filmmakers. Such self-assertions contribute to a myth of informality, according to which most films in Bollywood, an industry famous for its *masala* genre, are made without a 'bound' script. During my interviews in Mumbai between 2016 and 2019, I did not come across the same kind of 'boundary work'. However, I sensed a general appreciation of 'bound' scripts as pre-cinematic texts that facilitate the conception and production of a film, although not conventionally worthy of preservation for a literary readership.[19] As articulated by veteran screenwriter Kamlesh Pandey, the screenplay primarily has an intra-industrial circulation:

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[18] In the thesis, I have used the terms 'Bollywood', 'Hindi/Urdu cinema' and 'Bombay cinema' not interchangeably but because they refer to different historical, socio-economic and cultural aspects of the film industry in Mumbai, India. 'Bollywood' refers to the expansion of the film industry during the liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy since the 1980s. (See Vasudevan, 2011: 334-346; Thomas, 2015: 5-6) I mostly use 'Hindi/Urdu cinema' in relation to the question of language during the period I focus on (See Lunn 2015), and 'Bombay cinema' in relation to other regional cinemas, especially Bengali cinema. See Stadtler (2014: 10) for a brief discussion on how the blanket term 'Bollywood' has subsumed other 'arthouse, regional and middle cinemas' in India.

[19] This attitude is in stark contrast to Japanese film culture where, as early as the mid-1930s, a group of film critics started the *Shinario Bungaku Undo* (Scenario Literature Movement) to "read scenarios as autonomous literary texts", producing a six-volume collection of 'scenario literature' in 1936-37, nearly a decade before any such comparable volume came out in the USA. (Kitsnik, 2016: 293)

> It is a different document for every person reading it. To the producer it is a story that he weighs for audience appeal, to the director it is a progression of images and scenes in a dance rhythm that he or she may or may not want to dance to, to the art director, it is list of locations and sets, to the wardrobe people it is a list of costumes, to the prop man a list of props, to the actor a list of lines to learn, to the assistant director a schedule, to the transportation guy a list of cars, trucks, maps and times. (Kamlesh Pandey, personal communication, 24 June, 2016)

We would think that a document as essential to the production of a film as the screenplay ought to be preserved as an artefact. But this is hardly the case in South Asia, and sometimes even in the West.[20] Steven Price (2013) has pointed out a key difference between Hollywood and other film industries that underscores the indispensability of the archival condition in theorizing the generic form of screenwriting:

> . . . the Hollywood continuity script was not only a form of screenwriting; it was also a method by which the studios kept a record of the production, and therefore Hollywood studios were creating screenplay archives almost by default, dating in some cases as far back as the 1910s. Some of these, such as those of MGM and Warners, have been made available to scholars in

[20] Geoff Brown (2008) has offered a detailed account of the decrepit working conditions of early British screenwriters whose many screenplays from the 1930s were neglectfully stored in basements only to be destroyed by rat infestation. Horton and Hoxter (2014: 3) have claimed in the context of Hollywood that "the preservation only of shooting scripts limits the utility of many archives". However, having considered such laments, it is important not to flatten the fate of early screenwriting heritage across all global contexts. Jill Nelmes' (2014: 281) monograph on the role of the screenwriter in British cinema from the 1930s till date was self-admittedly "based on archival research only possible thanks to the availability of the BFI collections." Horton and Hoxter (2014: 4), too, refer to the screenplay collection in the Margaret Herrick Library in California as a "comprehensive" one.

> major research centres. (Price, 2013: 20)

Returning to India, the archival absence of scripts from the early years is in fact compounded by serious apathy towards preserving primary film artefacts. While the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) does boast a digital collection of censor scripts from the mid-1950s till date, these scripts are primarily post-production transcripts sent to the film censors and are unable to tell us much about in-house screenwriting practices. In a country where very few silent films and early talkies have survived, it is rather unsurprising that there is no substantial archive of early film scripts. Sudhir Mahadevan (2015) has theorised this archival crisis as the 'slaughterhouse' of Indian cinema, which is a result not only of the canonizing processes of film criticism but also of the massive scale in which films are produced and forgotten in India. The notion of ephemerality as the very ontological condition of film's popularity is essential for understanding the exceptionalism of the South Asian film archive: "The ephemeral is what exists in abundance. Or rather, it is ephemeral precisely because it is abundant. Who cares for it when there is so much of it?" (Mahadevan, 2015: 161).

The archival condition has direct bearing on the kind of historiography that is *not* possible in South Asia.[21] The vast body of historical scholarship on screenwriting includes classical historiography of the practice in Hollywood (Staiger, 1976; Azlant, 1980; Hamilton, 1990; Stempel, 1991), revisionist histories[22] through closer analysis (Maras, 2009; Price, 2013;

[21] The stark absence of primary sources has adversely affected some of the existing scholarship. Anubha Yadav's (2011) attempt to write screenwriting history with an emphasis on storytelling traditions draws heavily on the available scholarship on narration in Hindi cinema but largely fails to distinguish the practices of screenwriting from the conventions of filmic storytelling. The essay, of course, remains an early attempt at historicising the complex field of screenwriting in Hindi cinema and deserves credit for its pioneering endeavour in the face of serious archival challenges. Similarly, Debashree Mukherjee's (2015a: 71) essay on Jaddan Bai's lost films and screenplays was written with the help of "certain extra-filmic or secondary sources such as publicity booklets, song booklets, film reviews, and interviews in order to reconstruct the lost film".

[22] Among more recent screenwriting histories, Steven Maras' (2009: 80) work has moved beyond the screenplay-centrism of the field, studying screenwriting as a 'language game' rather than an 'empirical

Macdonald, 2013; Horton and Hoxter, 2014), and explorations of the practice through the locus of creative labour (Conor, 2013; Banks, 2015) as well as literature (Nannicelli, 2013; Ksenofontova, 2020). This body of scholarship is, however, circumscribed within "Northern screenwriting practices", calling to attention the need for "a theory of the screenplay in Southern media industries" (Arellano, 2016: 114), which would frame screenwriting as a *pluriversal* practice rather than a universal one. Decolonial thinkers have usefully introduced the concept of 'pluriversality' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) as an alternative to the universality of Euro-American modernity – a conceptual framework I borrow in this thesis to demonstrate the heterogeneity of screenwriting practices. Broadly speaking, the mainstream history of screenwriting in the West is premised on the formal development of the screenplay. Maras (2009: 80-81) has referred to this predisposition of screenwriting historians as 'screenplay-centrism' – a condition materially facilitated by extensive archives. The Hollywood screenplay archive in the Margaret Herrick Library has been "acquiring material since the 1930s and by now contains example scripts or screenplays of over 11,000 produced films", which "presents a treasure trove of material for historical and textual analysis" (Horton and Hoxter, 2014: 4). Jill Nelmes' (2014: 3) account of British screenwriting history too acknowledges how "the working practices of the writer in different periods are revealed as a result of the findings in the (BFI) archives".

Conversely, the absence of early Indian film scripts has so far been a deterrent for a historiography based on close archival scholarship. Stray archival finds such as the silent film

practice'. Ian W. Macdonald's (2013: 4-7) exploration of the 'screen idea' has departed from fixed and foundational principles of screenwriting, and paid equal attention to screenwriting documentation, practices as well as 'beliefs'. Claus Tieber's (2018) inquiry into Walter Reisch's screenplays has explored an intersection of music and screenwriting (an intermedial consideration not too alien to the musical nature of Hindi cinema) to explicate how textual practices often informed the production and integration of musical numbers within narrative cinema. Also, Steven Price (2013) has historicised the screenplay as part of a complex industrial culture of textual practices, shifting our understanding of the script from a sovereign document in film production towards material practices of documentation.

script of *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924) (Dharamsey, 2012) or the script fragments of *Mother* (1936) and *Savitri* (1937) (Mukherjee, 2020) in private collections testify to the presence of film scripts in early Bombay cinema and give us a sense of the practice within a particular studio at a particular time, but they do not support a sequential historiography of screenwriting. Nonetheless, my intention is not to present the situation as an entirely unyielding one. A great deal of attention has been paid to writing history "*along* the archival grain" (Stoler, 2002: 100), and how such historiography may provide rich conceptual dividends.[23] The task here is to critically reconsider the idealized screenwriting archive against which we define our absences. It is worth investigating how dominant media practices shape our archival imaginaries and epistemic claims, and how laments of archival absence stem from the doomed search for a screenwriting modernity wherein alternative media practices are largely obscured.

**Provincializing the Continuity Script**

Around 1913-14, Thomas Ince introduced a system of screenwriting in Hollywood studios that would allow studio proprietors to micromanage every step of the production process. It was the 'continuity script' – a fully fleshed out plan for shooting a film. Janet Staiger (1979) has studied the continuity script as a studio document that streamlined the production of films in the assembly line mode, introducing unprecedented levels of corporate rigour and rationality into film production through documentation and execution:

> The continuity script works because it is an external manifestation of a more fundamental structure inextricable from modern corporate business

[23] For instance, Meltem Ahiska's (2010: 29-64) investigation of early Turkish radio broadcasting throws light on the epistemological divide between linearized Western historiography and the circular memory of the missing archives in Turkey.

> – the separation of the conception and production phases of work and the pyramid of divided labour. (Staiger, 1979: 23)

The scriptural economy of film production is understood to be an organisational bedrock according to this reading of the continuity script as an 'external manifestation' of rational systems of the early twentieth century.[24] In her richly detailed work on the diverse practices of modernization in colonial Bombay cinema[25], Debashree Mukherjee (2020: 20) too discusses the continuity script as a significant tool of scientific management that was "pressed into urgent service with the increased rationalization of talkie studios". The most prominent of these studios – Bombay Talkies – was founded in 1934 by Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani, an erudite Bengali couple who had originally met in London. The studio combined the technical prowess of an experienced German crew with the rising stardom of Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani to emerge as an extremely successful production house during the 1930s-40s. Due to their international approach towards filmmaking, the studio's operations were carried out in a highly systematic fashion using the continuity script.[26] In fact, some of their extant continuity scripts can be accessed at the Dietze Family Archive in Melbourne.[27] Mukherjee's access to the invaluable Bombay Talkies papers has allowed her to launch a critique of an earlier thesis about the pre-capitalist nature of the Hindi film industry. Madhava Prasad (1998: 42-45) had

[24] Michel de Certeau (1984: 134) defined 'scriptural economy' as a modern social formation predicated on systems of unprecedented recordkeeping in quotidian institutions and practices which separated itself from the oral world of "voices and traditions".

[25] See pp. 19-20 above for a broader overview of Mukherjee (2020).

[26] Interestingly, V. Shantaram's *Aadmi* (1939) staged a spoof of a Bombay Talkies-like production set where the male and female leads perform a romantic song next to a tree, much like Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani in Bombay Talkies' *Achhut Kanya* (1936). The Western ways of the actors and filming crew as well as the archaic Hindi words of the on-set *pandit* were the objects of Shantaram's spoof.

[27] For details, see Debashree Mukherjee's blog interview with Peter Dietze, grandson of Himanshu Rai. Available at http://pharaat.blogspot.com/2014/06/a-rather-filmi-twist-of-fate-in.html.

originally argued that the Bombay film industry was characterised by a 'heterogeneous form of manufacture', an unsystematic and scattered mode of production undertaken by professionals who would specialise in different narrative components of a film. For Prasad, the absence of film scripts indicated the absence of capitalism in the Hindi film industry. In her critique, Mukherjee (2020: 117) argues that the absence of the 'bound script' has been "fetishized over the past few decades to characterise Bollywood as a culturally curious, messy, cottage industry", to the extent that the academic community has also taken the myth seriously. She highlights Prasad's misreading of the 'script' as a written, coherent story instead of Janet Staiger's intended notion of the script as a blueprint – "a techno-documentary tool for organizing production" (118).

Arguably, both Prasad and Mukherjee reduce the history of Indian screenwriting to a search for industrial capitalism. While Mukherjee's critique of Prasad is based on invaluable primary sources, her reading of the extant Bombay Talkies' continuity scripts as a harbinger of capitalist modernity in Bombay cinema runs certain risks.[28] How do we understand indigenous agency in global film history when more enlightened film studios such as the Bombay Talkies become passive beneficiaries of techniques developed by pioneers like Thomas Ince? At what point does the search for the continuity script become a search for a screenwriting modernity *à la* Hollywood? Most importantly, what kind of scriptural economies does such an investigation exclude and what epistemic misrecognition does it perpetuate?

Ravi Vasudevan (2010: 140) has argued that early Bombay cinema's connection with Iranian and other Southern film cultures calls attention to other "global trends of modernization than those circulated by Hollywood." An epistemic de-linking (Mignolo, 2009) from the perceived global hegemony of the continuity script therefore becomes essential for such South-

[28] It must be mentioned that Mukherjee's (2015a) earlier work on Indian screenwriting has not prioritised the written script as evidence. In fact, the essay on Jaddan Bai's screenwriting work constructs an autobiographical relationship between Jaddan Bai's unexamined life and the stories of her films (sourced from song books), despite the complete absence of both her films and scripts.

South transnational interfaces to emerge as parallel constitutive forces of early screenwriting practices. In the following sections, I shall try to complicate the easy understanding of the continuity script as a marker of screenwriting modernity that emerged in the West and was diffused in South Asia. This is not to undermine the transnational movement of film techniques or the trailblazing practices of Bombay Talkies but to attain a deeper understanding of how 'rational' practices that travel to new cultures negotiate pre-existing systems that tend to persist.

**From Object to Practice**

While film scripts from the early years are largely missing, even a cursory look at screenwriting credits during the 1930s-40s introduces us to the *munshi* – a scribal professional as old as the early 1600s. Going by the records, at least twelve screenwriters, mainly as dialogue writers and lyricists, from 1932 to 1952 have *munshi* prefixed before their names: Munshi Ismail Faroque, Munshi Ashiq, Munshi Sefta, Munshi Zameer, Munshi Sagar Hussain, Munshi Ehsan Lucknowi, Munshi Sarfaraz, Munshi Arzoo Lucknowi, Munshi Dil, Munshi Sham, Munshi Khanjar and Munshi Abdul Baqui worked in different studios in Bombay, Calcutta and Pune during this period.[29]

Who is a *munshi*? In South Asian history, the term 'munshi' has acquired several meanings from the professional court scribe and secretary to an honorific title for celebrated writers and administrators. However, in this chapter, I reconstruct a specific genealogy of the screenwriting *munshi* whose origins arguably lie in precolonial scribal culture. Since there is no consolidated history of the munshi's multiple meanings and professions, my deep dive into precolonial and colonial South Asian history will largely rely on fragmentary histories of the

[29] Sourced from https://indiancine.ma/

*munshi*. A considerable body of scholarship on early modern scribal professions in pre-colonial and colonial South Asia has largely located the *munshi* in two historical offices: i) the 17th-18th century Mughal administration (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2004; Kinra, 2010, 2015), and ii) 18th-19th century colonial language-learning institutions (Bayly, 1996; Ogborn, 2007). Apart from the pop-cultural imagination of the *munshi* as a scheming accountant and accomplice of the evil *zamindar* (landowner) in Hindi films, the *munshis* of the twentieth century were arguably a part of the gradual political and cultural decline of Urdu-speaking elites in North India (Robinson, 2007: 33-83). In the context of some of the broader concerns I raised in this chapter, it becomes important to trace the decline of the *munshi* from his respected position as a court scribe to his *obsolete* status as a dialogue writer in film studios. A note of caution is due here though. My engagement with the early modern category of *munshi* is not a clarion call for a civilizational return to an essentially indigenous form of screenwriting but an attempt to provincialize the Hollywood-centric discourse of screenwriting that often becomes an uncontested universal frame of reference. Rather, Erkki Huhtamo's (2011: 43) media archaeological notion of the *topos* as a "temporary manifestation of a persisting cultural tradition" has helped me think about the transhistorical category of the *munshi* from the Mughal court and colonial language institutions to the film studio and online accounting software.[30] Instead of reading the continuity script as a modern tool of screenwriting that diffused into the subcontinent through an enlightened film studio, I suggest that a decolonial media archaeology of screenwriting practice, through the topos of *munshi*, can help us reposition Indian screenwriting history against the archival determinisms of the continuity script.

[30] See http://www.e-munshi.com/index.html

**The Case of the *Munshi***

I begin with a brief history of the early modern *munshi*. It was during the Mughal emperor Akbar's reign (1556-1605 AD) that Persian was formally declared the language of the administration – a proclamation that was "accompanied by a reorganisation of the revenue department as well as the other administrative departments" (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62). The original Hindavi system of accounting was gradually restructured through the acquisition of new rules and regulations from Iranian scribes. The introduction of Persian as the court language radically "streamlined and rationalized" bureaucratic and administrative practices "to levels unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent and unsurpassed in all but a handful of states elsewhere in the world for some time to come" (Kinra, 2015: 3). Due to Akbar's moderately secular educational policies, both Muslims and upper-caste Hindus undertook voracious training in Persian language and literature to secure the coveted administrative position of the *munshi* (secretary). (See Fig 1)

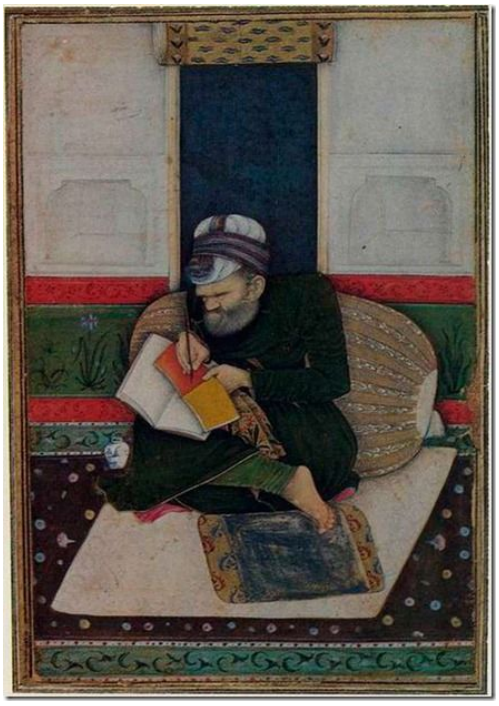

Figure 1: *A Mughal Scribe*, c. 1625
Source: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University

The word *munshi* comes from the Arabic verb *insha* which means "'to compose' a written document" (Yule & Burnell, 1886: 444). According to a number of early modern manuals (also known as 'mirrors for *munshis*'), the Mughal *munshi* was required to possess excellent penmanship (*khwush-nawisi*), scribal skills (*navisindagi*), accounting abilities (*siyaq*), draftsmanship (*insha*) and the ability to use coded language (*sukhan-i marmuz*) (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62; Kinra, 2015: 65). In the high echelons of his profession, a true *munshi*'s job often went beyond the drudgeries of taking dictation and tallying accounts and required him to "participate in the cultural life of the court, to be one of the elite literati who composed and recited poetry for special occasions and important public functions" (Kinra, 2015: 38):

> The whole nobility had been brought up to revere the art of *insha* or letter-writing as a tool of literacy and as a form of regulating proper social relations. . . Thus the munshi should be regarded as more than a secretary; he was an expert in diplomatics and social deportment. (Bayly, 1996: 76)

From the mid-eighteenth century, the diplomatic and secretarial expertise of *munshis* became an asset for the British East India Company which had started colonising different parts of the subcontinent. (See Fig 2) With their help, the British officials made "tenuous and ambivalent contact" (Bayly, 1996: 74) with North Indian administrative systems that were predicated on extensive, hierarchized infrastructures of writing.[31] The officials primarily interacted with

[31] Christopher Bayly (1996: 74) writes, "In indigenous society, the royal *munshi* was at the top of a hierarchy which stretched up from the common writer of the bazaar, through the clerks and men of business of Indian commercial firms (*munims* or *sarkars*) to the clerks of individual landowners and notables. The commercial communities used their own family members to write the accounts and Bengali or Hindi commercial letters. They needed Persian writers to communicate with the local officials and to check or confirm grants recorded by the registrar (*kazi*). Complexity of language and multiplicity of scripts therefore increased the number of writers in government and private establishments."

*munshis* as language teachers who could train them in Persian. In fact, a well-known Persian-learning manual for British officers was titled *The Persian Moonshee* (1795), effectively reducing the *munshi* to a language-learning tool for colonial gain. Unlike manuals from the Mughal period that laid great emphasis on the intellectual and cultural growth of the *munshi* alongside his administrative tasks, the instrumentalism of orientalist language-learning endeavours such as *The Persian Moonshee* arguably resulted in an abstraction of human subjectivity as the colonial gaze reified the *munshi*'s linguistic repertoire. Moreover, despite an initial interest in the *munshi* due to vigorous colonial investment in indigenous language acquisition, the scribe's public reputation started declining as the official language of colonial India was changed from Persian to English during the first half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, British officials had already begun mocking the *munshi* as a cultural mercenary who always exaggerated the worth of his services.

> Nobody could possibly place a higher value upon his own services than does the *erudite aboriginal* who sees us safely through the various languages of India. And nobody, of all the vast horde of creditors, is more particular about the timely settlement of his 'little bill'. (*The Times of India*, 1887: 5, emphasis mine)


Figure 2: *A European Gentleman with his Moonshee*, c. 1824

Source: British Library, London

Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial divide-and-rule policies created a new demarcation of scribes wherein linguistic knowledge was gradually communalised. The coloniser's ways of learning indigenous languages ironically led to a process of unlearning for the indigenous themselves as Persian and Urdu gradually came to be associated more rigidly with Muslims, and Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi with the Hindu community.[32] While *munshi* continued to be "a secular term used across board" (Ravikant, 2015: 126), the number of Hindu *munshis* in the twentieth century were certainly far fewer in number compared to the Mughal

[32] For instance, Miles Ogborn (2013: 245) has discussed how Nathaniel Halhed's "identification of Bengali with a 'pure Sanskritized form'" during the composition of *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778) led to a "purification of Perso-Arabic elements of Bengali encouraged by the Brahmin pandit, who . . . had eventually ousted from his place as Halhed's teacher the Muslim munshi."

era.[33] The entry of these scribes into the world of theatre and cinema as literary jobmen bore a colonial legacy of instrumentalism. Just as British officials had appointed *pandits* for their expertise in Sanskrit and *munshis* for their knowledge of Persian, theatre owners and talkie studio proprietors too hired the former for Hindi dialogues and the latter for Urdu ones (quite often the latter for both Hindi and Urdu).

**The *Munshi* in Modern Times**

The commercial Parsi theatre was an intermediary in the transition of *munshis* from scribes and language teachers to literary jobmen. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, travelling theatre companies, largely owned by the Parsi business community, employed *munshis* to compose plays for audiences in the Urdu-speaking regions of North India. (Hansen, 2011: 18) Professional linguistic divisions in popular modes of entertainment were generated through the employment of *munshis* and *pandits* as dialogue writers. Sound introduced language barriers for Indian film studios. The coming of the talkies in the early 1930s gradually restructured national distribution patterns along linguistic and regional lines. New Theatres in Calcutta and Prabhat Studios in Pune, for instance, remade most of their successful Bengali and Marathi talkies in other regional languages to ensure an almost pan-Indian audience. Quick remakes necessitated authoritative translators, and therefore a number of *munshis* and *pandits* were recruited from the Parsi theatre for composing as well as translating dialogues and songs. The relationship between Hindi and Urdu had been "symbiotic in the field of commercial publishing and theatre" (Orsini, 2009: 4), and this spirit of bonhomie was extended to the new

[33] Broadly speaking, while the *pandits* were traditionally Brahmin scholars with sound knowledge of Sanskrit, some of the most highly regarded *munshis* from the 17th and 18th centuries were in fact also upper caste Hindus. (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62)

medium of talkies where *munshis* and *pandits* together contributed to "an expansive and inclusive register of Hindustani" (Lunn, 2015: 2), combining the two North Indian languages in an equal, secular measure.

In the non-chronological spirit of media archaeology, I will return to the *munshi* in Chapter 2 to discuss how the coming of talkies in India made studio proprietors hire some of the most popular Parsi theatre *munshis* of the day. The recruitment of Parsi theatre playwrights (also referred to as company *munshis*) to write the first Indian talkies in the early 1930s imbued the novelty of sound with a rich textual quality through frequent songs and theatrical dialogues, laying the aesthetic foundations of Hindi cinema for decades to come. However, in this chapter, I focus on a later phenomenon from the late 1930s onward – the gradual obsolescence of the screenwriting *munshi* after the theatricality of early talkies had been tempered with a more 'realistic' cinematic idiom in which songs became less frequent and dialogues less flamboyant. I show how the tension between scribal tradition and 'modern' screenwriting techniques weighed heavily on the *munshi* whose practices were usually held in opposition to cutting-edge developments in Hollywood or 'modernizing' initiatives in domestic studios. From the late 1930s onwards, the *munshi* was frequently recalled and represented through imageries of obsolescence and incompetence:

> There was a time when "the writer" in a film studio meant a shabby-looking Munshi, who would chew *paan* and spit out what passed for stories in those days.[34] In a six-pice exercise book the literary inspirations of the Munshi would be recorded with the stub of a pencil and handed over to the director who would immediately start shooting, only skipping

[34] *Paan* is a preparation of spices (often spiked with tobacco) wrapped in betel leaf that is widely consumed in South Asia till date. Here it is a marker of a kind of plebeian coarseness with which *filmindia* would usually unfairly associate the *munshis* of the film industry.

> through "the story" to make sure that there was in it a role each of Sulochana, Billimoria and Gulam Mohamed… Now and then, of course, youthful enthusiasts like Naval Gandhi would get hold of a story by a real writer like Tagore and make a film of sorts, like "Sacrifice". But these were exceptions that only proved the rule. In the studio, the Munshi still reigned supreme. (*filmindia*, 1940: 3)

The emphasis on the cheap 'exercise book' and 'pencil' was evidently a jibe aimed at the munshi's origins in scribal culture, arguably in contradistinction to typed continuity scripts. The medium-specific appreciation of screenwriting also becomes complex in early South Asian film criticism as magazines such as *filmindia* seemed overzealous to congratulate 'real' writers of the print world on the successful adaptation of their works but not necessarily dialogue writers whose intermedial labour made such adaptations possible. While lesser-known writers such as Munshi Dil and Munshi Aziz kept getting the stick, a more famous poet like Munshi 'Arzu' Lucknowi (See Fig 3) would be spared in reviews, such as that of *Reckless Rogues* (1938) which sympathetically read: "There is hardly any scope for the writer, who has previously given good work in another picture. The whole affair is so slap stick that a writer like "Arzu" is wasted on a picture like this." (*filmindia*, 1938: 47)

In this section, I have paid special attention to the popular English language magazine *filmindia*, which implored domestic film studios to emulate "how the (foreign) screen has discovered the writer - original writer as well as the studio scenarist - and restored him to his rightful place of eminence" (*filmindia*, 1940: 5).[35] A consistent emphasis on story as art (meant for 'original' literary writers) and on scenario as visual craft (meant for visually oriented scenarists/directors) as the twin pillars of the new medium of cinematic storytelling often

[35] The scope of this chapter does not allow any serious engagement with *bhasha* (vernacular) periodicals.

reduced language and speech, in the form of dialogues, to mere embellishment.[36] In film discourses from the 1940s, an unshakeable faith in the adaptive immediacy of popular stories by well-known Indian writers and a strong advocacy of the technical skills of film direction was coupled with the denigration of early modern scribal professions, mainly the *munshi*.[37]

Figure 3: Munshi 'Arzoo' Lucknowi

[36] Japanese screenwriting history reveals a more indigenous taxonomy in the merit-based distinction of *shinaro sakka* (scenario author) and *shinario raita* (scenario writer) wherein the former was considered more 'literary' not in relation to one's print-centric literary standing but to one's screenwriting work in films. (Kitsnik, 2016: 287)

[37] In her thesis, Mukherjee's (2015: 154) passing observation that *filmindia*'s jibes against *munshis* were "part of the move to carve out a uniquely modern space for screenwriting as befitting a uniquely modern art form" falls short of an adequate critique of such disparaging discourses, arguably due to an uncritical focus on the continuity script as a modernizing film technology. In her book, Mukherjee (2020) makes no mention of the *munshi*.

Figure 4: Munshi Khanjar

Many eminent personalities had worked closely with *munshis* in the film studios. The famous scenario writer, Mohanlal G. Dave rewrote some of his silent hits with the help of Munshi Zameer in *Do Ghadi Ki Mauj* (1935) and of Munshi Sagar Hussain in *Ghar Jamai* (1935) and *Tadbir* (1945). V. Shantaram was one of the earliest filmmakers to use the services of Munshi Ismail Faroque when he remade the Maratha film, *Ayodhyecha Raja*, into its Hindi version titled *Ayodhya Ka Raja* (1932). A few years later, when he remade *Kunku* as *Duniya Na Mane* in 1937 and *Manoos* as *Aadmi* in 1939, he employed Munshi Aziz to write the dialogues and songs in Hindi. However, the illustrious early modern scribes had become an object of mockery by late modern times. For instance, Munshi Aziz's vast knowledge of literature too had become a subject of derision:

> To begin with, he talks of taking a Tagore story with dialogues from Iqbal.
> Iqbal probably knowing of Ajij's (sic) intentions chose to die and as Ajij

> says "badly let him down". Let us pray that Tagore doesn't follow his example. Otherwise Munshi Ajij will straightaway become an 'orphan'. (*filmindia*, 1938: 48)

Early twentieth century witnessed several news reports that sensationalised petty crimes, usually thefts, committed by *munshis*.[38] The film world did not accord high status to the *munshis* either, often inscribing obsolescence into the descriptions of their practices. In a review of *Baghdad Ka Chor* (1948), the dialogue writer was criticised for using a "pseudo-literary jargon regardless of the spoken idiom", which looked like "the work of some Munshi who is used to coaching British officers for the Army examination in Roman Urdu!" (*filmindia*, 1948: 66). The concerns of medium specificity raised in *filmindia*, through a consistent vilification of the *munshi* as the archaic scribe with little knowledge of the new medium, were aimed at expediting the imminent displacement of *obsolete* writing systems with more *modern* scriptwriting techniques. Pandit Indra, a well-known dialogue writer and lyricist, wrote an article about the maligned status of *munshis* and *pandits*, likening themselves to Shakespearean fools who always know better:

> The film studios are supposed to have their "prize-fools" and this uncomplimentary title is generally awarded to the Munshis and Pandits who write the dialogues. By common consent almost every one tacitly believes this. . . The Munshi or the Pandit is a dialogue writer and naturally a men of letters. His education gives him the right to think more than the others and when a dialogue writer finds himself in a crowd of block-head

[38] See, for instance, the titles of these *Times of India* articles: A Sentence Enhanced: The Case Against Munshi (1900, July 17), A Dishonest Munshi (1903, May 15), Theft of a Fountain Pen: Munshi on Trial (1929, July 17)

> directors and producers, he must surely think himself to be in the land of fools. (Indra, 1938: 45)

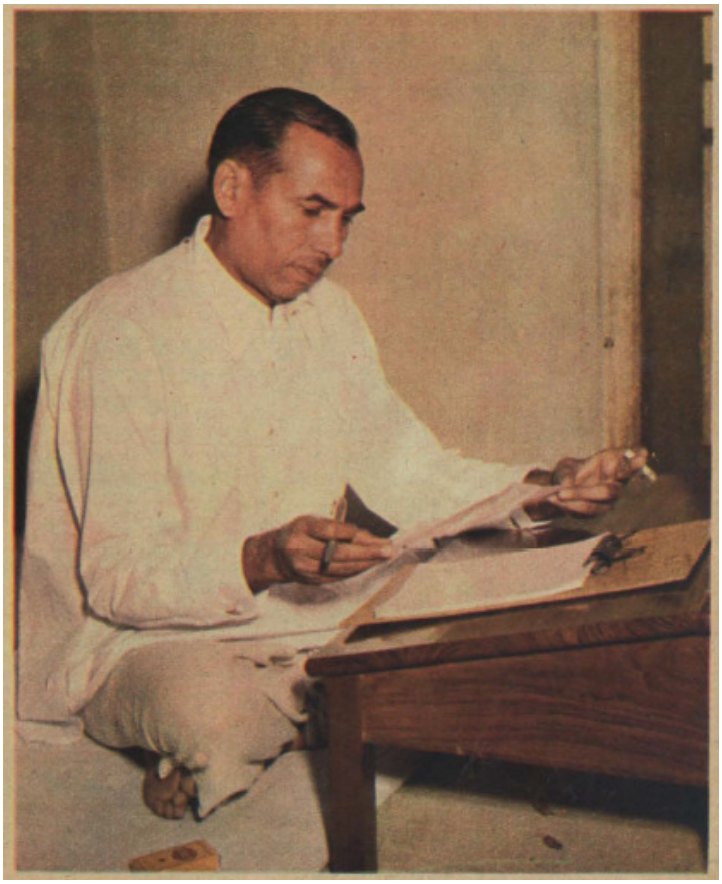

Figure 5: Pandit Mukhram Sharma

Saadat Hasan Manto, now a posthumously celebrated Urdu writer, once used to struggle to make ends meet in Bombay. In his sarcastic tongue-in-cheek style, he later recounted his experiences of working in a film studio as a *munshi*, which resonate strongly with Pandit Indra's account:

> I learnt. . . on turning up for my first day of work that my name wasn't Saadat Hasan Manto, but for some reason, not apparent to me, "Munshi". My tasks, and this was made clear, were three. First, getting a *paan* for the director every five minutes (or so it seemed). Second, to not speak. Third, if these two were

> performed competently, to write, every so often, a dialogue in incorrect Urdu.
>
> And then to not speak. (Manto, 2014: 149)

The category of *munshi* had long become obsolete by the 1950s as most new writers rejected the erstwhile honourable prefix in favour of more 'professional' (and less exploitative) designations such as the dialogue writer and lyricist.[39] Lyricist Rajinder Krishan, for instance, "wanted to break the convention" when he started working in Bombay around the mid-1940s, because "the 'Munshis' and 'Pundits' were ruling the film industry with an iron hand, and to my erstwhile producers I had to explain time and again that I was neither" (Krishan, 1956: 65). The 'reign' of the *munshi* had been ended successfully. The scribal tradition of the *munshi*, therefore, points to : i) an *ascriptive term* referring to literary jobmen in the talkie studios who were hired to write songs and dialogues in the advent of sound cinema, ii) a *derogatory term* from the early 1940s once the novelty of speech and sound wore off, iii) a historical topos and trace that (re)constructs the desire for a screenwriting modernity in South Asia and iv) a *conceptual term*, as we will see in Chapter 2, that includes more 'respected' writers and playwrights who were tasked with composing or adapting stories and perhaps not explicitly referred to as *munshis* as such.[40] While writers with a flair for Urdu continue to write songs and dialogues in Bollywood films till date, most Indian screenwriters today would scoff at the

[39] The erstwhile linguistically defined screenwriting community of *munshis* and *pandits* gained more professional recognition as story writers, lyricists and dialogue writers, and also featured more prominently on publicity material from the 1950s onwards.

[40] In the second half of Chapter 2, I use the term *munshi* broadly to include Parsi theatre playwrights who were recruited by studio proprietors to primarily adapt their plays and also compose dialogues and songs for talkies. While film-historical sources such as magazines and film credits do not necessarily refer to them as *munshis*, the history of Parsi theatre suggests otherwise. For instance, both Narayanprasad Betab's (Hansen, 2011: 76) and Master Fida Hussain's (Hansen, 2011: 266) autobiographical accounts refers to Betab as a 'munshi'. Kathryn Hansen (2011: 320) also refers to the playwright Radheshyam both as a *kathavachak* and a company *munshi*. I maintain this media archaeological continuity from theatre companies to talkie studios in the following chapter.

idea of being called *munshis*. This dismissive attitude arguably reveals a colonial unconscious that continues to associate traditional taxonomies with incompetence and obsolescence and writes them out of a history of capitalist efficiency and technical progress.

**Absence and Obsolescence**

My inquiry into the professional genealogy of the *munshi*, from Mughal scribe to dialogue writer in talkie studios, finally brings me to a pertinent media archaeological question: Is media obsolescence solely an object-oriented concern, or can we also map it onto human practices? Here it is worth inquiring briefly into the contrastive appreciation of early screenwriting practices that distinguished the modern from the obsolete, and, by extension, the visible from the invisibilised. While the old order of *munshis* became the subject of derision, modernised studios such as the New Theatres and Bombay Talkies were exclusively accorded distinction. An editorial piece on screenwriting in Indian film studios celebrated the technically sound Debaki Bose of New Theatres as "the first real screen writer in India. . . for getting the actual shooting scripts written" (*filmindia*, 1940: 3). The same article also articulated a glimmer of hope in the practices of Bombay Talkies as their young and 'efficient' screenwriters served to redress the archaic 'studio Munshi stage' of Indian screenwriting. The *munshi*'s practices were positioned as an impediment to the advancement of screenwriting as a 'technique':

> A commendable example has been recently provided by Bombay Talkies who have organized an efficient group of young and educated scenarists. . . . In most of the other studios. . . the technique of scenario-writing seems to have advanced very little beyond the studio Munshi stage. (5)

It is no coincidence that a substantive body of Bombay Talkies' documents have survived, including a few continuity script-like files that I had the privilege of accessing during a research visit to Melbourne. As mentioned earlier, the Hollywood continuity script was not only a screenwriting technique but also an archival system. The continued privileging of one Western technique of recordkeeping over other local practices of screenwriting is an example of postcolonial irony, both in the sense that it continued into the postcolonial period and as an extended form of coloniality.[41]

The Dietze Family Archive in Melbourne is mainly comprised of personal correspondence papers of Devika Rani and Himanshu Rai, production photographs, press cuttings, publicity stills, promotional brochures and production files. The production files include shooting programmes, costume lists, shot lists, scenarios, all written in English which reveal a systematic organisation of film production. Shooting programmes were dated and divided according to locations and sets. Sometimes they would indicate when costume changes would be needed for certain characters and also whether some of the scenes could be shot at the same time with a second filming unit. The costume lists tabulated clothing changes for characters in different scenes. These also included a short description of the dresses for the designer. Since the stories were originally written by Niranjan Pal who could not write in Hindi/Urdu, most of the scenarios seem to have been written in English first before the dialogues were rewritten or translated into Urdu, usually by J. S. Casshyap according to film credits. Arguably, the typed English scenarios and production papers were also more suitable for the German technical crew, comprising director Franz Osten, cinematographer Josef

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[41] Postcolonialism signifies both a rupture and a continuity with official forms of colonialism. As postcolonial and decolonial scholars would both agree, colonial logics extend themselves to the present day through a range of historical processes.

Wirsching, production designer Karl von Spreti and lab technician Wilhelm Zolle.[42] These scenarios presented the film story chronologically (with details of characters, scenes and action) and would include simple shot transitions (fade, dissolve etc.) but not any camera instructions. Interestingly, the archive also contained palimpsestuous dialogue script fragments which indicate the presence of an Urdu dialogue writer, possibly also referred to as a *munshi* in the studio. In one of the untitled dialogue script fragments (See Figure 6), a conversation between Maya Bai and Magan Lal about Kamla's marriage prospects is written in Hindustani (a mix of standard Hindi and Urdu words).

[42] The German presence in Bombay Talkies is also indicative of how Hollywood was not the only model of film production. Kristin Thompson (1993: 392) has offered a useful comparison of early Hollywood and German scripting practices: "The German method of scriptwriting, though similar to that of the Americans in many ways, had some notable differences. The shooting script apparently did not plan out the shot-by-shot details of the production in such a specific fashion." The German-language documents of the Bombay Talkies, such as Karl von Spreti's letters to his family, constitute an invaluable emergent archive that is being presently researched by the film historian Eleanor Halsall.

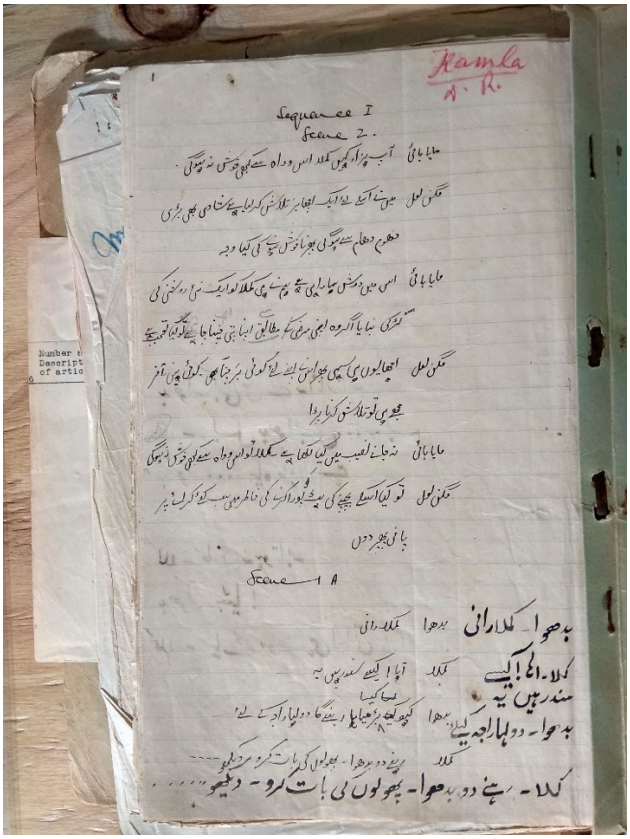


Figure 6: Dialogue Script in Urdu

Courtesy: Peter Dietze, Dietze Family Archive

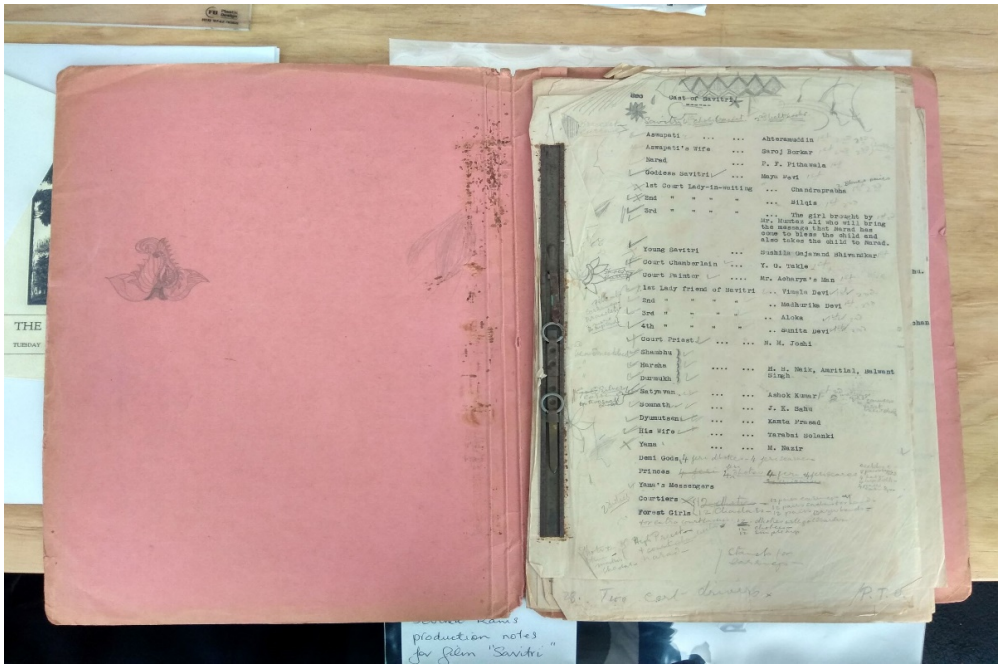


Figure 7: Production file of *Savitri* (1937)

Courtesy: Peter Dietze, Dietze Family Archive

Early screenwriting practices in Indian studios therefore embodied multiple temporalities. Even in a highly organised and cosmopolitan film studio like the Bombay Talkies, the early modern *munshi* co-existed with the twentieth century continuity script, much like the handwritten Urdu dialogue script fragments and the typed production papers I came across in the Dietze Family Archive (See Figures 6 and 7). The Hollywood continuity script was an assiduously formatted document that had rapidly become the standard screenwriting technique, setting itself apart from oral and handwritten scripting practices in other film cultures whose palimpsestuous quality laid greater emphasis on on-set improvisation and modification. The search for the 'bound' script is therefore the search for an archive-oriented screenwriting modernity. It is worth reiterating that this search is symptomatic of the historiographic desire for a retroactive reorganisation of film practices around (if not avowedly within) the logics of the Hollywood studio system, especially in the face of recurrent stereotypical descriptions of the Hindi film industry as an unorganised one.

If 'bound' scripts from the early years are largely missing, it may be more constructive to ask whether the continuity script (also a form of recordkeeping) was ever a predominant mode of scripting. Arguably, archival laments and expeditions fail to historicise the contingent nature of scripting in a film industry that continues to promote on-set improvisations and pre-production narrations. While the excavation of scripts that testify to modernizing impulses in studios such as Bombay Talkies is a promising start, more parallel practices and pre-existing traditions are yet to be recovered, some of which are obscured by the very privileging of archival technologies such as the continuity script. A failure to do so would charge the 'screenplay-centrism' of screenwriting history not only with a colonial amnesia of early modern writing traditions but also an epistemic misrecognition of an industrial order of orality

and handwriting where spontaneous on-set textual production has historically co-existed with continuity script-like recordkeeping techniques. In the Hindi film industry, oral narrations of the film story remain a common practice for screenwriters and directors when they approach producers and actors. In the context of the 1970s/80s, Rosie Thomas (2015: 204) has observed that "one of the prerequisites of a successful writer was the ability to narrate a script entertainingly and, crucially, to flatter the star in the process." Tejaswini Ganti (2012: 222) has studied script narrations as a part of an oral work culture in Bollywood with an "emphasis on face- to- face interaction, collaboration" and "a tremendous reliance on memory". While the screenwriting community in Mumbai has witnessed an increased awareness of the indispensability of a registered bound script in legal cases of piracy and plagiarism, this rather unique storytelling technique for pitching a screenplay has stood the test of time. [43]

**Conclusion**

This chapter has studied the archival problem of Indian screenwriting as an epistemic smokescreen that obscures local practices and writes them out of a history of filmic modernity. I have tried to tie together several strands of screenwriting and scribal history in South Asia to problematize the notion of the continuity script as a harbinger of filmic modernity, and by extension, the epistemological implications of a universalized archive of screenwriting. The sole search for the 'bound script' runs the risk of becoming a search for a screenwriting modernity that fails to capture the tension that characterises encounters of pre-existing traditions and modernizing techniques in colonial times. It becomes important instead to

[43] A major scriptwriting contest I had attended in Mumbai in 2018 required the participants to narrate their stories to judges in the final round.

critically engage with popular twentieth century magazines such as *filmindia* that mimicked the discourse of orientalists and colonial officials. The chapter has attempted not only to rethink the possibility of historicising a film practice in the supposed absence of its archive but also to reveal a colonial unconscious that has undermined the heterogeneity of such practices in the first place. The two lost histories of screenwriting object and practice are not mutually exclusive, though it is often an uncritical lament for the former that fails to join the dots. On a more optimistic note though, the Mughal *munshi*'s deep appreciation of literature and sound knowledge of accounting arguably represents the perfect skillset for the present-day screenwriter who must combine a creative sensibility with a commercial one – an early modern legacy that should reassure Anjum Rajabali and his students that they are indeed part of a very special tradition.

*Munshis* are "the Menocchios of the cinema" (Maltby, 2007: n.p.) whose micro-historical recovery offers a significant counterpoint to the archival determinisms of film history. The focus on indigenous agency is significant as it helps populate global film history with 'local' film practitioners and undermines any Euro-American preoccupation with cinema's pioneers. It is worth mentioning that the rich cultural history of *munshis* of South Asia is not reducible to a linear trajectory of obsolescence, and the continuity script's automatism as a 'bound' blueprint of film production in Hollywood is mythical to a certain extent.[44] In this chapter, however, I have used the *munshi* and *continuity script* as heuristic shorthands for scribal tradition and screenwriting modernity respectively due to their enduring epistemic functions. The screenwriting *munshi* became an object of obsolescence in reformist discourses of screenwriting once the talkie studios had settled into a relatively stable system of

[44] Steven Price (2013: 98) has suggested that while the continuity script possessed an unrivalled degree of stability compared to other past and future techniques of screenwriting, its status as "the final stage in a writing process . . . can be questioned, in light of the frequent rewriting of both scene sequencing and intertitles".

sound film production, just like the colonial officials of the nineteenth century had begun mocking the scribal *munshi* after the language of administration was changed from Persian to English. Similarly, the old reformist desire to emulate the efficiency of Western screenwriting practices resurfaces today as the historiographic desire to organise accounts of early Indian film production around the industrial fetish of the 'bound' script. Arguably, both these cultural desires are predicated on an erasure of the pre-industrial figure of the *munshi*.

The cultural lag of Indian cinema vis-à-vis the discourse of screenwriting modernity is therefore a recursive loop that obscures both film history and historiography. My attempt has been to epistemologically delink Indian screenwriting from the archival determinism of Hollywood scripting practices and visibilise the existence of the screenwriting *munshi*, occasionally alongside screenwriting techniques of the early twentieth century. In the following chapter, I continue this archaeological project through a critical-comparative study of the discourse of screenwriting pedagogy and the practice of Parsi theatre *munshis* during the eventful period of the first talkies.

Chapter 2

# The First Talkies

## Pedagogy, Precarity and the Parsi Theatre

### Introduction

This chapter builds upon the previous chapter's critical reading of the conventional film script archive and its inconsistencies with the plurality and parallelism of Indian screenwriting practices. In the first half of the chapter, I shift the focus of my subversive reading of conventional archival sources from the continuity script to the early scenario manual. In the second half, we see a flashback of the 'obsolete' *munshis* as the prized playwrights of the first talkies. Through a critical-comparative study of screenwriting manuals and Parsi theatre *munshis*, this chapter resumes the epistemological inquiry of Indian screenwriting into its discourse and practice.

The anticipation of the talkies in the late 1920s and its arrival in the early 1930s was an important historical juncture in the aesthetic and economic reformation of Indian cinema, marked by heavy but premeditated financial risks. It was not an unanticipated moment. Rather it was a wait of four years following the ceaseless discourse on whether the talkies were "here

to stay", preparing the film industry to cope with inevitable infrastructural changes.[45] The Indian film companies now had to gradually retreat into regional spaces due to linguistic territorialization, thus shrinking their pan-India market considerably, while at the same time there were added outlays in procuring new equipment and recruiting more sound personnel.

In South Asia and elsewhere, a boom in the production and circulation of manuals containing technical advice on cinematic practices, especially screenwriting, characterised this period of anticipation and arrival.[46] I discuss how these screenwriting manuals were primarily aimed at amateur screenwriters whose wide-eyed enthusiasm for cinema reveals a cycle of pedagogy, promise and precarity *outside* the emergent Indian film industries. *Inside* the major talkie studios, I study how and why Parsi theatre *munshis* (or playwrights) had become the first screenwriters at a time of significant technological and textual shifts in cinema. Broadly, the objective of the chapter is to retrace a history of screenwriting around an eventful moment in early cinema when it becomes possible to disaggregate and visibilize its discourse and practice. Through an intermedial study along the margins of print and theatre history, I also try to historicise the spectral figure of the screenwriter by profiling both the precarious amateur and the professional playwright during the early talkie period in India.

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[45] A close look at *The Times of India* in the years right before the first Indian talkie productions brings out the enthusiasm and anxiety in the public sphere with this new development in film technology. Notice the gradually increasing tone of assertion in the titles of these news articles: Have Sound Films Come to Stay?: British Trade Attitude. (1928, Sep 19); Does India Want "Talkies"? (1929, March 1); The Talkies: Famous Critic Says They Will Stay (1929, July 19); The 'Talkies' Have Come to Stay in Bombay (1930, March 4)

[46] See Daniel Gritten (2008) for a discussion on the crucial role of screenwriting manuals in aiding British cinema's technical and narrative transition to sound. Donald Crafton (1999: 28) has briefly discussed how technical manuals explained electrical and acoustic innovations to film projectionists in Hollywood during the late 1920s.

**Amateur Voices from Colonial Archives**

Unlike Hollywood studios that had systematically organized an assembly line of film production around a clearly structured continuity script through the 1920s, Indian studios had only just begun to produce a substantial number of films to offer any competition to Hollywood productions. "It was not until around 1928, when a sufficient number of cinema halls had started showing Bombay films all round the year, that a stratified topos of cinema halls vis-à-vis Bombay cinema emerged… The companies had fought a hard battle against imported films and had gathered a substantial market in the exhibition circuit" (Bhaumik, 2001: 35). What did this mean for struggling scenario writers in the late 1920s? Here I focus on four South Asian screenwriters outside the silent studio system whose testimonies were documented in the *Indian Cinematograph Committee Evidence and Report 1927-1928,* produced under the aegis of the British Raj. One of these scenario writers, T. S. Subbaraman from Madras, offered a sceptical outlook towards the prevalent practice of writing scenarios in Indian studios by way of defining the practice as it ought to have been.

> Scenario writing is an unknown thing. In this branch of literary work technical knowledge coupled with a good plot and a certain amount of literary ability is not enough. The scenario-writer is one who can picturise his ideas and understand the entertaining value of a situation and know when and how it should be used or presented . . . These are the men on whom the future of the industry depends in all countries. (Subbaraman, n.d.: 209)

Two other screenwriters in the Indian Cinematograph Committee reports, B. D. Sharma from Lahore and S. Wahajuddin from Delhi, declared their freelancing work for Hollywood and expressed apathy towards the scope of work in Indian studios. When asked why he had never tried to sell his scenarios to Indian producers, S. Wahajuddin caustically responded, "I don't

think they can buy scenarios for 3 to 4 years to come unless there are good producing facilities in India" (Wahajuddin, 1928: 970). The rate of 500 rupees per scenario in Bombay was hardly as attractive as the nominal rate of 50 US dollars offered by American studios for every accepted scenario: "I don't believe in any of the producing companies here in India. I mean to say, if there were good companies, I should take an interest even now." (Sharma, 1927: 248). The risk of story piracy was also a common concern: "Unfortunately there are a few producers in the trade, with piratical tendencies, and here the Government would do well to devise a sort of protection for the scenarist, from having his ideas stolen" (Subbaraman, n.d.: 209). A film enthusiast's letter in 1929 to the editor of *The Times of India* listed several "glaring defects" in Indian films, among which "entire lack of dramatic action", "utter disregard of time and space in story", "poor characterization", "faulty language" and "faulty choice of theme" point towards poor writing (Nanda, 1929). However, D. D. Kapur, a scenario writer and dramatist based in Lahore, claimed in his written statement that the emergent "class of cinema patrons who want to see every angle of the technique . . . good photography, good acting, good settings, a good plot and a good scenario, in other words . . . a perfect picture" was in reality a very small part of the cinema audience (Kapur, n.d.: 250).

Reading these testimonies, it seems to be a common complaint that more screenwriting jobs would be available only if more Indian films could be made. All the interviewed screenwriters expressed an urgency to favour the production of Indian films over the promotion of Western films, much in keeping with the anti-colonial *swadeshi* spirit prevalent during that time. The following is an excerpt from D. D. Kapur's interview.

> Q: You want to see it (cinema) spread?
>
> A: As much as possible.
>
> Q: By substituting Indian for Western films or by encouraging both?
>
> A: No, I am for absolutely Indian films.

Q: You want to Indianise the films in this country?

A: Certainly.

Q: And you would do everything for securing that end?

A: Of course. (Kapur, n.d.: 253)

The *Indianization* of a number of aspects of film production, including screenwriting, had already begun with the talkies, not merely with the boom in more jobs due to a proliferation of talkie studios and halls, but also with the debates around language.[47] While the coming of sound in Hollywood "would momentarily throw screenwriting into a state of confusion, and no comparably universal set of principles would emerge in place of the continuity" (Price, 2013: 98), the four-year gap between the arrival of sound in Hollywood in 1926-27 and the first talkie productions in India in 1931 had arguably prepared the studios for this sea change. However, it is important not to highlight the coming of the talkies, concurrent with the process of *Indianization* through infrastructural expansion and linguistic expression, as a transformative moment for amateur screenwriters that propelled them into the studio system. Based in different regions of South Asia, T. S. Subbaraman, B. D. Sharma, S. Wahajuddin and D. D. Kapur represented a parallel infrastructure of amateur screenwriting which, as I argue in the next sections, was sustained by pedagogy and marked by precarity well into the early 1930s.

[47] An article in *The Times of India* brings up the issue of how Indians were being "talked out" of cinema halls because even "the Indian who can read, and probably write English, finds that the dialogue in the talkie film is uttered too rapidly for him to follow intelligibly, besides which the accent in the voices puzzles him". (*TOI* Aug 09, 1930: 14) The article further adds, "With the Indian talked out of the European cinemas there is a fillip given to the production of Indian films in the vernacular and to the building of cinemas for Indians." (*TOI* Aug 09, 1930: 14) David Lunn (2015) has written that the introduction of sound presented Indian studios with an unprecedented problem of choosing a language of film production. "In the Hindi–Urdu–Hindustani context, this became a question of register, of which range of the oral continuum would be appropriate for a given character, film, or situation." (2)

**Mapping the Manual**

As I have argued earlier, screenwriting largely remains a dehistoricised form of practice due to the epistemological authority of the manual, which prompts a prescriptive mode of inquiry into screenwriting rather than a mapping of its own social history. While rules and guidelines do inform the screenwriting process, a focus on prescription alone does not adequately historicize or even imagine an extra-industrial dimension that might allow screenwriting to speak to broader histories of colonial-industrial modernity. Therefore, it is important to study the screenwriting manual, not as a prescriptive model, but as a bearer of traces of its own social history. Film manuals have not yet received any significant attention from South Asian film scholars despite the rich possibilities they have to offer both in terms of their transnational circulation and intermedial pleasures.[48] The scenario manual has, however, received a great deal of attention from Hollywood historians, whose many observations of classical film narrative and style were supported by the contents of screenwriting manuals.[49] More recently, Claus Tieber (2012: 1), a screenwriting researcher, has been rather critical of the CHC

[48] Studies of the intersection of film and print culture in South Asia have closely dealt with film journalism (Dwyer, 2001; Joshi, 2009; Mukherjee, 2013; Ravikant, 2015) and film song books (Duggal, 2020), but largely ignored film manuals.

[49] In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al, 1985), scenario manuals from the formative years of the Hollywood studio system have been studied in two prominent ways. Firstly, David Bordwell frequently referred to the prescriptive content of these manuals in order to substantiate his formalist observations of a distinctive Hollywood style of storytelling which was grounded in causality and motivation. Secondly, Kristin Thompson investigated the content of these manuals in relation to the late 19th century boom in the literary market which saw the emergence of prescriptive rulebooks for different genres of writing, in particular the short story manual. Thompson showed how the short story manual's emphasis on *unity* as "the prime structural necessity in narrative" (Bordwell et al, 1985: 257) was "fed directly into the film scenario manuals" (258).

(Classical Hollywood Cinema) approach, pointing out that both Bordwell and Thompson "integrate manuals into film studies and treat them as if they were scholarly literature."[50]

As early as 1915, Columbia University in New York had introduced film education in the curriculum with a focus on the emergent professional field of scenario writing. Apart from the creation of scenario schools and competitions, the heyday of *scenario fever* produced a number of manuals whose circulation was not territorially restricted to the United States and Europe.[51] A number of them, in fact, reached South Asian readers. Some local versions were also written and published, albeit in English. Some of these 'how-to' books, archived at the National Library of India in Kolkata and the British Library in London, constitute a lost memory of early cinema's reciprocal relationship with print. However, scenario manuals help us more in historicising an infrastructure of print pedagogy rather than the industrial operations of a film studio.[52] Therefore, in lieu of using these manuals as sources for industrial information, I would argue that it is more appropriate to study the peculiar role of the English

[50] In his unpublished conference paper, Claus Tieber (2012: 3) argues emphatically that screenwriting manuals "were and still are not written for actual screenwriters but for aspiring ones, for wanna-bees (sic), for a specific market and a specific target group and therefore they were only written at times when a free market for screenwriters existed." However, in the process he incorrectly claims that no manuals were published between the late 1910s and late 1970s since the studios did not require the services of freelance writers. Despite the end of the *scenario fever* before the 1920s, a number of manuals were in fact still being published despite the studios closing their doors on newcomers. Tieber finally claims that screenwriting manuals "are no windows into the mind of writers" (11) and therefore have limited purchase in historicizing "the screenwriting process" and analysing the "industry's internal discourse." (10) What gets grossly overlooked in his critique of the CHC approach though is the scenario manual's material status as an extra-filmic document that carried and circulated promises of industrial success far and wide.

[51] Edward Azlant (1980) uses the term *scenario fever* to refer to the period from 1912 to 1920 when Hollywood film companies depended on freelance writers to meet the huge demand for original stories.

[52] I loosely borrow the term *infrastructure* from Brian Larkin (2013). He defines infrastructures as contingent architectures for circulation that "also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning" (329).

scenario manual in South Asia whose affective strategies often superseded its technical functions and professional prospects.[53]

**A Book Market for Amateurs**

In a testimonial account, the Lahore-based amateur scenario writer, B. D. Sharma's claim to have "studied some literature on the cinematograph industry and the art of writing for the screen as an amateur" (Sharma, 1927: 243) is insightful for two reasons. Firstly, it points towards a gradual institutionalization of the craft of scenario writing through the circulation of screenwriting manuals shipped from the West and the establishment of scenario schools which tapped into this readership more profitably by promising placements to outsiders in the industry. Secondly, the pedagogical attention paid to amateurs as opposed to writers who had connections within the film industry is also significant. Scenario writing, as evident from so many advertisements from the late 1920s and early 30s, called for professional training and was not a level playing field for autodidacts. For the aspiring writer in many cine-enthusiasts, screenwriting did not imply a creative energy but a technical sensibility which would render words into pictures: "In this work it is not the writer with a big literary name or a large command of language who succeeds but the one with less command of flowery words and who can think in picture and write in picture sense" (Subbaraman, n.d.: 209). As we will see in the next chapters, this medium specific understanding of screenwriting as the creation of images

[53] As opposed to classical Hollywood historiography which reconstituted the practices of film studios through an empirical study of film manuals, Claus Tieber (2012) has discussed how screenplay manuals do not necessarily reflect the actual practices inside the studios, and Anne Morey (1997) has exposed the contradictory rhetorics of manual publishers. Given the dearth of research on early screenwriting in South Asia, their interventions should be appropriated, with some degree of attentiveness to the contingencies of the local, in a much overlooked transnational context wherein these popular manuals written in English enjoyed significant readership despite little professional relevance due to regional and infrastructural differences.

and eradication of 'flowery words' informed the modernist and modernizing core of pedagogic and reformist discourses on Indian screenwriting.

The widespread circulation and consumption of scenario manuals promoted extensive affective networks of promise, placement and pleasure in Bombay and Calcutta. *The Home Movie Scenario Book* (1927), jointly authored by Morrie Ryskind, Charles F. Stevens and James Englander was one of the earliest scenario writing manuals available in Bombay. According to a *The Times of India* classified, the book was shipped from New York and sold by Taraporevala Booksellers and Publishers, who were based on Hornby Road in Bombay (*TOI* Feb 11, 1929: 3). This manual had a persuasive epigraph by H. L. Mencken: "The great films of the future, like the good films of today, will be mainly done by amateurs" (Ryskind, Stevens, and Englander, 1927). The British scenario writer Arrar Jackson's *Writing For The Screen* (1929) was advertised in Calcutta as "the book that was so long out of stock" (Fig 1). [54]

The high demand for scenario manuals encouraged the production of a few local versions in English as well. KT Dalvi composed and published *A New Profession or Manual of Indian Talkies* (1931) in Poona. A scenarist from New Zealand, V.S. Hignatio, was commissioned by Commercial Book Company in Lahore to write *Scenario Writing as a Career* (1933) "to meet the requirements of Indian screen authors" (Fig. 2). The Western scenario manuals influenced the vernacular discourse on film as well, as evident from the bibliography of Narendra Dev's *Cinema* (1935) (Fig 3). In this seminal Bengali work, Dev lists a number of scenario manuals as his sources, including Arrar Jackson's *Writing for the Screen,* alongside avant-garde textbooks such as *Film Technique* by Vsevolod Pudovkin which have acquired a canonical status in film studies today unlike early screenwriting manuals. Such high- and low-

[54] The book was certainly published with a broader reception in mind, which is evident from a list of agents in America, Australasia, Canada and India. Macmillan and Company, Ltd. were the official agent in India with branches in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Incidentally, the Bombay agent office was located on Hornby Road, where Taraporevala Booksellers and Publishers were also based.

brow distinctions were a much later phenomenon, and these manuals were circulated as authoritative textbooks on cinema. In Chapter 3, I discuss Narendra Dev's *Cinema* in detail and show how reformist writings on cinema in Bengal drew upon the Anglo-American scenario manual's technical information to foreground the medium specific understanding of cinema as visual form.

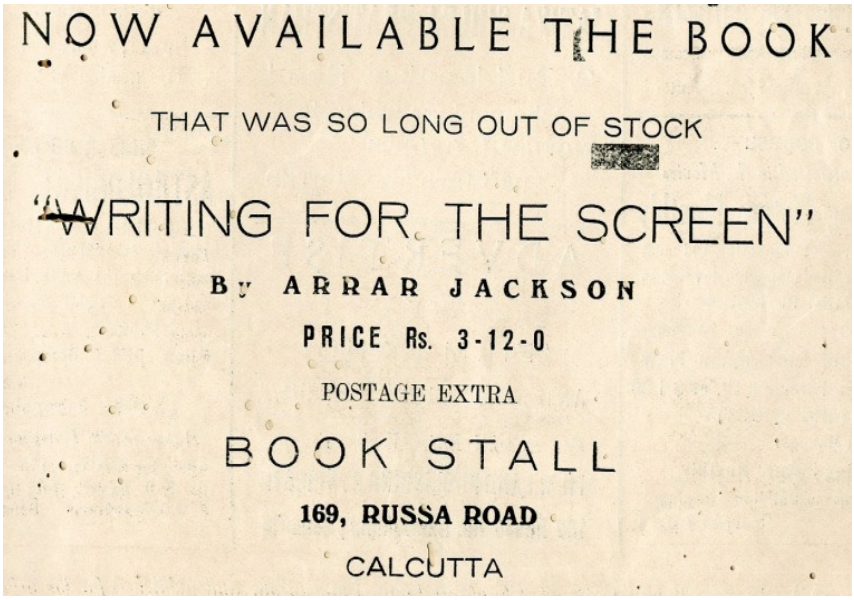
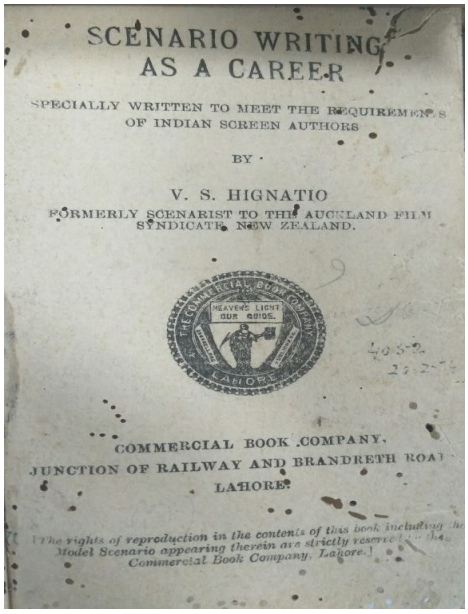



Figure 1: Manual Advertisement

Source: *Filmland* (14 March, 1931)

Image courtesy: The Media Lab, Jadavpur University


SCENARIO WRITING
AS A CAREER

SPECIALLY WRITTEN TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS
OF INDIAN SCREEN AUTHORS

BY

V. S. HIGNATIO

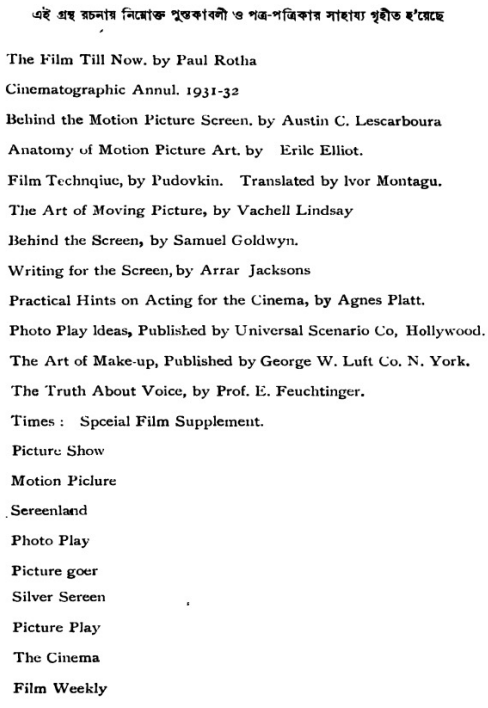
FORMERLY SCENARIST TO THE AUCKLAND FILM
SYNDICATE, NEW ZEALAND.

COMMERCIAL BOOK COMPANY,
JUNCTION OF RAILWAY AND BRANDRETH ROAD
LAHORE.



Figure 2: V. S. Hignatio's *Scenario Writing as a Career* (1933)

Image courtesy: The National Library of India, Kolkata


এই গ্রন্থ রচনায় নিম্নোক্ত পুস্তকাবলী ও পত্র-পত্রিকার সাহায্য গৃহীত হ'য়েছে

The Film Till Now. by Paul Rotha
Cinematographic Annul. 1931-32
Behind the Motion Picture Screen. by Austin C. Lescarboura
Anatomy of Motion Picture Art. by Erile Elliot.
Film Technqiue, by Pudovkin. Translated by Ivor Montagu.
The Art of Moving Picture, by Vachell Lindsay
Behind the Screen, by Samuel Goldwyn.
Writing for the Screen, by Arrar Jacksons
Practical Hints on Acting for the Cinema, by Agnes Platt.
Photo Play Ideas, Published by Universal Scenario Co, Hollywood.
The Art of Make-up, Published by George W. Luft Co. N. York.
The Truth About Voice, by Prof. E. Feuchtinger.
Times : Speeial Film Supplement.
Picture Show
Motion Piclure
Sereenland
Photo Play
Picture goer
Silver Sereen
Picture Play
The Cinema
Film Weekly

Figure 3: Bibliography of *Cinema* (1935)

Image courtesy: archive.org

**Fictions of Opportunity**

In film studies, the screenwriting manual has been used as a source to constitute as well as corroborate screenwriting history, both in the context of classical Hollywood (Bordwell et al, 1985) and early Bombay cinema (Mukherjee, 2020: 129). Here I make a conscious transition from the manual as a *source* to the manual as the *subject*. I study local Indian-English scenario manuals of the early 1930s in relation to a deep desire for structure and organisation in the imagination of cine-enthusiastic readers. Local print cultures of film magazines had also mushroomed with the coming of the talkies, detailing the glamourous lives of film stars and offering readers information about studio operations and new releases. As indicated by advertisements of screenwriting manuals in film magazines, the two readerships often overlapped. While the film industry mostly relied on networks of filial association, close acquaintance and informal recommendation, both K. T. Dalvi and V. S. Hignatio's manuals present a far more promising picture to the readers. I argue that these manuals effectively capitalise on new readerships created by a growing consciousness of middle-class unemployment and an amateurish enthusiasm for "the secrets of the Trade and Industry" (Dalvi, 1931: 45) of the film world. The strict divisions between pleasure and pedagogy are blurred as these texts, while advertised as self-instruction manuals, often relied significantly on fictions of opportunity. Unlike other self-instruction guides that had flooded the book market in the first half of the twentieth century on topics ranging from business letter writing to birth control, I will argue in the following sections that the excitement for film manuals was twofold.[55] Apart from exploiting the urban middle-class youth reeling under unemployment, it

[55] An advertisement in *The Times of India* (Dec 7, 1944: 2) by Taraporevala Booksellers lists a number of such "self instruction" books.

also tapped into a section of the film audience whose enthusiasm would spill over from the cinemas into the parallel world of print culture.

It must be pointed out that while I have studied the reception of scenario manuals primarily in relation to amateurs and outsiders who clearly constituted the target readership, it would be incorrect to claim that industry professionals never consulted manuals. It is one thing to claim that the prescriptive content of screenwriting manuals was not representative of studio operations and quite another to reject the possibility of any significant interaction between the proximate industries of film practice and pedagogy. For instance, the novelist and screenwriter Nabendu Ghosh (1995: 59) has described how a Hollywood screenwriting manual significantly influenced the story development of *Kismet* (1943): "Sasadhar, Ashok and Gyan Mukherjee had got hold of a marvellous book on Hollywood script-writing by Francis (sic) Marion".[56] (See Fig 4) Satyajit Ray (1994: 18) taught himself screenwriting using John Gassner and Dudley Nichols' *20 Best Film Plays* (1943), and the Bengali actor Ahindra Choudhury (1962: 204) purchased a scenario manual from a Higginbotham bookstore in the early 1920s. The contingent possibilities of the proximate worlds of print and cinema, as seen in *Kismet*'s story development, do not undercut the transnational network of affective strategies employed by manual writers and publishers to tap into an amateur readership. Instead, such anecdotes foreground the pervasive reach of the English scenario manual in the subcontinent, a once popular pedagogic text now reduced to a rare ephemeral document.

[56] The manual was *How to Write and Sell Film Stories* (1938) by Frances Marion. Marion was an immensely successful screenwriter in Hollywood having worked in the industry from the early 1910s to early 1940s and also won two Academy Awards during this period. Her manual, published towards the twilight of her career, was bound to enjoy great readership far and wide. In an interview, the veteran Bombay film journalist Rafeeq Baghdadi told me about this manual's usage in Mehboob Studios as well. In the manual, Marion disregarded any moral obligation of the screenwriter "to preach or to argue for any reformation" and proposed that "the sinner is a likeable fellow". (5) *Kismet*, incidentally, was one of the earliest films in Bombay cinema to present a star actor as a petty thief and an anti-hero.

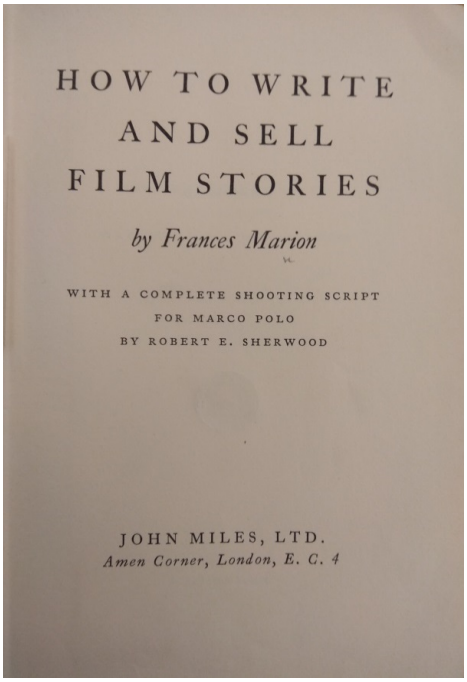



Figure 4: Frances Marion's *How to Write and Sell Film Stories* (1937)

Image courtesy: The British Library, London

As mentioned earlier, instead of treating the extant scenario manual as a mere source for industrial information, I pay closer attention to it as a textual object that often fashioned itself as the key to cinematic success. Anne Morey's (1997) work on the Palmer Photoplay Corporation, a company which inspired aspiring screenwriters through contradictory rhetorics, is particularly illuminating in this regard.[57] Referring to such strategies as "a kind of Taylorization of self-expression" (301), she exposes the fundamentally paradoxical nature of screenwriting pedagogy, wherein success was often defined in ways that blurred personal and professional distinctions. Morey details how the manipulative strategies of Frederick Palmer, an industry outsider himself, succeeded in keeping screenwriters under the illusion that the freelance market was still open to them when such opportunities had in fact dried up due to the

[57] The Palmer Photoplay Corp., formed by Frederick Palmer, was a clearing house for film stories and scenarios to be considered for filming in Hollywood. Based in Los Angeles, it was active mostly during the late 1910s and the early 1920s, and also offered correspondence courses in screenwriting promising lucrative jobs and careers to outsiders.

consolidation of the studio system. Even if the aspiring screenwriter was unable to place her work successfully in a studio, it was suggested that the experience would transform her personality.[58]

There is, in fact, some evidence to suggest that the rhetorics of the Palmer Photoplay Company had spread far and wide beyond Hollywood. In his testimonial account from 1927, B. D. Sharma from Lahore admitted to having sent one of his film stories by post to the Palmer Photo Play Company in his younger days (Sharma, 1927: 248). S. Wahajuddin, another struggling scenario writer based in Delhi, also declared a freelancing association with Hollywood after having placed a script successfully in one of the studios for 50 US dollars (Wahajuddin, 1928: 970). These declarations reveal existing channels through which the universalist discourse of screenwriting inspired speculative pursuits of transnational success. The rhetoric of screenwriting pedagogy was instrumental in not only sustaining an illusory afterlife of the *scenario fever* in Hollywood but also creating transnational networks of promise, placement and pleasure.

**The Prospect of Precarity**

Since unemployment remains a pervasive problem, my purpose here is not to establish a direct causal relationship between aspirations of screenwriting success and shocks of post-industrial unemployment. However, it is useful here to contextualise the popularity of the English-language scenario manual in South Asia vis-à-vis large-scale unemployment among the educated youth in various parts of South Asia. A considerable number of studies conducted by

[58] Morey (1997: 304) writes, "The Palmer advertising literature suggests that the development of self-expression, self-mastery, and, above all, 'personality' was every bit as rewarding and significant as was the prospect of becoming the next C. Gardner Sullivan, whose salary was listed as $104,000 in one Palmer brochure".

Government officials and other experts between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s bear testimony to a growing consciousness of the lack of job opportunities for the urban middle-class youth.

Nalini Ranjan Sarkar (1934: 2), then a university professor based in Calcutta, claimed, "In Bengal, of all the classes affected, none has been so badly hit as the *Bhadrolog* or middle classes of the Province". He detailed how members of this particular class to whom "the province owes much of its culture and enlightenment" were "begging for employments from door to door and meet(ing) with refusals everywhere" (2). Similar concerns for the middle-class youth were also echoed in the account of another university professor, M. Visvesvaraya (1932: 2): "Although an increase in the educated population of any country is always a blessing, the complaint is loudly voiced, at the present time, that a large number of graduates . . . are without employment". Even a Government of India circular was forced to address this issue, citing a number of factors behind this complex development, among which one was rather curiously "the gradual disintegration of the caste system which at one time operated to prevent middle-class unemployment by restricting admission to clerical professions" (cited in Visvesvaraya, 1932: 22). An official study by the United Provinces Unemployment Committee (1935) expressed initial difficulty in defining the social group under scrutiny before narrowing its focus down to "educated young men" (4) who had received formal education in modern institutions of learning such as universities and colleges instead of *gurukuls* and *madrasas*. Another official study (1927) conducted in Bombay, Poona and Karachi narrowed the category of the unemployed middle class down to those who exhibited adequate proficiency in the English language:

> the problem of middle-class employment, as generally understood, chiefly affects persons ordinarily engaged in the larger cities, who by the nature of

> their education and occupation are 'English knowing'. (Labour Office Presidency of Bombay, 1927: 2)

From the above observations made in the late 1920s and early 1930s, we may determine two important points. Firstly, large-scale unemployment among the educated youth prevailed during the period in which talkie manuals were in circulation in South Asia. As we will see in the following sections, the manual authors address this target readership by directly inviting young graduates to join the film industry. Secondly, a considerably large section of this unemployed middle-class youth knew English well enough for government reports to concentrate specifically on that group. This observation is particularly important as the question of the manual's popularity in colonial South Asia ought to be asked in the context of a distinctive obsession with the English language which was marked by a strong autodidactic impulse.[59]

**'For Better Jobs, Read the Book!'**

In the introductory pages of *A New Profession or Manual of Indian Talkies* (1931), KT Dalvi announced the requirement of "more educated artistes" in the talkie studios that would be open to "our unemployed college boys and graduates" (Dalvi, 1931: 2). After detailing the success of some of the stars, producers and directors in Bombay, Dalvi wrote that he published his manual "to show what new careers are open to young men and girls of India in the Film Industry

[59] Another contemporaneous form of film writing, as Debashree Mukherjee (2013) has pointed out, was the self-taught art of film journalism. With the growing popularity of film magazines such as *Bombay Chronicle* and *filmindia* in the 1930s and 40s, the readership exhibited "a peculiarly South Asian phenomenon, one that was catalysed by the colonial presence: autodidactism, especially in the context of the English language" (2013: 179). A passionate projection of self-taught writing ability was common in writers like Baburao Patel as the attraction of the film world spread to non-English reading publics through the colonizer's tongue.

– especially at a time of great unemployment as this" (2). The quick success of these stars was "a good incentive to our new graduates who will see the possibilities of this new line, rather than hunting for jobs for petty clerkships in Government and Railway Departments with all the drudgery attached thereto" (2). Priced at 3 Rupees, KT Dalvi's manual made an unabashed appeal to the unemployed youth of the country to join the film industry: "There are horses and dogs in America who receive quite good salaries more than some of the Professors in India" (3). As the proprietor of 'International Pictures Corporation', K. T. Dalvi was expected to be familiar with the workings of the studio. However, publishing a manual for Indian talkies in the year 1931, when even the major studio proprietors were still grappling with technical and infrastructural challenges, Dalvi's authoritative 'how-to' book seems questionably early. Notably, it evaded any discussion on film dialogues and songs.[60] Much like the existing foreign manuals in the market, the book detailed the different stages of developing a film story: theme, plot, synopsis, treatment, scenario and continuity. What is more interesting is how Dalvi's book was structurally informed by a crafty interplay of promise and precarity. It introduced the unemployed to the magnetic allure of cinema and then withdrew responsibility by publicising competition. Dalvi warned aspiring story-writers that the studios receive dozens of letters every day from amateur writers but "have no time to go through all these lengthy stories" (45). The sense of precarity evident from this statement was almost immediately undercut by a promise structured carefully through a chain of preconditions.[61]

[60] KT Dalvi's only "sound" advice to aspiring scenario writers appears much later in a different chapter on sound effects: Every writer of Stories for Sound pictures must understand Sound effects to make the resulting picture a realistic one. These Sound effects are created to heighten the total effects (Dalvi, 1931: 31). This piece of advice is appended with two equally inadequate examples of the sonic effects of prisoners' handcuffs and fighters' swords (31).

[61] Leslie Gordon's foreword to *Writing for the Screen*, the British manual available in India, too discusses opportunity through a similar juxtaposition of material prospect and subjective merit: "People say to me, I suppose on an average about half a dozen times a week, 'But do Film Companies want to see

> If after reading this book and the chapter on scenario, they arrange their stories in their good and neat scenario style, keeping an eye on the directorial difficulties and the likings of cine-fans, their scenarios would certainly be preferred by producers. (46)

In the final chapter of the manual, Dalvi appeared to be quite aware of his position as a pioneer of film manual writing in India and claimed that his knowledge was more practical than "many of our journalists and professors, who could write theoretically". (45)[62] Interestingly, Dalvi's self-endorsement did not stop at an assertion of practical knowledge. In an advertisement in *The Times of India*, none other than Jawaharlal Nehru, who would become independent India's first Prime Minister in the following decade, recommended the manual after having "looked through it with interest" (See Fig 5). The endorsement from the most venerated living public figure in the Indian subcontinent after Gandhi, among other "prominent people", ensured greater respectability for the "tremendous field" of talkies. Their validation of films as an honourable choice of career overrode moral concerns as the scenario manual invited the reader to a vicarious participation in the film industry, even if not necessarily a real one.[63]

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work by unknown people?' The answer is YES; the screen is starving for stories, but they must be GOOD STORIES" (Jackson, 1929: viii).

[62] The declaration of practical experience was a common feature in the endorsement of scenario manuals. Geoffrey Malins, a British filmmaker who was active from 1916 to 1930, wrote in the introduction to *Writing for the Screen*: "Just as Mr. Jackson is a practical man, so is this book a practical book. Into it has gone all the sound knowledge of technique that its author uses in the preparation of his scenarios" (Jackson, 1929: v).

[63] Just as theatre songs gained immense popularity in print through a kind of readerly appropriation (See Orsini, 2009), these manuals containing a comprehensive breakdown of the filming processes and detailed descriptions of studio spaces offered the film enthusiast a vicarious pleasure of participation. Similarly, the sample scenarios in the manuals, provided to illustrate pedagogical instructions, also invited the reader to reimagine filmic sequences through print.

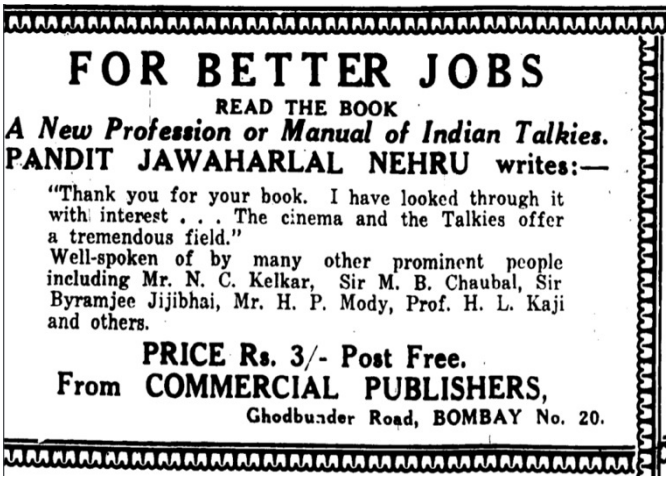



Figure 5: Jawaharlal Nehru endorses a manual

Source: *The Times of India* (September 19, 1931)

## The *Science* of Screenwriting

The other Indian-English manual from the same period, *Scenario Writing as a Career* (1933), was written by a scenarist from New Zealand. V. S. Hignatio, who "had considerable experience abroad" (Hignatio, 1933: 10), was considered authoritative enough by the Commercial Book Company in Lahore to write a manual for aspiring scenario writers in India. His insights into Indian cinema, however, emerged from his experience as a viewer of one film: "the Author of this work remembers having witnessed a play produced in India, dealing with events taking place long ago, before the advent of Europeans into our land" (36).[64] Apart from the irony in this choice of a scenarist based out of India, what is interesting is that scenario

[64] Although he doesn't name the film, it is quite likely that he was referring to one of the films in the pioneering trilogy of Indo-European silent co-productions from the 1920s, which despite their Indian cast and setting, boasted a predominantly German crew and was not necessarily representative of local studio operations in India. The trilogy comprised of *The Light of Asia* (1925), *Shiraz* (1928) and *A Throw of Dice* (1929). V. S. Hignatio in fact names one of the characters 'Shiraz' in a sample scenario in the manual.

writing was treated as a 'science' originating in the English-speaking world that would seamlessly diffuse into the subcontinent:[65]

> Unlimited scope exists in the Indian field of scenario writing for the man or woman who possesses the necessary talent and the ability to turn out work, not haphazardly, but on systemic and scientific lines. (10)

The rhetorical juxtaposition of a plenitude of prospects and careful selection of merit was now bolstered by an emphasis on "scientific knowledge" (10). Scientific diffusionism of foreign manuals had arguably become a local publishing strategy. In the manual, Hignatio devotes more attention than Dalvi to the technicalities of scenario writing. He discusses shot transitions in adequate detail describing how close-ups "register an incident, expression, or object" (19), fade "indicates the elapse of a period of time" (20) and cuts "terminate the (climactic) action *abruptly*" (24). The amateur scenario writer was advised to write a synopsis of the plot within 400-500 words for the convenience of the producer, which was to be followed by a detailed list of characters and a general note on the setting(s) of the film. (30) These were necessary information for the producer before he embarked on reading the "actual play, set out scene by scene" (31). The writer was strictly instructed to type on one side of the paper and use double spacing (31). Hignatio also illustrated his points frequently using examples of correct and incorrect method of describing scenes.[66] His instructions for the talkie writer were more well-

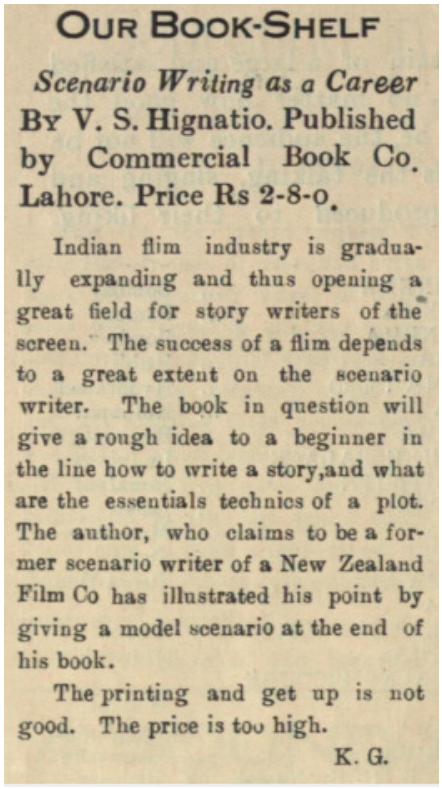
[65] A high demand for technical manuals shipped from abroad was particularly evident in the following decade. A newspaper article on the arrival of standard manuals for builders claimed that "special arrangements were made to secure manuals of the . . . leading Western authorities" (TOI, Oct 21, 1946: 7). Similarly, another article on manuals for printers and plastic traders advertised the availability of "approved self-instructional textbooks of which more copies have recently arrived in India to meet the demand for every Province", allowing readers to benefit from "the experience of the most highly qualified Western specialists" (TOI, Jan 19, 1948: 7).

[66] Hignatio (1933: 63) supplements all his instructions with a model scenario of "a short talking picture play in two reels". Titled *The Prisoner of the Temple*, the detailed scenario narrates an Oriental

defined than Dalvi's, although again perhaps not adequate for a successful Indian talkie scenario in 1933. As we will see in the second half of the chapter, the novelty of sound was still being exploited for a high frequency of songs and protracted melodramatic dialogues in Indian studios. However, Dalvi had different advice: "The lines to be spoken should be simple and to the point. Do not fill up each scene with long conversations which are of little practical value. . .Witty dialogue and good signing (sic). . . should not be given all the consideration to the exclusion of action" (41-42). Dialogues and song lyrics remained an afterthought, reinforcing the medium specificity of screenwriting as a predominantly visual practice in the manner of silent cinema.

*Scenario Writing as a Career* received a lukewarm review in the Calcutta-based *Varieties Weekly* (Fig 6), and the price of the book at 2 Rupees 8 annas was considered "too high". The review did not seem too certain about the author's identity as a former scenario writer either. However, the review of a manual in the pages of a popular film magazine bears testimony to overlapping readerships that desired 'insider' knowledge of the mystical world of cinema as well as the prospective field of talkies.

story of Ranjit, a young warrior who turns into a fugitive after having an affair with a dancer named Shiraz.



OUR BOOK-SHELF

*Scenario Writing as a Career*
By V. S. Hignatio. Published by Commercial Book Co. Lahore. Price Rs 2-8-0.

Indian flim industry is gradually expanding and thus opening a great field for story writers of the screen. The success of a flim depends to a great extent on the scenario writer. The book in question will give a rough idea to a beginner in the line how to write a story,and what are the essentials technics of a plot. The author, who claims to be a former scenario writer of a New Zealand Film Co has illustrated his point by giving a model scenario at the end of his book.

The printing and get up is not good. The price is too high.

K. G.

Figure 6: Manual review

Source: *Varieties Weekly* (June 3, 1933)

Image courtesy: The Media Lab, Jadavpur University

**Pedagogy and Practice**

A close reading of the two Indian-English manuals published around the coming of talkies allows us to contextualise their circulation in terms of locally appropriated publishing strategies that exploited social and cultural formations emblematic of industrial modernity. Local publishers were complicit in the diffusion of English screenwriting discourse in South Asia not only by limiting screenwriting to the domain of the *scientific* but also by attributing that domain to the foreign expert. The targeted readership, as shown in the chapter, was inevitably the unemployed, English-knowing youth whose predominant presence in South Asia is palpable from the studies and surveys undertaken during the same period. Such desperate times also witnessed a paradoxical rise of the glamorous world of cinema, and local manual publishers, in collusion with authors, devised a number of textual and promotional strategies to explore

this overlapping market of unemployed film enthusiasts. The gradual standardization of scenario writing for amateurs over the late 1920s and early 1930s further aided the establishment of scenario schools which tapped into this readership more profitably by making quixotic placement promises to outsiders in a rather impenetrable film industry. Apart from purchasing these 'how-to' books, amateur writers were also encouraged to join film schools such as the Cinema Training Institute in Bombay (*TOI*, Nov 09, 1929: 7), although according to T. S. Subbaraman, "the so-called cinema colleges and scenario schools were no good at all" (Subbaraman, n.d.: 209). Graduates from these schools also advertised themselves as "trained" and with "original stories for sale" (*TOI*, Aug 17, 1929: 4). In the classified section of a leading newspaper, a scenario writer based in Bombay confidently advertised his specialized genre:

> A rare opportunity for Indian Film Companies. A slightly RELIGIOUS DRAMA just completed by an experienced scenario writer. (*TOI*, Feb 04, 1931: 4)

A number of *Filmland* classifieds from 1931 also advertised the sale of stories, scenarios and titles for both silent and talkie films (See Fig 7). One of these advertisements was posted by Tarit Kumar Basu, who was, in all likelihood, either the writer himself or the manager of an agency of scenario writers.[67] He also advertised his BA and MA degrees next to his name (Basu, 1931). A. S. Kitta, another advertiser, was plying the same trade on the busy commercial Dhurrumtala Street (now Lenin Sarani) in Calcutta (Kitta, 1931). Most of these screenwriters operating as independent contractors and agencies in the years leading up to the talkies were possibly catering to the "proliferation of new small-scale companies outside the main studio system" (Bhaumik, 2001: 111). The three big studios from that period – Madan Theatres, Ranjit Film Company and Imperial Film Company – had sought the services of

[67] Mukherjee (2015b: 151-152) briefly discusses one of Tarit Kumar Basu's silent scenarios published in the trade journal *Cinema* in 1931.

veteran Parsi theatre *munshis* whose proficiency in writing dialogues and songs allowed these studios to compete against each other in the race for talkies. A crucial distinction has to be made here again between the discourse and practice of screenwriting. As I show in the second half of this chapter, while the pedagogical discourse on screenwriting was primarily aimed at amateur writers, the major studios were sealed off from the non-professional world. The practices in the studios were also markedly different from the medium specific rules prescribed in the manuals.


**Figure 7:** Sale of scenarios as advertised in *Filmland*

**Source:** *Filmland* (August 8,1931).

**Image courtesy:** The Media Lab, Jadavpur University

## The Theatrical Turn in Talkie Studios

Since silent cinema from its earliest years had borrowed extensively from theatrical practices, the objective in this section is not to highlight the coming of the talkies as a transitional moment

that changed cinema overnight. Moreover, the fact that silent cinema co-existed with the talkies well into the mid-1930s renders the rhetoric of a radical aesthetic rupture misleading. However, there is adequate evidence for a specific pattern of screenwriting recruitment emerging from historical accounts of the first talkies. The infrastructural turn towards a theatrical mode of writing for cinema may have been significantly influenced by observations made in Hollywood during the transition. While Hollywood writers were learning the trade on the job, regular reportage in Indian newspapers on the shaping of talkie productions kept Indian producers, directors and writers abreast of these developments even while Indian studios were still producing silent films. Although it is difficult to empirically pinpoint this transnational discursive influence, it is useful here to compare two articles on screenwriting published in *The Times of India*, separated by a long and significant gap of ten years. The change in the intended audience is also noteworthy. The first article, titled *Picture Play Writing: Take Punch's Advice* and published in 1920, solicited film stories from amateur writers by way of advocating the form of the short story as the foundation upon which a scenario was to be developed inside the studio from "the producer's point of view":

> Most amateurs seem to think we want scenario. We do not. Give us a good synopsis, not too wordy, but, on the other hand, not too brief. Set it out in the form of a good short story, and we will do the rest with it if the main idea has any merit. (*TOI*, Apr 27, 1920: 11)

The second article, titled *Writing for the Talkies: Sound Advice*, published a decade later in 1930, was primarily addressed at studio owners and discussed a phase of experimentation in screenwriting in the West that was underway following an unsuccessful attempt by producers

to revert to the speaking stage of theatre.[68] The article concluded that such a move initially "failed to capitalise the screen's greatest asset – its possibilities for pictorial movement" (*TOI* Oct 25, 1930: 14). At the same time, the article asserted that the theatricality of talkies was not a given form but one that had to be worked out through experimentation. There were no strict rules then that one had to follow as a scenarist, but the progress in scenario writing in the talkies had reportedly been quite remarkable. The article offered "sound advice" to studio proprietors and aspiring scenarists: "See what is being done in the scenario field by the best dramatists of the world, whose literary ability and experience are being utilised by the motion picture industry, in the development of this dramatic form" (*TOI* Oct 25, 1930: 14). Accomplished playwrights such as Elmer Rice and Robert Sherwood, and other well-known writers with varying degrees of experience in theatre such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley and Dorothy Parker were part of the first generation of talkie screenwriters in Hollywood. Their role in Hollywood's gradual development of the *dramatic form* of talkie writing may have influenced Indian studio proprietors in recruiting popular *munshis* as screenwriters to repurpose the more accessible idioms of theatre.

Apart from these textual concerns, there were strong economic reasons for shifting the base of film writing towards existing forms of popular theatre which would accommodate the *all-singing* and *all-dancing* films into available patterns of production with least possible economic disruption.[69] Talkie productions were driven back into the artifice of studios with the introduction of the first film sound technologies in India which were notorious for recording

[68] In Hollywood, William de Mille (1929: 371) wrote in a similar vein, "Probably the talking picture will develop its own form of writing, since stage-plays contain too many lines for the medium, and screen construction leaves room for too few lines".

[69] As Radheshyam Kathavachak (2011: 158) writes in his autobiography, "Somehow we finished *Shakuntala*, and not at great cost. The actors, costumes, and scenery were all from the theatre, thus the only real outlay was for film stock".

all kinds of human and non-human sounds. They were unable to filter the undesirable noise as "the recording conditions of early gramophone and early sound-on-film technology in India left audible traces in their sound quality" (Majumdar, 2009: 305). Ardeshir Irani of Imperial Film Company (Garga, 1980: 11-12) and J. B. H. Wadia of Wadia Movietone (Majumdar, 2009: 306) have recounted their distressing experiences of shooting talkie films in poor acoustic conditions in the early 1930s. The question of sound infrastructure and mise-en-scène became significant as low-quality sound equipment discouraged outdoor sessions and drove the shooting process into the more and more acoustically insulated spaces of studios where it made more sense to readjust to theatrical modes of production.[70] Veteran Parsi theatre *munshis* who had immense experience in presenting popular stories within the limitations of the stage were certainly better suited for this soundproof mise-en-scène.[71]

Mohanlal Dave, the most prolific scenario writer from the silent era, used to be paid 1200 Rupees per script at Kohinoor Film Company.[72] His success had inspired many young writers to send scripts regularly to film studios (Bhaumik, 2001: 80-81). However, with the coming of the talkies, even the most coveted of scenario-writers from the silent era had to face a dramatic change in fortune:

> Some years back Mohanlal Dave who made a big fortune by writing silly nursery tales was so much in demand that producers actually boarded at his

[70] J. J. Madan had invested heavily in his new talkie studio which was built next to its old silent counterpart in Tollygunge, Calcutta with the help of American experts. "It has been designed purely for talkie productions and its walls and its roofs will be covered with a padding of slag, or glasswool, which is… excellent for absorption of sound. This is necessary as the slightest echo in a talkie studio would be fatal to the production and every precaution has to be taken to prevent the entry or egress of extraneous noises in the studio while production is going on" (*Varieties Weekly* Oct 3, 1931: 4).

[71] See Crafton, Donald (1999: 225-226) for a study of the relationship between sound and mise-en-scène in early Hollywood talkies. (pp. 225-226)

[72] Mohanlal Dave's script of *Gul-e-Bakavali* is the only extant script from the silent era (See Dharamsey, 2012).

> place to get their stories in rotation. But now with the advent of better stories, Mohanlal Dave is out of the market. Dave wrote some stories for the talkies, but they had a lukewarm response. (*filmindia*, December 1937: 11)

While the application of sound technologies in the studios called for the recruitment of more technicians and engineers who had substantial operational knowledge and could run a talkie studio, the most suitable writing experts for sound films, who would also possess a sense of business, were to be found in the Parsi theatre companies.[73] R. K. Yajnik (1933), a theatre scholar from that period, discussed the *kavi* system in the Parsi or 'Gujarati-Urdu' stage of Bombay, in which a playwright would be hired by the manager or proprietor of a theatre company for a fixed salary.[74] The *kavi* was certainly comparable to, if not synonymous with, the *munshi* or *pandit*.

> Such *kavis* get a fixed salary and is duty bound to write one play every six months or so and to transfer all its rights to the manager . . . Moreover, this poet has to do many odd jobs, such as adding to or altering or cutting scenes and providing songs, i.e. the words fitting a situation, sometimes suggested by the manager, and on the musical notation decided by the expert of the company. (Yajnik, 1933: 107)

[73] Joppan George (2011: 84) writes, "Ardeshir Irani, prior to the shooting of *Alam Ara*, took elementary lessons in sound recording with his assistant Rustom Barucha from Wilford Deming Jr., a foreign expert who came to assemble the apparatus for Imperial Film Co."

[74] Nandi Bhatia (2003: 212) has raised concerns about the lack of objectivity in R.K. Yajnik's study by claiming that not only does it "reveal the divisions between high and low culture that crept into theater criticism" but also "clearly bears traces of Hindu separatism" in his valourisation of Bengali and Marathi theatre companies over the Urdu stage. However, despite such biases, Yajnik's detailed account of the system of writing plays in theatre companies across Calcutta, Bombay, Pune and Madras remains quite useful.

A more dominating and interfering manager would find it advantageous to keep a system of collaboration in place in order to ensure maximum efficiency and encourage a competitive milieu: "He often thinks of a vague plot and then distributes the writing of the usual three acts of a tragi-comedy to three 'poets' noted for their several gifts of serious, comic and musical composition" (Yajnik, 1933: 108). Though under contract, the *kavi*, like the *munshi,* was equally business minded and would be "constantly seeking better terms from other more prosperous commercial managers" (108). Yajnik claimed that such a lucrative system of playwriting was not to be found in the less commercial theatres of Poona or Calcutta, and it goes to show why the major film studios of the time sought the experience, expertise and efficiency of Parsi theatre playwrights apart from other artists and technicians. The commercially rooted multilingualism of the Parsi theatre was an added asset to the film companies, which would help them cut across linguistic and communal divides in a bid to secure the lion's share of Indian filmgoers.[75] Despite their religious backgrounds and linguistic activism within the Parsi stage, all four playwrights who were at the heart of this historical exchange between theatre and cinema were almost equally adept in both Urdu and Hindi, among other languages.[76]

**The *Munshis* of the First Talkies**

I have shown in the previous chapter how the screenwriting *munshi* largely found himself to be an archaic professional whose practices were perceived to have become obsolete in the face

[75] The Parsi theatre companies staged Urdu as well as Hindi plays to ensure a bigger market. Janardan Bhatt, a proponent of Hindi theatre, claimed that their investment in a multilingual theatre were purely commercial as they were as much 'enemies' of Urdu as of Hindi. (Bhatt, 1928, as cited in Anand, 2007: 331)

[76] Both Radheshyam Kathavachak and Narayan Prasad Betab were consciously engaged in Hindi playwriting at a time when Parsi theatre company owners were still uncertain about the potential of Hindi dramas.

of marked technical advancements in screenwriting. *Munshis* had become the object of ridicule in studios as well as film magazines by the early 1940s. Neither studio owners nor film critics made his job any easier. However, only a decade earlier, film studios had sought the expertise of *munshis* to compete in the race for the first talkies. The year 1931 was a watershed in the professional lives of four eminent Parsi theatre playwrights. Joseph David Penkar (See Fig 8) was hired by Ardeshir Irani of the Imperial Film Company, Agha Hashr Kashmiri and later Radheshyam Kathavachak were roped in by J. J. Madan of the Madan Theatres, and finally Narayan Prasad Betab joined Seth Chandulal Shah's Ranjit Film Company. The model of Parsi theatrical production became the economic and aesthetic foundation for the earliest talkies. Even film magazines celebrated this move.[77] The studios which did not recruit talented *munshis* for screenplays were duly warned by a critic in *Film World*:

> The Talkie producers must remember that the proprietors of theatrical companies could only make a name when they discovered that they must find an 'Ahsan', a 'Talib' and a 'Hashr'[78] to write their dramas, even if they had to pay a great price for their composition. (Shujaa, 1933: 17)

The entry of Parsi theatre *munshis* in the film industry was facilitated by the urgent need to locate a tested economic and aesthetic model for cinema whose textuality would incorporate the novelty of sound. Playwrights too became more conscious of the vulnerable economic standing of theatre in the light of such drastic developments in film technology. Narayan Prasad

[77] Only in some exaggerated accounts, this exodus of capital and talent has been viewed as detrimental for theatre. For instance, Nemichandra Jain (1992: 76-77) writes, "As the silent movies in the third, and the talkies in the fourth, decades of the 20th century made their debut, the Parsi theatre companies, including the owners, actors, playwrights and technicians, deserted the theatre for films, creating a situation of near total vacuum in the Hindi theatre."

[78] Ahsan Lucknowi, Talib Banarasi and Agha Hashr Kashmiri were all playwrights working for different Parsi theatre companies.

'Betab', who had worked for the Bombay Parsi theatre's Alfred Company and also Madan Theatres of Calcutta, was invited to write films for Chandulal Shah's Ranjit Film Company. An account of Betab and Shah's first meeting in Bombay reveals the symbiotic requirements of playwrights and producers at this time.[79] The relationship between J.B.H. Wadia, the co-owner of Wadia Movietone, and Joseph David, a veteran Parsi theatre playwright, also originated on reciprocal grounds of admiration as well as financial need.[80]

Figure 8: Joseph David

Source: Joanna Ezekiel, great-granddaughter of Joseph David

[79] Vidyavati L. Namra (1972) writes in her father's biography about Betab's meeting with Chandulal Shah on June 30, 1931 when the playwright most humbly offered to work on his first screenwriting project for one rupee but Shah decided to pay him most handsomely out of sheer admiration for the playwright. "Upon realizing the significance of this negligible amount, Sethji assured him, "Let me tell you as a matter of fact that a famous film writer in Bombay gets 1200 rupees at the most for one film. Although you have no experience in this line of work, it does not matter because your experience in theatre more than makes up for the inexperience. In fact, it makes you worthy of more than 1200 rupees. If the writer I am talking about is famous in Gujarat, you are famous all over India. So the worth of your pen can in no way be considered less than his. We will pay you 1500 rupees for one film." (446, translation mine)

[80] JBH Wadia's admiration for Joseph David dated back to the former's school years: "Although Joseph David came to know me only in 1933, I happened to know him ever since I was a school boy and used to see Gujarati and Urdu stageplays twice almost a week. He was the director, impresario, the heart and soul and sinews of the Parsee Imperial Theatrical Company" (Quoted from Wadia's essay 'Tribute to a Forgotten Pioneer', and accessed from Film Heritage Foundation with Roy Wadia's kind permission).

Virchand Dharamsey (2010) mentions an interesting development during the production of *Alam Ara* (1931) which hints at a possible strain in the relationship between studio proprietors and established playwrights from the Parsi stage:

> Meanwhile, on 14 February 1931, it was reported, "Imperial had already shot 7000 feet and which will be eventfully extended to about 12 reels. It is being directed by Mr. Joseph David. Provisional title is *Alam Ara* (Light of World)." . . . To this, a rejoinder was published on 23 February as follows, "It was mentioned that Mr. Joseph David was producing the Imperial Film Co's First talkie. This is entirely correct from the technical point of view, but we are asked to state that the general direction of all Imperial talkies remain in the hands of Mr. Ardeshir Irani, the executive of the Company." (Dharamsey, 2010: 25-26)

This incident also marked a rift between the authorial influence exercised by the playwright in the production of a film and the attempted construction of the proprietor as the auteur in the public imaginary. This was even more probable since the likes of Agha Hashr Kashmiri, Joseph David, Narayan Prasad Betab and Radheshyam Kathavachak were vastly experienced and commanded a position of great respect within the studio. It is not surprising that, apart from an enviable salary of 1500 Rupees per script, Seth Chandulal provided Betab with an apartment block, a servant and a monthly stipend of 300 Rupees (Namra, 1972: 446). While Betab's autobiography expresses no discontents of working at Ranjit Film Company, his daughter's account mentions how Chandulal Shah's interference in the screenwriting process increased to the extent that Betab had to retire from films altogether. It is understandable though that Betab's version, written as early as in 1936, may not have included such details since he was still

receiving a pension amount of 1000 Rupees every month from the Ranjit Film Company (Betab, 2011: 101).

J.B.H. Wadia's writings on Joseph David gives us a glimpse of the treasure trove of story and dialogue content amassed by the playwright in his theatre days which became ready material at the disposal of the film studios:

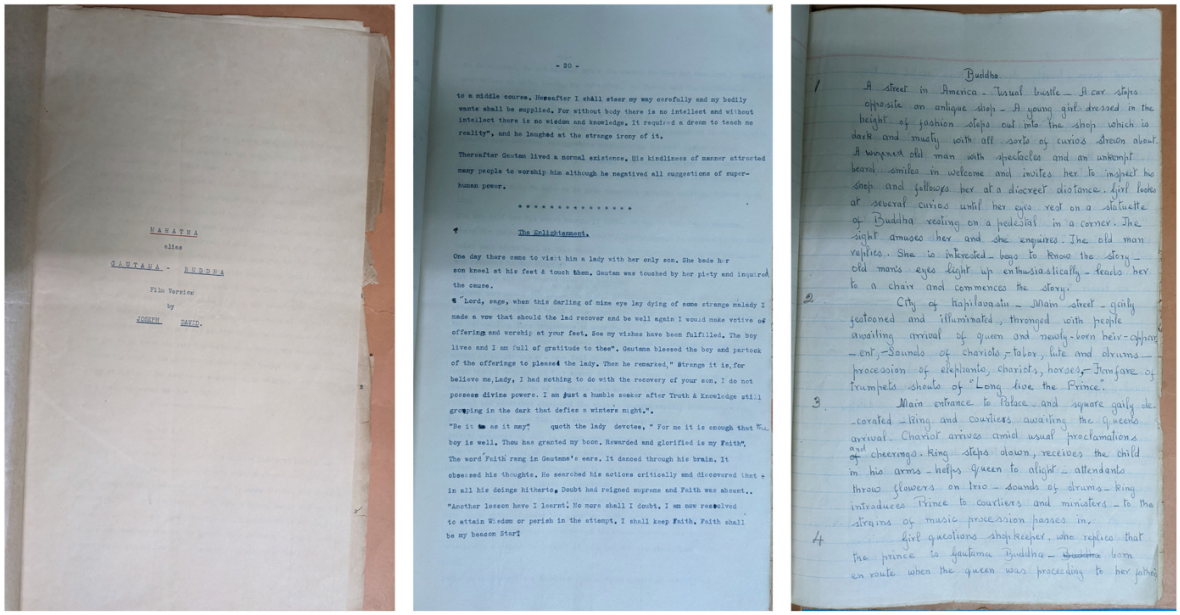
> Joseph David, respected Dada to us all, only had to pull out the papers from his fabulous collection of stories and plays written out in Gujarati script in his own hand for future use… They consist of story kernels and an endless stream of quotations in Hindi and Urdu (couplets, quatrains, etc.). (Wadia, n.d., as cited in Thomas, 2014: 43)

Being "a master of stage technique", Joseph David was "eager to transfer it to the art of film making" and he had "quickly grasped the essentials of film production."[81] The experienced impresario undertook a number of additional responsibilities at Wadia Movietone: "Dada's role went beyond script and dialogues and helping to cast and eventually coach the actors. He was also centrally involved, with JBH, in devising the music and songs strictly in accordance with raga theory" (Thomas, 2014: 69). Interestingly, a decade later, Joseph David tried to place a script of *Mahatma* (alias *Gautam Buddha*) in Hollywood through his acquaintance Ram Bagai, which reached me serendipitiously during the course of my research through David's great-granddaughter Joanna Ezekiel.[82] The extant script file consists of a typed screenplay and a

[81] Quoted from JBH Wadia's essay 'Tribute to a Forgotten Pioneer' and accessed from Film Heritage Foundation with Roy Wadia's kind permission.

[82] During the 1950s-60s, Ram Bagai was the president of The Hollywood Foreign Press Association and also the founder of Films of India, an organization that screened Indian films in the USA. He travelled in India during the 1940s, when Joseph David gave him the script of *Mahatma* to pass on to prospective producers in Hollywood.

handwritten synopsis, written entirely in English, and is a testament to his desire of succeeding in Hollywood with a successful Oriental film like the German-Indian film *Light of Asia* (1925), which was also based on the life of Gautama Buddha (See Fig 9).


MAHATMA

alias

GAUTAMA - BUDDHA

Film Version

by

JOSEPH DAVID.

- 20 -

to a middle course. Hereafter I shall steer my way carefully and my bodily wants shall be supplied. For without body there is no intellect and without intellect there is no wisdom and knowledge. It required a dream to teach me reality", and he laughed at the strange irony of it.

Thereafter Gautam lived a normal existence. His kindliness of manner attracted many people to worship him although he negatived all suggestions of super-human power.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The Enlightenment.

One day there came to visit him a lady with her only son. She bade her son kneel at his feet & touch them. Gautam was touched by her piety and inquired the cause.

"Lord, sage, when this darling of mine eye lay dying of some strange malady I made a vow that should the lad recover and be well again I would make votive of offerings and worship at your feet. See my wishes have been fulfilled. The boy lives and I am full of gratitude to thee". Gautama blessed the boy and partook of the offerings to pleased the lady. Then he remarked," Strange it is, for believe me, Lady, I had nothing to do with the recovery of your son. I do not possess divine powers. I am just a humble seeker after Truth & Knowledge still grouping in the dark that defies a winters night.".

"Be it as it may" quoth the lady devotee, " For me it is enough that my boy is well. Thou has granted my boon. Rewarded and glorified is my Faith".

The word 'Faith' rang in Gautama's ears. It danced through his brain. It obsessed his thoughts. He searched his actions critically and discovered that + in all his doings hitherto, Doubt had reigned supreme and Faith was absent..

"Another lesson have I learnt. No more shall I doubt. I am now resolved to attain Wisdom or perish in the attempt. I shall keep Faith. Faith shall be my beacon Star!

Buddha.

1 A street in America - Usual bustle - A car stops opposite an antique shop - A young girl dressed in the height of fashion steps out into the shop which is dark and musty with all sorts of curios strewn about. A wizened old man with spectacles and an unkempt beard smiles in welcome and invites her to inspect the shop and followes her at a discreet distance. Girl looks at several curios until her eyes rest on a statuette of Buddha resting on a pedestal in a corner. The sight amuses her and she enquires. The old man replies. She is interested - begs to know the story - old mans eyes light up enthusiastically - feasts her to a chair and commences the story.

2 City of Kapilavastu - Main street - gaily festooned and illuminated, thronged with people awaiting arrival of queen and newly-born heir-apparent - Sounds of chariots - tabor, lute and drums - procession of elephants, chariots, horses - Fanfare of trumpets shouts of "Long live the Prince".

3 Main entrance to Palace and square gaily decorated - King and courtiers awaiting the Queens arrival. Chariot arrives amid usual proclamations and cheerings. King steps down, receives the child in his arms - helps Queen to alight - attendants throw flowers on trio - sounds of drums - King introduces Prince to courtiers and ministers - To the strains of music procession passes in.

4 Girl questions shopkeeper, who replies that the prince is Gautama Buddha - ~~Buddha~~ born en route when the queen was proceeding to her father

Figure 9: Joseph David's script file of *Mahatma*

Source: Joanna Ezekiel

Some traces of the *kavi* system can be seen in Radheshyam Kathavachak's (2011: 162) own account of writing for cinema after an illustrious career with the Parsi stage: "Nowadays the story, dialogues, and songs are written by three separate individuals, but at that time they were the responsibility of one person. This was the way it had been in the theatre, and it remained the practice in the film world for a while". Kathavachak, who had joined Madan Theatres in Calcutta after quitting Bombay's Alfred Company, was contractually bound to work in the talkies when J. J. Madan, the managing director, decided to enter the talkie race with "a very big and ambitious programme of production for the year 1931-32" (*Varieties Weekly* Oct 3, 1931: 4). His *Shirin Farhad* (1931) had narrowly lost out to the release of

Imperial Film Company's *Alam Ara*, but the film created new records for Bombay running successfully at Wellington Cinema for months. The recipe that had worked for *Shirin Farhad* – the pairing of Master Nissar and Miss Kajjanbai, the large number of songs and dances, the oriental backdrop – was to be repeated in *Shakuntala* (1931), and Kathavachak was asked to write the dialogues and songs. The songs were to be shot in the newly renovated talkie studio in Tollygunge immediately after they had been written, which required the playwright to be present on the film set at all times:

> I spent every night writing. In the morning I travelled the eight or ten miles to Tollygunge and presented myself in time for the shooting . . . I rehearsed the parts with the actors using a chalk board, writing sometimes in Urdu, sometimes in Hindi, so that they could read the words from a distance. I worked on the song lyrics even at night when I took the tram home… One day, in the rush of production Jahangirji (J. J. Madan) even asked me to shoot a scene. (Kathavachak, 2011: 158)

The Parsi theatre *munshis* were not, however, exempt from criticism. The Urdu-Hindustani talkies had dealt an intense blow to the literary activism of the Hindi public sphere during the 1930s. While members of the Hindi literati took their time to come to terms with the diminished popularity of theatre, film scenarios were gradually becoming an acceptable mode of writing for them. An anonymous article in the Hindi periodical *Sudha* titled 'Hindi Talkie' complained that even some of the highly regarded talkies had utterly disgusted the writer for their lack of medium specificity:

> It seems the scenario writers of these films have no clue about the medium of cinema. The story offers nothing special, the dialogues are mediocre, the emotions portrayed are nauseating and the frequency of songs is extremely

> laughable. It seems the talkies are merely a more mechanical form of the Parsi theatrical productions. ("Hindi Talkie", 1932, as cited in Anand, 2007: 306-307, translation mine)

The writer urged more Hindi playwrights to start writing for the talkies in order to extend the literary activism of the Hindi stage:

> So I make an appeal to the most proficient Hindi writers to enter this field. A grand opportunity awaits them. Even after writing a dozen plays he would never be able reach out to the masses the way he would by writing one tasteful, worthy and pleasant talkie. ("Hindi Talkie", 1932, as cited in Anand, 2007: 307)

Talkies gave vernacular voices to Indian cinema at a time when the Hindi language had emerged as an instrument of nation building (See Orsini, 2002). One of the prominent voices of the Hindi public sphere, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, too appealed for an ethical barter between film producers and Hindi writers in which better Hindi screenplays would inadvertently translate into more profits for the producers and ensure a more widespread circulation of authentic Hindi. (Nirala, 1934, as cited in Anand, 2007: 290-292) While neither the scope of this chapter nor the overall thesis allows for a rigorous discussion of the question of language,[83] these statements indicate that the field of screenwriting extended beyond

[83] In the thesis, I deal with two filmmaking regions, Bombay and Bengal, which represent different objectives, problems and aspirations around questions of language. Earlier I have discussed concerns of language in the context of *munshis* and *pandits* (Persian/Sanskrit) and manuals (English). In the subsequent chapters, the question of language will emerge again in the context of literary adaptations (Bengali) and film songs (Hindi/Urdu). The linguistic questions concerning screenwriting in a multilingual South Asia set the practice apart from largely monolingual contexts in Euro-American screenwriting. See Hansen (2003) for a discussion of language shifts in relation to Parsi theatre; Lunn (2015) and Ravikant (2015) for discussions of language and syncretism in Bombay cinema; and Gooptu (2010) for a discussion of Bengali cinema around the question of language and regional identity.

industrial concerns and took on linguistic questions which were of nationalist proportions during that time.

The veteran screenwriter Kamlesh Pandey told me in an interview, “Sound brought in Urdu playwrights to write the dialogue because early talkies were simply an extension of the Parsi theatre in terms of scripts, the language or the acting styles. Songs too were by playwrights” (K. Pandey, personal communication, 24 June, 2016). It is heartening that while there is no institutionalized history of screenwriting from the early years, the informal accounts of such veteran practitioners in the industry corroborate my research. Writing for the talkies was not, in essence, an uncharted territory for such experienced and established *munshis*, and their autobiographical accounts also suggest little or no discontinuity between their practices on the stage and screen. After the relative silence of silent cinema, the first generation of *all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing* talkie producers employed synchronised sound more as a novelty than as an aesthetic force, which enabled a systematic collation of stories, dialogues and lyrics from the rich repository of the Parsi theatre, and a smooth integration of the melodramatic textual content within nascent visual and aural technologies of the screen.

**Conclusion**

Building on the previous chapter’s critical-comparative approach, my historical study of the amateur screenwriter and the Parsi theatre *munshi* demonstrates the epistemic inconsistency between film pedagogy and practice during the first Indian talkies. The autobiographical accounts of some of the first playwright-turned-screenwriters bear testimony to the spaces they successfully negotiated for themselves in the talkies after a successful stint with the Parsi stage. I have shown how these memoirs were significantly different from testimonies of amateur screenwriters in the Indian Cinematograph Committee evidences (1927-28). The amateurs

expressed great apathy towards working opportunities in Indian studios, and contrastingly asserted their freelance work for Hollywood studios as more lucrative. To cater to this amateur market, a parallel infrastructure of screenwriting pedagogy emerged in South Asia through the circulation of Western and local scenario manuals that promised screenwriting jobs to amateur writers. By espousing a 'universal' poetics of screenwriting, these manuals complicated the strict divisions of consumption and production across interdependent film and print cultures, and created a cycle of pedagogy, promise and precarity outside the talkie studios.

An intermedial archaeology of screenwriting along the margins of print and theatre history not only disaggregates and visibilises screenwriting around this eventful moment in early cinema but also deepens the epistemic rift between screenwriting discourse and practice. I have shown in this chapter that while the pedagogical discourse on screenwriting was primarily aimed at amateur writers, the major studios were sealed off from the non-professional world. Early talkie studios in Bombay and Calcutta witnessed an influx of Parsi theatre playwrights, establishing an inseparable historical link between the performing arts and industrial craftsmanship, and facilitating the formal appreciation of early screen craft as an extension of stage craft. However, Indian screenwriting manuals written in English reproduced the universality of screenwriting techniques and overlooked professional practices within the Indian studios. These manuals generated aspirations and precarities which stemmed from narratives of technical backwardness and fictions of professional opportunity.

As I argued in the Introduction, screenwriting manuals have historically reproduced the narrative of cultural lag in Indian cinema, obscuring actual industrial practices as deviations from the 'universal' norm. In the next chapter on Bengali screenwriting, I show how local reformist discourses often discussed screenwriting in instructional terms like the manuals, which anachronistically privileged visual techniques of silent cinema as the standard. The cultural terrain of Bengali screenwriting was further complicated by a contradictory emphasis

on filmic medium specificity and literary indigenisation, and deeply fractured by a social divide between elite reformers and uneducated masses. While my focus shifts from modernizing discourses of technical inefficiency to modernist declarations of aesthetic deficiency, the cultural lag of Indian cinema stemming from the epistemological biases of screenwriting discourse remains the thread running through the thesis.

Chapter 3

# The Intermediality of *Boi*

## Adaptation and Authorship in Bengali Cinema

### Introduction: Film or Book?

During an interview at her residence in Malabar Hills, Mumbai, the veteran actress Kamini Kaushal told me how she was required to read a Hindi translation of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's Bengali novel *Biraj Bou* as many as 20 times to prepare for her titular role in the 1954 adaptation (See Fig 1). When I asked her if she had also read the screenplay, she recollected, "Yes, but hardly as many times" (Kamini Kaushal, personal communication, 31 December, 2018). The book was evidently more important than the script. The film's director, Bimal Roy, had started his career in New Theatres, a Calcutta-based film studio famed for its literary adaptations and highbrow associations, before moving to Bombay after the studio's decline around the late 1940s. Considered one of the greatest directors of Hindi cinema, Roy largely mined stories from the deep reservoir of Bengali literature, and all his screenplays were developed by the Bengali novelist and screenwriter Nabendu Ghosh, who self-avowedly did not prefer writing original screenplays. Through the 1950s and 60s, Roy and Ghosh were perfectly paired in their preference for Bengali literary adaptations in the Bombay film industry.


Figure 1: Kamini Kaushal in *Biraj Bahu* (1954) poster

This chapter is more about the role of screenwriting within the Bengali film culture of literary adaptations during the period of 1930s-50s rather than the afterlife of that film culture in Bombay. However, Kamini Kaushal's anecdote reminded me of how it is more than a lexical coincidence in the Bengali language that the word '*boi'* (book) colloquially implies both book and film. Although originally not intended to be a homograph, I argue in this chapter that the recurrence of the word '*boi*' as book and film in Bengal points toward an intimate relationship between film and literature in early Bengali cinema and beyond.

The colloquial homograph has often been derided as lowbrow by *bhadralok* (upper-caste Hindu male Bengalis[84]) film critics. In *Boi Noi, Chhobi* (*Image, Not Book*), eminent film critic Chidananda Dasgupta (1991) chides readers who tend to confuse film with literature. He

[84] Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 20) focuses on the same elitist regional group to "explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds." In the context of early Bengali cinema, the influence of *bhadralok* men in defining good/bad cinema and regional/national/international cinema in India is similarly representative of an encounter of Western ideas and local specificities. (See also Mukherjee, 2009; Gooptu, 2010; Dass, 2016)

makes an attempt to differentiate them by highlighting the intermedial process of screenwriting as a non-literary craft. Curiously, however, he uses a descriptive passage from a Bankimchandra novel as an example of a 'beautiful screenplay'. Dasgupta then goes on to argue that mainstream cinema has ignored the imagistic qualities of literature and instead borrowed heavily from the dialogues. For him, these incorrect practices reduce a work of adaptation to an exercise in merely conveying narrative information which obscures medium specificity and creates terminological confusions as with '*boi*'.

> A literary work is not always a screenplay. A literary work is only sometimes a screenplay… There can be films without dialogues, but not without images. When dialogue serves no realistic purpose but becomes a filler for gaps in the story and takes on an expository role, cinema is no longer cinema. It has become, in common Bengali parlance, *boi* (book). (Dasgupta, 1991: 97, translation mine[85])

It is revealing how the image-speech binary continues to inform Dasgupta's reformist analysis in a book written in 1991, six decades after the talkies had arrived in India. Yet Dasgupta's emphasis on image elides any actual discussion on screenwriting in a chapter on the very subject, and his examples of screenplays are in fact also passages extracted from canonical Bengali literary texts. Arguably, his argument that film is not literature fails against his own litmus test. This chapter explores how a similar confusion recurs in both screenwriting practice and discourse in Bengali cinema during the 1930s-50s. In this period, the cine enthusiast *bhadralok* tried to negotiate with the new medium of talkies through film practice and criticism, and shape the best practices of screenwriting for Bengali cinema by tapping into local literary

[85] All Bengali to English translations in the chapter are mine, unless stated otherwise.

production. The colloquial homograph '*boi*' is therefore a symptom of an extensive configuration of visual, literary and auteurial practices in early Bengali cinema which is not reducible to concerns with literature alone but reveals a wide range of cultural anxieties and aspirations with regard to the invisibilised craft of screenwriting.

Madhuja Mukherjee (2009: 25) has located a similar irony in the Bengali word '*shilpo*' in relation to the highbrow practices of New Theatres: "What is intriguing in the context of Bengali cinema is the term 'shilpo', which means both art and industry in Bengali… This irony of words needs to be noted, and the Bengali *bhasa* and culture are the basis of its identity politics". Ravikant (2015: 124-128) has shown how Hindi and Urdu neologisms in the first half of the twentieth century facilitated the localisation and socialisation of cinema in North India: "These etymological routes are crucial in getting a handle on the repertoire from which a new vocabulary was invented in order to convey the goings on in technology-driven new media events/performances such as cinema." (128) Vernacular terminologies are therefore more than semantic curiosities. They are potentially sites of conceptual and cosmological meaning-making that can open up alternative routes for tracing cultural and technical history in the Global South. In continuation with the archaeological approach of the previous chapters, the theoretical perspectives in this chapter demonstrate alternative dimensions of film historiography and knowledge production from South Asia by expanding its archive. I will try to show how the contradictions of a double consciousness of immediacy (See Note 87) and medium specificity, vis-à-vis the homograph of *boi*, have their roots in early-twentieth century Bengali cinema. The chapter is in no way a comprehensive or chronological account of screenwriting in Bengal, but an attempt to study patterns in early Bengali screenwriting practice and discourse that reveal significant cultural anxieties and medium-specific aspirations around cinema during colonial modernity.

**Adaptation and Intermediality**

The relationship between different media forms has been historically understood as both competitive and symbiotic. While an unmistakeable sense of determinism characterizes earlier writings of media scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler,[86] more recent notions of remediation[87] and media ecology[88] have considerably expanded our understanding of what it means when media forms and systems interact. The concept of 'media ecology' has also been used to argue against notions of obsolescence of literary narratives in new media environments (See Joseph & Wutz, 1997; Punday, 2012). Popular practices of transmedial and cross-cultural adaptation have been studied as symptoms of media-ecological processes at large. Adaptation, in particular, encompasses a wide range of conscious and unconscious creative practices that involve not just fiction and film but also forms as diverse as theatre, opera, graphic novels, television, dance, theme parks, video games and so on. Translation scholars too have used the term 'adaptation' to refer to a mode of translation, especially in theatre studies, which re-contextualises a source text from its original to its target location.

Before the influence of poststructuralist thought, the discourse on film adaptations mostly revolved around the assumption that a work of literature was the origin and held the

[86] For instance, Kittler (1990 [1985]: 248) wrote: "Since December 28, 1895, there has been one infallible criterion for high literature: it cannot be filmed."

[87] Bolter and Grusin (1999) claim that remediation is driven by a dual logic. The first is our insatiable desire for 'immediacy', for removing all evidence of mediation to provide a seamless experience. Opposed to immediacy is 'hypermediacy', which "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 34) Through the process of remediation, the audience is made to oscillate between media transparency (the feeling that the medium has disappeared) and media opacity (the experience of the presence of media). Bolter and Grusin argued that film adaptations of Austen novels often characterize an experience of immediacy: "The content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted." (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 44)

[88] Matthew Fuller (2005) has demonstrated that the only way of knowing how media systems interact is to trace their interactions. According to him, media ecology is "the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter." (Fuller 2005: 2)

'essence' of the artistic work. Within Euro-American discourses on film adaptation, while one group of critics believed that this essence of the literary work could be effectively reproduced through adaptation, more orthodox critics argued that the technical aspects of filmmaking were incongruent with literary composition. More recently, however, adaptation scholars (Stam, 2005; Elliott, 2003; Hutcheon, 2006; Leitch, 2007) have challenged the criterion of fidelity and subverted the hierarchical understanding of literary texts and their adaptations.[89] Simone Murray (2012), for instance, has argued that former adaptation critics' ignorance of the book industry has perpetuated a myth of the authorial agency of an individual writer. According to her, fidelity-oriented theories of adaptation since George Bluestone[90] have continued to invoke an abstract idea of an isolated author's creative work rather than the dependence of the text on "the complex circuits of printers, binders, hawkers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, collectors and readers" (Murray, 2012: 7). In lieu of comparative case studies of literary works and their adaptations, a great deal of attention has been paid to questions of intertextuality and intermediality in practices of film adaptation over the last two decades. The composition of the intermedial screenplay has unsurprisingly emerged as one of the most crucial steps in the process: "Literature-to-film adaptation involves the textual transposition of a single-track medium of published writing into a document that embraces the scenic structure and dramatic codes of the multitrack medium of film" (Boozer, 2008: 1).

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[89] With a more or less straightforward application of the poststructuralist concepts of Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian subjectivity, Foucauldian authorship and Kristevan intertextuality, Stam (2005: 9) has claimed that adaptation critics can expose disruptions in the originary status of the author: "And if authors are fissured, fragmented, multi-discursive, hardly 'present' even to themselves, the analyst may inquire, how can an adaptation communicate the 'spirit' or 'self-presence' of authorial intention?". Linda Hutcheon (2006) argues that scholars should celebrate the cultural promiscuity of adaptations which extends to video games, novelizations, opera, stage plays, e-literature, radio plays, installations and other media.

[90] In what is considered to be a foundational yet problematic academic treatise on film adaptations, *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone (1959: 13) drew heavily on the "primordial" properties of film and literature which show "how contrasting origins and development have brought the media of film and novel to radically different points". He argued that novels are invested in mental images or concepts, while films deal with visual images or percepts.

In other words, the writing of the screenplay gives shape and structure to the ideas that regulate the film's relationship with the source text. In the context of Bengal, I argue that a study of screenwriting reveals more than just the specific relationship between an adapted film and its literary source. With the arrival of talkies in Bengal, the increased narrative demands from cinema compelled studios to tap into the cultural capital of literary adaptations, which initially reinstated the *original* authorship of the writer and later upheld the director as an artist on a par with literary writers. Even a cursory look at film publicity material from the early years shows the differential treatment meted out to literary writers, from Tagore to Saratchandra, whose works were being adapted, and screenwriters whose work received little acknowledgement despite their intermedial labour. This literary culture, it has been argued, reached its peak in the two decades following India's independence in 1947 when "85 per cent of the approximately 900 Bengali films" made during this period were literary adaptations (Sen, 2017: 116).

The reformist discourse on cinema in critical writings from the 'lettered city' of elites frequently disapproved of the lack of medium specificity in literary adaptations, but a close reading of their discussion on best screenwriting practices will reveal a literary sensibility. I will show how the *bhadralok* desire to emulate the originality of Western screenwriting and achieve visual medium specificity was consistently undercut through references to regional literature as the repository of filmable stories. The intermediality of *boi*, although a source of annoyance for *bhadralok* critics, helps us historicize the role of screenwriting in this semantic collapse of otherwise distinctive forms, and also argues that the practice and discourse of screenwriting shaped the modernist encounter of film and literature in Bengal.[91] The following

[91] Madhuja Mukherjee (2017) has shown how early Bengali film studios, including the highbrow New Theatres, produced films of different popular genres, from mythologicals to comedies, and often

sections of the chapter excavate the hushed history of screenwriting in Bengali cinema by tracing film's literary liaisons in Bengal, from Rabindranath Tagore's lesser-known engagements with film to Satyajit Ray's practices of literary adaptation vis-à-vis his extant scripting documents.

**Tagore and Transmediality**

The scant scholarship on film adaptation in Indian cinema is dominated by both an authorial and auteurial predisposition. A seminal volume on Indian film adaptations focuses on Satyajit Ray's adaptations of Rabindranath Tagore's literary works – two international icons of Bengali culture (Asaduddin & Ghosh, 2012). While Satyajit Ray's scripts and sketches are relatively well known and will be discussed later in the chapter, Tagore's own attempts at editing and writing screenplays are largely unknown.

In 1920, the Bengali theatre actor-director Ahindra Choudhury developed a scenario of Tagore's drama *Bishorjon* (1890) during stage rehearsals of the same play. After unsuccessful attempts at pitching the story to India Films and Aurora Films, he finally met Rustomji Dhotiwala, the son-in-law of J. F. Madan, although he was not particularly keen on working with Madan Theatres.

> I told him, "I have a developed a scenario of Tagore's *Sacrifice*. I have come to inquire if you'd like to make the film". Had it been any other story, it's hard to tell what his reaction might have been. Maybe he would have said, "We have our stories and we like to work with them. We are not interested in new stories". But now his eyes lit up hearing it was

mixed these disparate genres in fuzzy ways in a single film. It is worth mentioning that the 'literary' was therefore in no way the only genre of early Bengali cinema, and even as a genre itself, it was "fractured and fissured" (Mukherjee, 2017: 129). My focus on screenwriting and authorship, however, makes Bengali literary adaptations more relevant than other genres.

> Tagore's story. So he exclaimed, "Really? Surely we will make it!".
>
> (Choudhury, 1962: 214)

Eventually the film could not be made because Tagore was away travelling across Europe. Ahindra Choudhury waited for several months to secure filming rights before giving up on the idea. Nearly a decade later, Madhu Bose also came up with the idea of adapting a suitable Tagore short story for the screen. In this instance, the decision to adapt the author's work had preceded the selection of the story. When he approached Madan Theatres with an English translation of Tagore's *Manbhanjan*, J. J. Madan, excited again at the prospect of garnering financial as well as cultural capital, asked him to meet Tagore to secure the rights. In April 1929, Tagore got involved in the scripting of Madhu Bose's *Giribala*, which was based on the story *Manbhanjan*. Tagore asked him to prepare a rough draft. Bose then extended the story and drafted a scenario which was meticulously supervised by Tagore. It was still the silent era in Indian cinema, and Tagore's written dialogues were used as intertitles. Tagore's authorial hand in the scenario made it a prized possession for the director: "After completing the scenario, we sought Gurudeb's advice. He made corrections in the scenario with much care and affection. I am still proudly protecting the pages of the scenario with poet's handwritten corrections" (Bose (n.d.), quoted in Ray, 1986: 5-6).

Authorial intervention was therefore sought, heeded and celebrated. Proximity to the author was necessary to venture on a work of adaptation, and the aura around the author figure was at its peak in the late 1920s. The film *Tapati* was an unfinished film by Dhiren Gangopadhyay in which Tagore not only co-wrote the scenario but also acted. In 1929, one of the film's posters in *Amritabazar Patrika* proclaimed: "DR. TAGORE AS MOVIE STAR" (Ray, 1986: 12). Internationally, too, the craze was visible. Tagore was asked to write a film scenario by UFA during his travels in Germany, and he composed a poem named *The Child*

(later self-translated into Bengali as *Shishutirtho*) that understandably never materialised into a film. Later, Tagore was asked to recite his scenario poem in front of an august gathering of Soviet filmmakers that included the likes of Eisenstein (Ray, 1986).

In 1930, Tagore met Pramathesh Barua in London and arranged for his visit to Paris where he could learn filming techniques (Mukhopadhyay, 1987: 26). In 1932, Tagore also christened and inaugurated the cinema hall Rupabani before the premiere of Barua's *Bengal 1983*. Pramathesh Barua's *Mukti* (1936) was the first film to use Tagore's musical compositions. While listening to Barua's script narration, music director Pankaj Mullick felt that the song '*Diner sheshe ghoomer deshe*' was well suited for a particular situation. When Mullick met the poet to secure his permission, Tagore suggested a few word changes to enhance the musical effect (Mukhopadhyay, 1987: 54). Tagore was regularly consulted on the cinematic adaptation of his works, and he willingly supervised scenario drafts to ensure faithful adaptations. Since rights and permissions had to be procured from the author himself, prospective directors with a scenario were required to meet him in person, which paved the way for the author's active collaboration and supervision. However, Tagore would often be quite disappointed with the final films:

> In the past, Rabindranath had become quite protective about the cinematic adaptation of his stories and also complained about directors not being able to grasp the meaning of his stories. Noticing his annoyance, the owner of New Theatres, Birendranath Sircar, requested Rabindranath to take a look at the scenarios of stories he had selected. Rabindranath did not agree to do so, but informed Sircar about his wish to direct a film himself in order to understand why his stories are not being adapted properly. (*Chitrajagat* 1976, quoted in Ray 1986: 23)

Upon this request, it was decided that Tagore would direct *Natir Puja* under the banner of New Theatres (See Fig 2). Tagore's tryst with filmmaking, however, was not a successful one: "The cameraman and the other artists became impatient. Being unskilled in the techniques of filmmaking, Tagore kept instructing everyone with the camera unmoved, like filmed theatre. Nobody could muster the courage to tell him that a film scene is supposed to be divided into different shots according to camera positions" (*Chitrajagat* 1976, quoted in Ray 1986: 23-24). It has been suggested that Tagore himself was very disappointed with his film. Although the film reviewers did not dare to overtly criticise his work, he had finally understood that "film was a different medium with a different set of qualities" (*Chitrajagat* 1976, quoted in Ray 24).


Figure 2: Tagore with members of New Theatres during the shooting of *Natir Puja*

Source: Media Lab, Jadavpur University

However, Tagore's engagement with the world of cinema was not over. His authorial presence was quite visible in the adaptations of his works. In one remarkable instance in 1938, Naresh

Chandra Mitra's adaptation of *Gora* featured a cameo by Tagore himself in which the director touches the author's feet to seek his blessings before the opening credits, which appear as the pages of the novel (See Fig 3). Notably, in 1936, Tagore also drafted an unfinished scenario in which he tried to combine a novel and a short story to create a film story (See Fig 4).

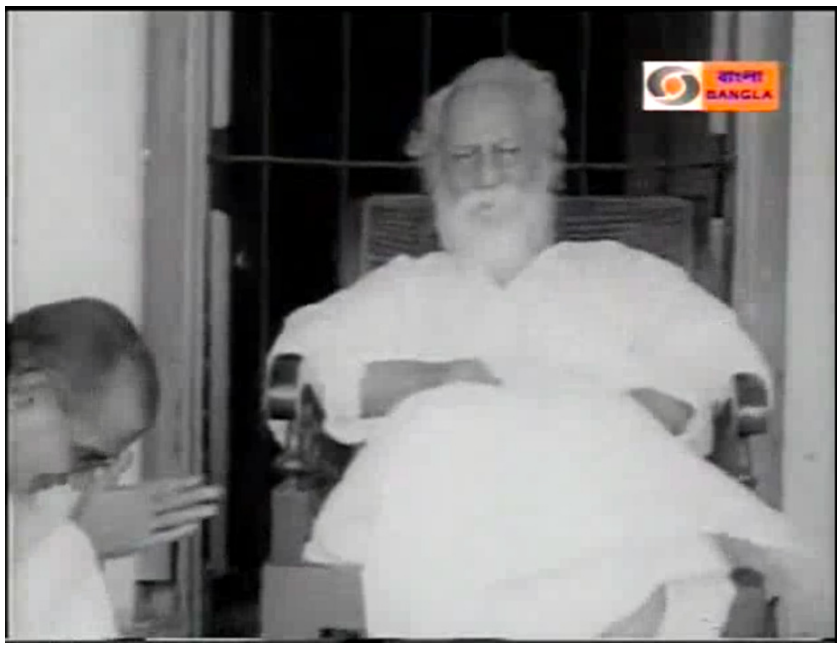


Fig 3: Tagore with director Naresh Mitra in a still from *Gora* (1938)

Source: Author's personal collection

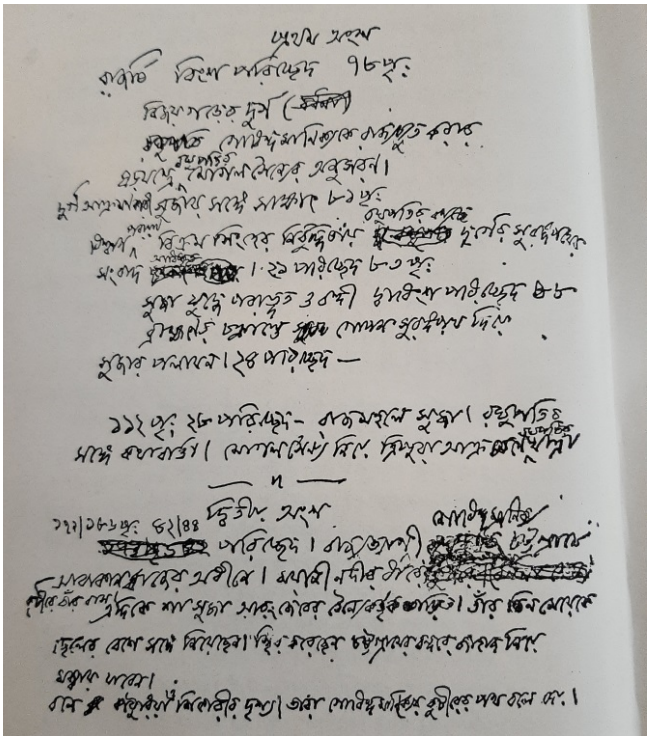

Fig 4: Tagore's attempt at scriptwriting, 1936

Courtesy: Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan

The combination of genres and forms was not an oddity in Tagore's case. If we take a look at his well-known doodles, we can notice his desire to exceed the textual form and create images that combine calligraphic art with poetic content (See Fig 5). Sukanta Chaudhuri (2010: 183) has described Tagore's doodles as non-semiotic "extensions of textuality" which were carved out of "rejected possibilities of form". These playful interactions between text and image, semiotics and aesthetics are more than simply personal idiosyncrasies. Tagore's doodles, like his screenwriting attempts, were forms of 'imagetext' (Mitchell, 1994: 89) which combined words and images in ways that challenged the medium specificity of both. Notably, his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, was one of the most influential Indian painters of the early twentieth century and also a distinguished writer of children's fiction. When Rabindranath Tagore himself started painting in 1928 at the age of 67, he claimed to have been "envious" of

his nephew's artistic abilities and "thoroughly convinced that my fate had refused me passport across the boundaries of letters" (Tagore (n.d.), quoted in Deepak, 1962: 70).

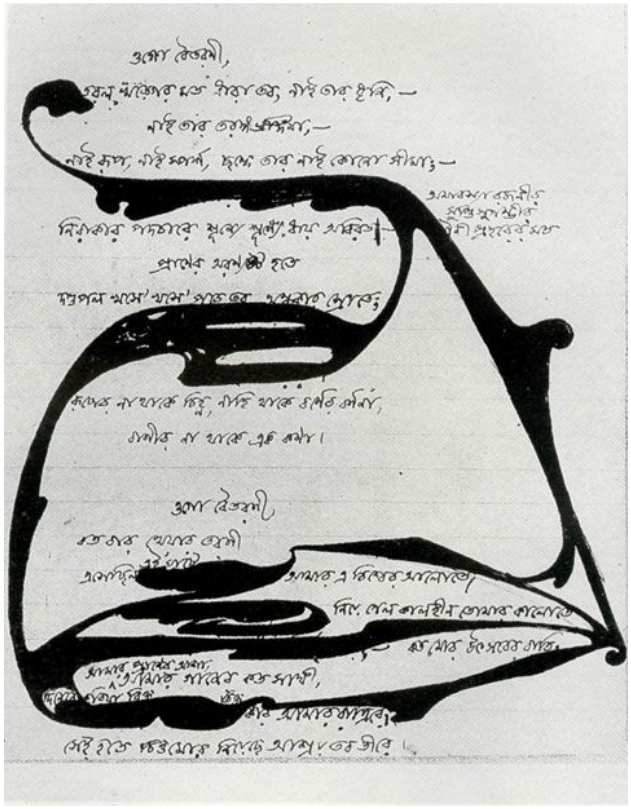

Figure 5: Tagore's doodle from the manuscript of *Purabi* (1924)

Source: Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan

It is important to bear in mind that in the context of colonial rule such aesthetic aspirations were not purely abstract concerns of form and medium.[92] The work of the Bengal School of Art, led by Abanindranath Tagore, was a revivalist movement that resisted the Westernisation of Indian art under the British Raj by 'modernizing' indigenous Mughal and Rajput traditions. As a new medium of images, cinema was bound to reproduce inward

[92] Screenwriting, like other forms of cultural production, can be linked to broader anticolonial struggles and projects of national and regional identity production (See Singh, 2008; Bhatia, 2010). However, due to the focus of this thesis, with a focus on the material practice on screenwriting and the possibility of its historiographic articulation (see p. 11 above), I have chosen not to delve into the film narratives that constituted the cultural products of screenwriting.

aspirations of 'indigenization' in sections of the upper crust of Bengali society. In the heyday of anticolonial and *swadeshi* sentiments, the notion of cinema as a foreign medium was not lost on reformist film critics. However, it was believed that local stories and subjectivities could indigenise the European medium, just as Bengali writers had successfully indigenized literary forms such as novels and short stories.[93]

> The fact that the seeds of our literary genres came from Europe is no longer embarrassing for us. We have planted and cultivated those seeds with our own imagination. We have repaid our debts to Europe with interest. If we are not equally ambitious about the art of cinema, then we won't be able to create something big… Of course, we have to learn the techniques of camerawork and processes of production from Europe. But merely imitating long shots and close ups will not create a Griffith in our lands. If a Griffith is ever born in our country, they should not share anything with the American Griffith. (Mitra, 2011 [1931]: 72)

According to the critic, filmic techniques were inescapably Euro-American and necessitated a great degree of imitation, but only the distinctive authorial style of a genius could create iconic Bengali filmmakers. From adapting Tagore to finding Griffith, the industrial project of making Bengali cinema often translated to the cultural desire of making cinema itself Bengali. In the following sections, we will see how the practice of screenwriting reflected this two-fold

[93] The urgency of such cultural projects under colonial rule has varied across different contexts. In the emergent field of indigenous media studies, Lea Sonza (2018) has referred to the Native American appropriation of Western media technologies and techniques as 'media activism': "the use of traditionally 'Western' media turned into indigenous media and used as tools of resistance and resurgence, is relevant within the framework of indigenous Nations' struggles for self-representation, self-determination and sovereignty." (15) In the context of Bengali cinema, however, the cultural assertion of film professionals and critics was not characterised by such radical anti-colonial fervour.

aspiration by: i) adapting Bengali literary stories for the new medium of talkies; and ii) invisibilising its textual traces to create new medium-specific author figures.

**Making Cinema Bengali**

The interwar years connected local film cultures in India with a global film culture, predominantly Hollywood (See Majumdar, 2009; Govil, 2015). Sharmistha Gooptu (2015 [2010]: 42) has shown how, from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, a local "film culture" emerged in Bengal comprising cultural commentators whose critical writings in film periodicals "broadened the scope of film practice". Manishita Dass (2016: 4) has also studied the rise of mass culture outside the 'lettered city' of film critics who persistently tried to reform Indian cinema and school the non-literate filmgoing masses. This *bhadralok* film culture extended prevailing ideas of Bengaliness from late nineteenth and early twentieth century to fashion Bengali cinema as a marker of cultural distinction and respond to a modern aspiration for internationalism. The split between mass audiences and elite critics fractured the filmic public sphere from the earliest years of Bengali cinema.

Tom Gunning's (1994) 'modernity thesis' of early cinema has focussed on new technological experiences of Western urban modernity, which only partially explains the emergence and experience of early film cultures in the Global South. Here I wish to draw on Miriam Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism, which she explored in two seminal essays separated by a decade. In the first essay, she discusses modernism vis-à-vis classical Hollywood cinema and argues that "Hollywood did not just circulate images and sounds; it produced and globalized a new sensorium; it constituted, or tried to constitute, new subjectivities and subjects" (Hansen, 1999: 71). Extending the Bordwellian emphasis on the narrative-cognitive aspects of Hollywood cinema, Hansen argues that "it was not

just *what* these films showed, what they brought into optical consciousness, as it were, but the way they opened up hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience, their ability to suggest a different organization of the daily world" (72). In the second essay, Hansen (2009: 300) elaborates her use of 'vernacular' "as the level of cultural circulation at which … uneven modernities connect, intersect, and compete, defined by a tension between, on the one hand, connotations of the everyday (the common and ordinary, routines of material production and reproduction) and, on the other, connotations of circulation (commerce, communication, migration, travel)".

Sudipta Kaviraj (2005) has made the case for a revisionist theory of modernity that can account for historical difference through its diverse trajectories across different parts of the world where different structural conditions pre-existed. In the context of South Asian cinemas, the dialectic of Western modernity and Indian tradition has long constituted the conceptual axis for scholars.[94] Miriam Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism, especially due to its focus on global early cinematic flows, helps me relocate adaptation practices in Bengal within cognitive structures and cultural logics of local literary readership and film viewership. Modernism here is not restricted to a set of avant-garde practices but has to be understood as a response to techno-cultural formations of early twentieth century modernity that spread far and beyond the West. One of them was the motion pictures, which elicited new sensory responses emblematic of industrial and colonial modernity. I argue that the vernacular modernist tension

[94] Indian popular cinema has been described as "Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare by the fate of traditions in contemporary life and arts" (Nandy, 1998: 7) and "an evolving, unabashedly hybrid cultural form that narrates the complicated intersection between tradition and modernity" (Mazumdar, 2007: xvii). Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1987: 54) has shown how this 'neo-traditionalism' of Indian cinema is "a kind of traditional modernity in lieu of modernity". Within the 'moral universe' of film diegesis, Rosie Thomas (1995: 172) has shown how archetypal figures of Mother and Villain as well as the moral negotiation of hero/heroine in popular Indian cinema construct "shifting notions of 'traditional modern' identities". Similarly, Madhava Prasad (1999: 107) has argued that treating the encounter of modernity and tradition in Hindi cinema as evidence of any actual social conflict would be misleading because "the construction of 'tradition' is part of the work of modernity".

between the global and the local in Bengali film culture can be mapped onto cinema's literary liaison in Bengal. While canonical Bengali literature, with translations available in various languages, was not 'local' in any technical sense of the word, I refer to Bengali literary adaptations as local practices to highlight a form of cultural assertion using a globally available technological form. In other words, cinema produced in Bengal had to be localised using Bengali literature assertively and appropriately.

My study of this cultural encounter as modernist, rather than modernizing, highlights the ironic discourse of medium specificity that tried to invisibilise the intermediality of '*boi*' as both technically and culturally deficient, despite its relevance for the high incidence of Bengali literary adaptations. Modernism in art represents the heightened awareness of art's medium, but it has also been argued that modernism's engagement with medium specificity is often overstated by critics. The recombination of multiple media, in practice as well as discourse, was not uncommon in the early twentieth century. Jesse Schotter (2018), for instance, has revealed a modernist media ecology by demonstrating how the metaphor of the hieroglyph helped bridge the divide between modernist writing and new media in the early twentieth century. In the context of Bengal, the bridges were more culturally assertive in the context of colonial rule and often personified through important Bengali author/auteur figures, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. Film studios and reformist critics in Bengal negotiated with the question of film authorship as the practice of screenwriting encountered Bengali literature as a visual field to create new ways of *seeing* a literary work and extracting its pictorial pleasures for the screen. It is revealing that Bengali film histories often began with how Madan Theatres, a film company owned by migrant Parsees, was not 'Bengali' enough:[95]

[95] Even in *Hiralal* (2021), a recent biopic of Hiralal Sen (1868-1917), who is considered by many Bengalis to be India's first filmmaker, J. F. Madan of Madan Theatres is portrayed as an antagonist who destroys Hiralal's entire life's work by burning down his film warehouse.

> Madan Company's bioscope pictures cannot exactly be called Bengali films. Although many of their actors-actresses, photographers and even directors are Bengali, the instructions about which pictures to make always come from the Parsee owners. This causes some difficulty, in terms of *rasa* (aesthetics). The Parsee owners of bioscope are not in touch with the heart and soul of Bengalis. (Mukhopadhyay, S. (2011) [1923]: 19, translation mine)

One of the earliest 'sincere' attempts at creating Bengali cinema was by the Tajmahal Company. It was an adaptation of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's *Aandhare Aalo* (1922), directed by Sisir Bhaduri and Naresh Mitra. Around the same time, the distinction made between *abolombone* (adaptation) and *tola chhobi* (picturisation) in film periodicals highlights how the medial distinctions between literature and film, as well as cognitive distinctions of readerly and viewerly appreciation, were still being worked out in the Bengali public sphere. A review of Naresh Mitra's silent adaptation of *Manbhanjan* (1923) stated:

> Those who came looking for Tagore's *Manbhanjan* in this photoplay were being slightly unfair. This is because Tajmahal Company had stated earlier that the film was only based (*abolombito*) on Tagore's *Manbhanjan*. They never said that Tagore's *Manbhanjan* had been picturised (*tola chhabi*). (*Bharati* 1923, quoted in Ray 1986: 22, translation mine)

During the late silent period, there were three more cinematic adaptations of Tagore's literary works. While the films have not survived, their reviews offer us some useful insight into the changing appreciation of adapted films. Madan Theatre's *Giribala* (1930) was again an

adaptation of *Manbhanjan* which found much praise in reviews. *Daliya* (1930), released in the same year, was criticised as a poor adaptation of Tagore's short story despite the big budget at the director's disposal. The screenwriter was criticised for wasting the story's '*shamanjoshyo*' (compatibility) for the medium of cinema. On the other hand, a review of *Noukadubi* (1932) criticised director Naresh Mitra for selecting an inappropriate story for adaptation: "*Noukadubi* is a good novel but it does not have adequate action for cinema" (*Shishir* 1932, quoted in Ray 1986: 74, translation mine). The slowness of Bengali life and its augmented psychological projection in Bengali novels was a concern for some critics. Cinema, a product of twentieth century urban modernity, necessitated narratives with more speed, shock and spectacle:

> While there is no need to start worrying about Bengali life already, Bengali novels do give us some cause for concern. The latter is mostly found lacking in pace… Novels which represent the slow and stagnant nature of life may qualify as good novels but they remain too still for motion pictures. (Sen 2011 [1930]: 49-50, translation mine)

An adapted screenplay would therefore require "peeling off the colourful coating of cognition in order to endow the story with more speed and suspense" even if those aspects were indispensable to the literariness of the novel (Sengupta (2011 [1932]: 73). In a pithy prescription of visual creativity bolstered by motion, the film critic Narendra Dev emphasised that scenario writers have to make the medium of images the *vahan* (vehicle) of their imagination: "Those who want to master the writing of screenplay, their imagination should be driven by *chhobi* (image) – only image! They should think in images, write in images, and express their complex imagination in images" (Dev, 2011 [1930]: 46). For *bhadralok* critics, cinema's specificity lay in its understanding as a medium of images, and arguably its literary

liaisons in Bengal were also informed partly by an understanding of literature as an inspiration for visual action.

Literary adaptations were sometimes defended as a temporary phase. Some critics believed that new scenario writers would emerge who would create stories independent of literature and more suited for cinematic storytelling. Till then, however, film adaptations would continue to entertain readers. In a sense, these early adaptations functioned as 'attractions' (Gunning, 1990) for readers: "In the near future, one hopes we will have such film writers. However, till that day arrives, what is the harm in trying to bring these popular classics to life? Should these films be considered inferior by *viewers* just because they entertain the *readers*?" (Sen, 2011 [1930]: 49, emphasis mine). Such an understanding of adaptations as readerly attractions continued to limit the target audience to *bhadralok* readers. A couple of decades later, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, a well-known Bengali writer who also wrote for films, complicated this category of a readerly audience arguing that such viewers were in fact very few in number. The original film story, for him, was a tool to ensure mass viewership while adaptation was merely one of the extended pleasures of reading:

> Literary stories can only be grasped by a small society of readers (*pathak*). Cinematic stories, on the other hand, were appreciated by a far greater number of viewers *(darshak)*. In reality, it has been observed that in both urban and suburban areas, far from reading literary stories, a sizeable section of such viewers are unfortunately illiterate and lack basic knowledge of the alphabet… Cinematic stories don't require one to be educated. Only the eyes suffice. (Bandyopadhyay 2011 [1953]: 42)

Making Bengali cinema and making cinema Bengali were largely a *bhadralok* project. The insightful distinction between the *bhadralok* eye which could 'read' and the non-literate eye

which could 'see' characterises the fractured sensorium of filmic modernity in colonial Bengal. Though higher than the rest of India, undivided Bengal's literacy rate at the beginning of the twentieth century was still less than 10%. All eyes could access narrative cinema but not all eyes could recognise literary adaptations. On the other hand, viewership far and wide ensured that viewers did consume literary narratives, whether knowingly or unknowingly. The 'unschooled' intermediality of *boi* may have emerged from viewerly encounters with literature outside the 'lettered city' as the term shows a lack of interest in the elite distinctions of reading and seeing, and becomes a way of dismissing medium specificity. As we saw in Chidananda Dasgupta's *Boi Noi, Chhobi* (Not Book, Film), the *bhadralok* disdain for the intermediality of *boi* stems from the cultural privilege to distinguish between media forms. In the next section, we will see how medium specificity was not only a staple of elite reformist discourses, but also a conscious part of crediting practices in Bengali film studios which tried to construct new author figures for cinema.

## ***Chitranatya*** **Credits**

Unlike the English credits commonly used in Hindi films, Bengali films have always displayed credits in the regional language as part of a local taxonomy of film practices. The term '*chitranatya*' continues to be used instead of scenario or screenplay and '*chitranatyakar*' in lieu of scriptwriter or screenplay writer. Vernacular terminologies offer an insight into how global practices were imagined, interpreted and performed locally. The term '*chitranatya*' literally translates to 'screenplay', a term which, interestingly, screenwriting historians have suggested was not used in Hollywood until around 1940. The term 'screen play' was used as early as 1916 to refer to the film rather than the script, and while it was sometimes used for

written material as well in the subsequent decades, the terminology remained largely fluid. Much confusion has been elicited by "the history of screen texts – in all their permutations as scenarios, scripts, photodramas and screenplays" (Loughney, 1997: 278, qtd. in Maras, 2009: 356). A similar confusion can be noticed in Bengal as well in the early 1920s. In essays written in 1923, Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay uses the English term 'scenario' for the pre-cinematic written text and '*chitranatya*' for films, but in his essays written in 1925, he instead uses the terms 'bioscope' and '*chhobi*' (image) to refer to the film. By the end of the decade, however, the term *chitranatya* became consolidated in Bengali filmic discourse to consistently refer to the written document. Narendra Dev (2011 [1930]) referred to the '*noksha'* (blueprint) of the silent film as *chitranatya* and distanced it from its etymological roots in drama (*natya*): "Drama has a huge place in the canon of literature but *chitranatya* is not to be included in it because *chitranatya* is not literature" (Dev, 2011 [1930]: 46).

In filmic practice, however, the term '*chitranatya*' appeared a little later, and not too consistently. Some of the earliest Bengali talkies, for example, do not mention the *chitranatyakar* (screenwriter) in credits. *Chandidas* (1932) credits Debaki Kumar Bose as the *parichalak* (director) and *kathashilpi* (dialogue writer), while *Krishnakanter Will* (1932) only mentions the director after opening with an image of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay on whose eponymous novel the film was based. *Kalanka Bhanjan* (1933) initially uses credits in English, attributing the 'story' and 'direction' to Amar Chowdhury and later combines both credits into one Bengali term - '*rachito*' (written/created). The omission of the term *chitranatya* in film credits of early talkies points to a conventionalised understanding of screenwriting as the director's craft. In talkies from the latter half of the decade, *chitranatya* is sometimes credited separately but almost always attributed to the *parichalak* (director).

New Theatres (NT) and Shree Bharat Lakhsmi Pictures (SBLP) produced the lion's share of films during this period, and their crediting practices often revealed internal

inconsistencies. A comparison of two NT films released in the same year is insightful. While *Bidyapati* (1937) mentions *chitranatya* and *parichalana* separately and attributes both to Debaki Kumar Bose, *Mukti* (1937) only mentions Pramathesh Barua as *parichalak*. Similarly, in the case of SBLP films such as *Alibaba* (1937) and *Parashmani* (1939), the former mentions only the *parichalak* Modhu Bose while the latter credits Prafulla Roy for both *chitranatya* and *parichalana*. After crediting himself for the *chitranatya* in *Adhikar* (1938), Pramathesh Barua again avoids the term in the credits for *Rajat Jayanti* (1939). Interestingly, he was sketched in the credits as Lord Shiva, one of the supreme Hindu deities who creates and controls the universe (See Fig 6). In *Shesh Uttar* (1942), the credit for *chitranatya* is again missing for Barua. Such inconsistent crediting practices within the same film studio and for the same writer-director arguably produced two kinds of creative assertions which are indicative of the same authorial desire. Whether by explicitly attributing the composition of the screenplay to the director or by implicitly understanding the director to be the screenwriter through a frequent omission of the term *chitranatya* in credits, an image of the *parichalak* (director) as the central creative figure in film production was introduced and consolidated. Moinak Biswas (1999: 8) has argued that it was the question of authorship in early Bengali cinema that produced the "metonymic logic" of terms such as *chitranatyakar* and *parichalak*: "If the screenplay-writer is often seen as the filmic incarnation of the literary practitioner, the literary liaison seemed to play a major role in defining the directorial function in the film text".

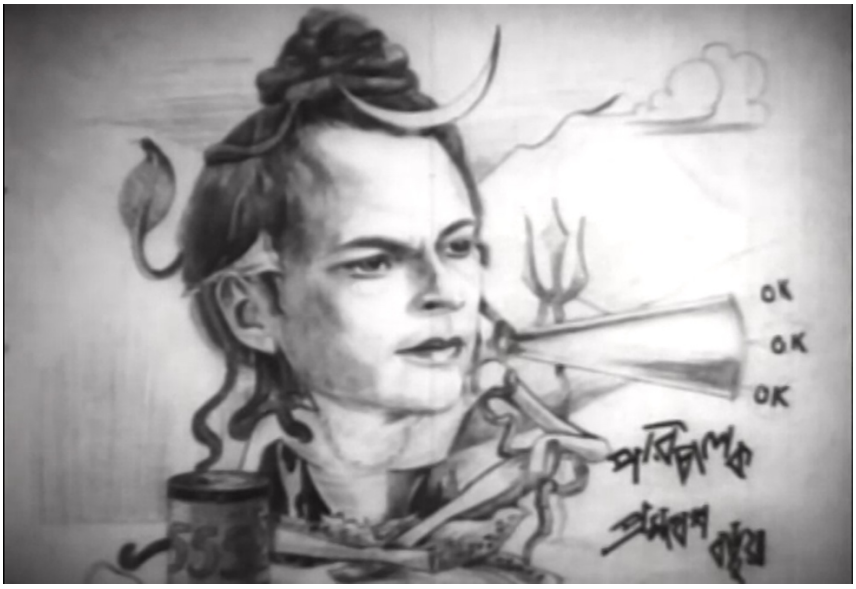


Fig 6: Pramathesh Barua's sketch as Lord Shiva in *Rajatjayanti* (1939) opening credits

Over the 1940s and 1950s, the use of the term *chitranatya* became more common in film credits, yet still mostly attributed to the director. Interestingly, Premendra Mitra, a well-known literary figure who also made films, avoided the term *chitranatya* completely in the credits of his films. As evident from the credits in Mitra's films *Samadhan* (1943), *Kalo Chhaya* (1948) and *Hanabari* (1952), there was no mention of the screenplay separately. Instead Mitra used the term '*rachana*' (composition) alongside '*parichalana*' (direction) to indicate that he created the story of his films. In his final film *Chupi Chupi Ashey* (1960), the story was attributed to him even though it was based on Agatha Christie's play *The Mousetrap*. Premendra Mitra's preference for an abstract and generic term like *rachana* in lieu of the more explicit *chitranatya* betrays a creative desire to transcend medium specificity. Earlier, as a film critic, however, Mitra had stressed the difference between scenarios and literary stories in unequivocal terms, expressing his deep dissatisfaction about film adaptations of that period:

> Good literary authors do not write scenarios in any country. But those who write scenarios have an understanding of the compatibility of stories for cinema. In Bengal, it is the opposite. It is difficult and embarrassing to see

> how our scenario writers have distorted the works of Rabindranath and Bankim. These scenario writers probably think that the film story can be just another version of any published story. They try to translate literary stories and novels into film stories like incompetent clerks. (Mitra, 2011 [1931]: 71, translation mine)

The disjunction between Mitra's film practice and discourse becomes more evident through such contradictory attitudes towards scenario writing. In his film criticism, laments and complaints about a lack of specialisation in screenwriting frame a rhetoric of deficiency, while in his practice, the category of screenwriting was eschewed wholesale in credits to promote authorial hierarchies of creative production.

Due to the collaborative nature of filmmaking, film critics and scholars have long struggled to locate the author of a film. The studio proprietor, film star, screenwriter and director have all been attributed with a marketable authorial style across different periods of film history. Ideas of authorship in the discipline of film studies have historically been informed by auteur theory, *Schreiber* theory and collaborative labour. The apparent absence of a singular organizing principle in the collaborative practice of film production was addressed by French critics in the late 1950s through auteur theory, which has been lampooned in more recent years through the provocative assertion in '*schreiber* theory' that the work of the *schreiber* (writer) is a better indicator of the quality and character of a film (See Kipen, 2006). This theoretical contestation has its material roots in the detailed division of labour in Hollywood film studios which operated along an intensely divisive assembly line model. In the context of Hindi cinema from the mid-1930s to 1950s, questions of film authorship have had to address the rich history of writer-director partnerships formed under studios that operated like "family units"

(Vasudevan, 1991: 183-184; Prasad, 1998: 39-40).[96] In Bengali cinema during the same period, as we have seen, credits attribute both screenwriting and direction to the *parichalak*, sometimes replacing the screenwriting credit with a literary term such as '*rachana*'. In this context, it is therefore unsurprising for Premendra Mitra to assert the significance of the scenario in his article and later avoid the term completely in the credits of his own films. The invisibilisation of screenwriting in credits went hand in hand with the deification of original writers. Eminent literary writers were regularly credited in the films, quite often at the very outset. Tagore's songs were always listed in the credits with his name preceded by the honorific epithets *kabiguru* (master poet) and *vishwakabi* (world poet). Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay were sometimes anachronistically credited as the creator of these works. The former was referred to '*rishi*' (sage) in the credits of *Anandamath* (1951), while the latter was variously referred to as '*kathasamrat*' (emperor of words), '*amar kathashilpi*' (immortal author), '*aparajeyo kathashilpi*' (undefeatable author) in *Kashinath* (1943), *Baikunther Will* (1950), and *Badadidi* (1957) respectively. Remarkably, *Baikunther Will* (1950) began with a note seeking forgiveness from the dead author Bankimchandra's *atma* (soul) as well as the Bengali audience if the adaptation was not deemed reasonably faithful! (See Fig 7)

[96] Some of these successful writer-director partnerships include Niranjan Pal – Franz Osten, Kamal Amrohi – Sohrab Modi, Nabendu Ghosh – Bimal Roy, K.A. Abbas – Raj Kapoor, Abrar Alvi – Guru Dutt, Pandit Mukhram Sharma – B. R. Chopra.

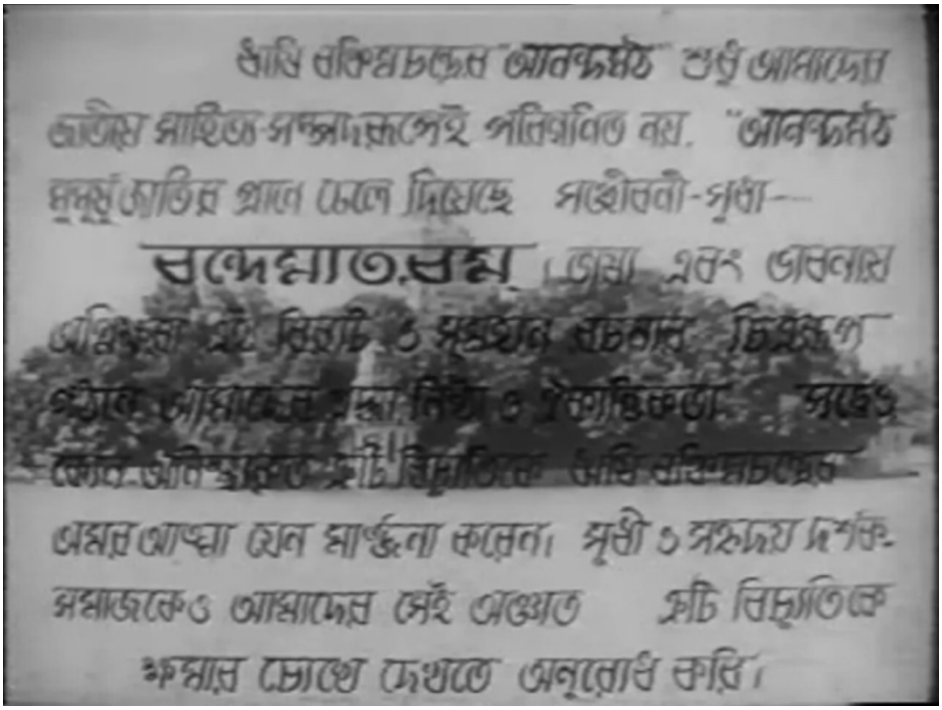


Fig 7: Disclaimer about fidelity from *Baikunther Will* (1950)

Arguably, the veneration for writers of original literary stories was extended to film directors who also had to be the sole creators of their works. Both these Romantic forms of authorship led to marketing strategies that obscured the *chitranatya* in Bengali film credits. As stated earlier and also evident from above examples of authorial attribution, the discourse of screenwriting in Bengal was inseparable from literary adaptations. A good film scenario often automatically implied that it was able to achieve a creative independence from its source literary text. Short stories, plays and novels represented an established literary culture with highbrow associations, but at a practical level, they also constituted a rich repository of narrative material. Cinema in Bengal drew on both to evolve as an indigenised medium, often resulting in contradictory forms of screenwriting discourse and practice. While reformist film discourses presented screenwriting as a necessary technique meant for specialists, Barua or Mitra's refusal to credit screenwriting as a specialised film practice indicates cultural and commercial anxieties around individual authorship.

**Literature as Content**

Before joining New Theatres, Pramathesh Barua had first set up his own studio, Barua Film Unit, in 1931. With the coming of talkies and closing of silent film studios in the same year, Barua's independent studio received a windfall of talent from British Dominion Films. In a letter to Debaki Kumar Bose who was a part of the exodus, he discussed the development and acquisition of film stories:

> My idea is to produce one costume and one social play now. I am now waiting for your book and also one of mine and I shall get them sequestered when I am in England or Germany. In the meantime please try to see Sarat Babu and ask him for the film right of *Grihadaha* and *Biraj Bou*. See if he agrees and if the terms are reasonable. (Barua, 1931, quoted in N. Mukhopadhyay, 1987: 28)

The letter is insightful for two reasons. Firstly, Barua plainly refers to the film story or script as 'book', in keeping with the confusion elicited by the Bengali homograph '*boi*'. Secondly, it points to a practical need for filmable stories to begin film production. After the acquisition of film personnel and equipment, film stories constituted the necessary creative raw material for the embryonic film studio. In contemporary parlance, especially with the advent of online streaming platforms, this diegetic raw material is often referred to as 'content'. The veteran screenwriter Shama Zaidi told me how Netflix was like a 'library' for her from where one could pick and choose from a wide range of films instead of going to single-screen or multiplex theatres (S. Zaidi, personal communication, January 2, 2019). The algorithmic recommendation engines of streaming platforms today require more 'content' to maximize

their viewerships, which in conventional terms translates to more stories for production and more films for streaming. In early Bengali cinema, the 'library' of Bengali literature served as a similar repository from where producers and directors would choose popular and filmable stories.

This section shows how pedagogic and prescriptive writings on cinema in Bengal regularly outlined the best practices for adapting literary content. In Narendra Dev's manual-like book *Cinema* (1935), the discussion on screenwriting brings out a similar understanding of filmable content. For Dev, *katha-chitra* ('cine-fiction or story film') is one of several genres of cinema that is based on "an eminent literary work or a story or novel especially written for the screen" (69). *Katha-chitra* or narrative cinema is distinguished from (i) *abimisra-chitra* ('abstract or absolute film') which constitutes purely non-narrative cinema, and (ii) *kavya-chitra* ('cine-poem or ballad film') and *natya-chitra* ('cine-drama or play film'), which bring alive the pleasures of poetry and drama on the celluloid. Differences of medium and form are recognised and collapsed simultaneously in Dev's typology as cinema is defined through representational modes (narrative and abstract) as well as literary genres (poetry and drama). Additionally, Dev's definition of narrative cinema refers to literary works as well as any story written for the screen. Whether literary or non-literary, stories constituted content for narrative cinema, and therefore no separate category of literary adaptation was required in Dev's taxonomy. Dev praised Debaki Bose's film *Aparadhi* (1931) for its original story, which had allowed the director to work with a degree of creative freedom often not offered by literary texts. However, he acknowledged that every director could not be as adept at writing original stories and would benefit from a literary collaboration:

> When the director is knowledgeable about cinema but not adept at composing literary work, s/he has to rely on a few good writers to develop the scenario. . . Even if s/he embarks on filming a famous work by a

> literary author, s/he will be unsuccessful without the support of good writers. No one needs to be reminded of how poorly Saratchandra's masterpiece *Srikanta* was adapted for the screen. In the earliest years of Bengali cinema, Rabindranath's *Manbhanjan* suffered the same fate. (72)

According to Dev, the need for writing original film stories stemmed from the increased awareness of cinema as a medium of images. Oddly again, like Chidananda Dasgupta's deployment of a Bankimchandra passage mentioned earlier, Dev demonstrated good screenwriting techniques by adapting Saratchandra's *Kashinath,* perhaps to take advantage of the readers' familiarity with the popular story. What followed was a breakdown of the literary story into a synopsis, list of characters, scenario and shooting script. The synopsis contained the important narrative components of the source material, while the scenario rationalised the story material according to filmable actions and situations, and the shooting script spatialized them as scenes with locations. In another prescriptive account, the visual *biboron* (description) of each scene was required to include details about the geography, sets, property, costume, time and light action (Raychaudhuri, 2011 [1932]: 108). The process of adaptation also necessitated such techniques to represent the interiority of characters: "In order to bring out the psychological states of characters, the scenario writer will have to develop a range of situations where their actions will help us look into their minds" (Dev, 1935: 86).

Even though talkies had arrived in Bengal, the understanding of cinema as a primarily visual medium continued to dominate film criticism well into the late 1930s. The literary novel was even more intensely deployed as a counterpoint: "The novel is all about words, the film is all about action" (Sengupta, 2011 [1932]: 73). Narendra Dev, too, strongly advocated minimum use of dialogue to compose a film story as he stressed the centrality of images in cinema. He suggested that his sample scenario, though originally intended for a silent film, could also be

used to make a talkie with a few minor modifications. He recommended the removal of some redundant scenes, and also went on to claim that since Saratchandra's literary works were a treasure trove of conversational content: "the scenario writer does not need to create dialogue from scratch; everything can be sourced from the book" (85). While early theatrical dialogue scripts offered dramatic characterisation, a novelistic script offering dialogue-driven characterisation would seamlessly ensure a broader exploration of character construction in cinema through accent, dialect and register. Satyajit Ray made a similar claim about Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's use of dialogue and how it could be used verbatim for adaptation:

> If any film-scriptwriter feels the need of training from film-dialogue, I can unhesitatingly name one litterateur and he is no other than the late Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay. In the domain of composing the film-script, he surpasses all… The dialogue is so befitting and the characters are so revealing that even if the author did not describe the appearance of a character, simply by virtue of the dialogue the character manifests itself before our eyes. (Ray, 1997: 78)

The direct borrowing of dialogues from original works implied that screenwriting in adaptation was broadly a process of extracting the literary work's visual action and diegetic information. The Barthesian distinction between indispensable story elements (major cardinal functions) and less important elements (catalysers) in any narrative has been deployed by film adaptation scholars to distinguish between the transferable and non-transferable elements of literary sources (McFarlane, 1996: 201). These distinctions were discussed and dissected in diverse

ways by Euro-American film directors and critics as well.[97] Dev participated in such contemporaneous debates in world cinema by demonstrating the intermedial process of literary adaptation as generally one of careful selection and modification of visualizable content, and occasionally, as in the case of dialogues, of direct borrowing. After stressing the importance of being familiar with different cinematographic techniques to develop a suitable story for *mookhor* (talkie) cinema, he incongruously provided an example of how to portray domestic poverty cinematically without any use of speech:

> Fade-in, first scene – (long shot): Kitchen door closed. Here a description of the kitchen should follow according to the story structure (treatment) – for example, the oven is without fire. There is no wood or coal. There is a scarcity of rice, oil and salt. No vegetables either. A cat is shown roaming around and crying in search of food in the empty utensils. – (Insert a close up shot of an empty pot) - Suddenly the housewife enters the kitchen (Medium long shot). (92)

The privileging of *mook* (silent) screenwriting techniques and the persistence of ocular-centrism in Bengali discourses on cinema complicate the perception of talkies as a new medium of cinematic storytelling. No ruptures were revealed, and no losses were lamented.

[97] For instance, Andre Bazin and Francois Truffaut discussed the French production *Devil in the Flesh* (1947), an adaptation of the eponymous 1923 French novel by Raymond Radiguet, in strikingly different ways. The novel's central theme of conjugal fidelity in times of war also spawned Italian and Australian adaptations later in the 1980s. The premise of a married woman's affair while her husband was away fighting in a war had scandalized many a readers during its time. Both the screenwriters were associated with the 'tradition of quality' in French cinema which privileged literary works as cinematic sources. Bazin (2000 [1948]: 25) wrote that though the screenwriters of the 1947 adaptation, Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, "have succeeded in transforming the absolute amoralism of the original into an almost too decipherable moral code, the public has been reluctant to accept the film". For Truffaut, the translative mode of seeking equivalences was seen as incompetence on part of the screenwriters who fail to be faithful to the literary text due to their unawareness of cinematographic practices: "The touchstone of adaptation as practised by Aurenche and Bost is the so-called process of equivalence… I am by no means convinced that a novel can contain unfilmable scenes, and even less so that scenes decreed to be unfilmable are unfilmable by any director" (Truffaut, 1954: 234).

Instead, commentators variously described the talkies as a prosthetic or a predictable return to performance arts.[98] For many critics, the advent of sound was at best a supplement to cinema's photographic realism, which ensured a pedagogic continuity with silent scriptwriting techniques that eschewed any emphasis on speech. Narayan Gangapadhyay (2011 [1953]) wrote that developing a scenario entailed the creation of 'situations' or dramatic moments: "All stories have situations. But a cinematic situation is slightly different and has a distinctive meaning. From exposition to crisis and climax, the situation controls every step of the narrative. The real purpose of the scenario and the film lies in the appropriate expression of such situations" (46). However, these situations were not supposed to turn into 'formula' for producers and gain an inordinate degree of artificiality. Gangopadhyay argued that cinematic situations should reflect real life and not become self-referential: "Only when real life situations are projected on the screen, Bengali cinema will be able to progress" (49). Discussions on best practices of screenwriting for Bengali cinema were inevitably about the best ways to adapt Bengali *literature* for the film medium in order to not only enhance the aesthetic quality of regional films but also indigenise the medium.

Earlier in the thesis, I had argued that material practices of early screenwriting in India did not usually translate to archival practices, which led to their invisibilisation in film history. In the context of Bengal, the practice of screenwriting is additionally obfuscated by cinema's literary roots in the region. The reformist strain in the writings of *bhadralok* film critics combined concerns of cultural and medium specificity in ways that continued to define screenwriting as a post-literary practice rather than a non-literary one, despite their puritanical

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[98] The terms *mook* (mute) and *mookhor* (talkative) were used regularly to refer to silent and talkie cinema respectively. Narendra Dev (2011 [1930]: 46) compared silent actors' performances with sign language used by deaf-mute people (*haba-boba*). The eminent Bengali artist Abanindranath Tagore (2011 [1931]: 62) claimed that the talkie was not a Western import since the 'idea' behind it predated its invention. Using the example of ventriloquism in puppet shows and musical performances in *jatra* (folk theatre), he argued that the talkie was only a return to the origins of performance art.

emphasis on differences between the abstract categories of cinema and literature. The material practice of screenwriting kept returning filmmakers as well as critics to Bengali literature, the predominant narrative resource for cinematic content in the first half of the twentieth century. Under colonial modernity, medium specificity was seemingly desired by the elite *bhadralok* but also subliminally contested through cultural specificity. The reformist calls for literary indigenisation and medium specificity were evidently contradictory, and unintentionally participated in the intermedial play of *boi*. However, the discourse of medium specificity stressed the visuality of cinema, and Bengali critics and filmmakers envisioned literary works as a visual resource through their cultural imagination and individual creativity.

In the latter half of the 1950s, a distinctive auteurist practice of screenwriting emerged in Bengali cinema, albeit again in relation to literary adaptations. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to Satyajit Ray's screenwriting practices both as an extension and a departure from pre-existing constructs of film authorship in Bengal. Through a study of his extant scripting documents, I show how Ray's image as an auteur was shaped by his technical ability to micro-manage different production processes as well as his cultural standing as a filmmaker who could authoritatively extract the visual content of his literary sources.

**The Auteur's *Kheror Khata***

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) is often considered a watershed in Indian film history, establishing a clear divide between art and popular cinema, regional and national cinema, and traditional and modern forms of filmmaking. In 1952, the first International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Bombay introduced Indian filmmakers, critics and audiences to a number of neorealist films, and it is understood to have created this rupture with existing Indian

filmmaking traditions.[99] Moinak Biswas (2007) has argued, however, that neorealist principles were not prescriptive in their influence on Indian filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray in Bengal and Bimal Roy in Bombay. Instead, neorealism helped them overcome a number of formal restrictions that Indian cinema faced in its aesthetic production of the 'social' genre, whose local material was "not only its reality lying outdoors, or its people living out there, but also its novels, poems, and pictures" (Biswas, 2007: 89). In a similar vein, Satyajit Ray has also suggested that elements of neorealism were already present in the Bengali novel whose "rambling quality … contained a clue to the feel of authenticity" (Ray, 1997: 31). With an exposure to neorealist principles of filmmaking, the slowness of the Bengali novel was no longer seen as incompatible with the medium of cinema: "The real basis of the film *Pather Panchali* is not a neo-realistic style… The novel by Bibhutibhusan is the source from which the style of my film has emanated straightway" (Ray, 1997: 119).

Before *Kanchenjungha* (1962), all of Ray's first seven feature films from 1955 to 1961 were adapted from literary sources. The Apu trilogy (1955-59) was based on two Bengali novels, *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. After the trilogy, Ray chose not to adapt novelistic material and became "convinced that the long short story is ideally suited to the two-hour span of the non-commercial film". (Ray, 1994 [1966]: 64) *Parash Pathar* (1958), *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Devi* (1960) were adapted from popular short stories of the same name by Rajsekhar Basu, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay and Provatkumar Mukhopadhyay respectively. Ray's anthology film *Teen Kanya* (1961) was also based on three short stories by Rabindranath Tagore. Ray's participation in the prevailing Bengali film culture of literary adaptations owed much to his autodidactic foundations in scenario writing. In his younger years, Ray had acquired "a new hardcover copy of John Gassner and Dudley Nichols' 20 Best

[99] Italian neorealism of the 1940s-50s was a national cinema movement in the wake of World War II that privileged the use of real locations, non-professional actors and working-class stories.

Film Plays" (1994: 18), which introduced him to the craft of screenwriting and initiated his self-training. Interestingly, most of his amateur scenarios were based on literary sources:

> Usually I would take a story or novel which had been announced as under production. I would write my own treatment and compare it with the result on the screen. I would even go to the length of preparing a second version which I surmised would be a better one compared to the version on the screen. (18)

For Ray, the composition of film scenarios naturally became a process of adapting literary works, and his early films were arguably an extension of his autodidacticism. Years later, Ray defined scriptwriting essentially as "a process of criticism of the original" wherein literary plots and characters inevitably undergo substantial changes for adaptation (Ray, 1992, qtd. in Dasgupta, T., 2015: 44). This concluding section will show how the idea of a literary story as diegetic and visual raw material, in lieu of a sacrosanct understanding of source texts, finds its fullest expression in Ray's screenwriting practices. Literary stories were conducive to making films, but fidelity was not the measure of a good script, and Ray expressed great disdain for "purists who rage at departure from the original" (Ray, 1994 [1966]: 64). Nonetheless, his adaptations were often the subject of criticism among such purists, who were mainly Bengali film and literary critics. One such critic, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, wrote in *The Statesman* that Ray's genius lay mainly in recognising that *Pather Panchali* was "a book produced by the eye" (Chaudhuri, 1958, qtd. in Basu & Dasgupta, 1992: 1), and therefore more credit was due to the novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. Ray pointed out in his response that no translation of the novel and no critical appraisement of its author had existed in the English language prior to his adaptation, further adding that "a novel – however 'visual' – can never be a film scenario" (Ray, 1958, qtd. in Basu & Dasgupta, 1992: 3). Ray admitted that his scenario benefitted considerably from the novel's family nucleus, character interplay, one-year time

span, pictorial and emotional contrasts, countryside setting, and its "two natural halves of the story culminating in two poignant deaths" (Ray, 1994 [1957]: 33). However, a great deal of "pruning and reshaping" (33) had still been required to adapt *Pather Panchali* into a film scenario. Interestingly, Ray claimed that "there was never a fully developed screenplay" and he worked with "only a sheaf of notes and sketches" (Ray, 1997: 30). It took three years for Ray and his crew to complete the shooting. The delays in the film's production due to a lack of financing were arguably intensified by the absence of a more detailed filming plan, and after *Pather Panchali*, Ray soon realised that this was not an ideal practice:[100]

> The experience after the first film told me that it would be better to have a proper script ready. With that in view, I bought a fat red cloth-bound book, the kind that is normally used to keep accounts, a practice going back several hundred years. They are called 'kheror khata' and they are meant to last. (Ray, 1997: 95-96)

Most of these *kheror khatas* are fortuitously extant, though only accessible as scanned electronic copies through Ray's family members and personal collectors. Here I offer an analysis of the *kheror khatas* used to develop the scenarios of *Aparajito* (1956), *Parash Pathar* (1958), *Jalsaghar* (1958) and *Apur Sansar* (1959). A *kheror khata* is a traditional ledger book manually bound in red cloth, used by traders in Bengal since the 18th century. Although computerised forms of accounting have become more prevalent now, many traders continue to auspiciously start the first day of the Bengali year (*poila baisakh*) with a new *kheror khata*. Ray's conscious use of the *kheror khata*, a traditional recordkeeping tool, to develop film

[100] In a later account, Ray argued that it was no longer possible to shoot 'off the cuff' without a film script like Griffith. Film production had to undergo a process of systematization for economic reasons, and the script was a necessary aid for planning. "Without it, or even with an inadequate script, there is bound to be fumbling and wastage in shooting" (Ray, 2011 [1960]: 23).

scenarios is testament to an archival desire for his creative work, which can be read as an extension of his auteurial status.[101] I have argued earlier in this thesis that screenwriting in early Bombay cinema was largely an ephemeral practice with little archival aspiration, and much of early Bengali screenwriting in the 1930s and 1940s was characterised by a similar archival indifference. While Ray's distinctive practices constitute an exception which only proves the norm, the extant body of *kheror khatas* tell us a great deal about his pre-production practices. At the same time, as I will argue later, the *kheror khata* as handicraft should not be mistaken as an incarnation of screenwriting modernity in the form of 'corporate' continuity scripts. Ray's handwritten scripting practices represent a continuity with the *munshi*'s non-typographic work as well as a departure from his archival apathy.

Ray's early practices of screenwriting were intermedial processes of adaptation wherein the original stories are abridged, extended and modified significantly to meet the dramatic requirements of the audio-visual medium. At first glance, his *kheror khatas* resemble large personal diaries with illegible notes, quick sketches, playful doodles and rough budgetary calculations. On closer inspection, these extant scripting documents tell us a great deal about story development, characterisation, visualisation, scheduling and editing processes. All the four *kheror khatas* begin with a synopsis of the original story, usually written in English and in the style of a short story. In the subsequent pages, Ray's next step was to develop a sequential script draft with dialogues, camera instructions and descriptive action. In the *Jalsaghar* notes, the film story is clearly divided into 8 sequences. Ray also outlined his shooting plans in standard spatial and temporal formats. For *Apur Sansar*, he drafted a full 59-day schedule of shooting with studio and outdoor location sequences listed

[101] Satyajit Ray has left behind a substantial paper archive that comprises of manuscripts, posters, set and costume designs, drawings and sketches, musical notations, and advertisement illustrations. Much of this material has been restored, archived and digitised by the Society for the Preservation of Satyajit Ray Films founded in 1993.

separately. Its *kheror khata* also included details of location, characters, sound/silent sequences, time of the day and duration of shooting. In *Jalsaghar*, the shooting schedule listed 13 locations and sets, subdivided into scene, artists, dress, sound/silent sequences and time of the day (See Fig 8). If a complete spatialisation of the adapted story through studio and location shooting details formed the basis for scheduling, Ray also broke the script down into temporal units to make the best use of lighting conditions. In *Aparajito*, the sequences in Benares are neatly categorised as day and night shots; similarly, the *kheror khata* of *Jalsaghar* contains separate shot lists for day and afternoon sequences (See Fig 8).

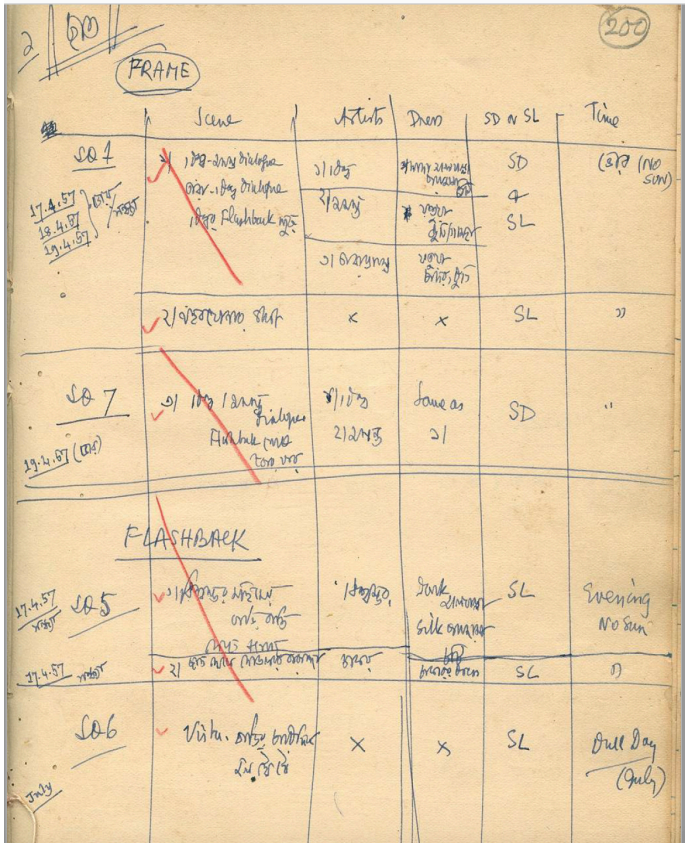



Figure 8: Shooting plan in *Jalsaghar*

The rationalisation of literary story material would sometimes vary across genres. In addition to the shooting schedule, Ray developed a music script for *Jalsaghar* assigning incidental sounds (such as bird calls, fireworks) and background music (mainly *shehnai* and

*dhak*) to 403 shots in the film. The detailed 48-page music script in the *kheror khata* was a sonic reorganisation of a short story that had been chosen purposely for its commercial prospects:

> My standing with the distributors was not particularly high at this point, and maybe this was one of the factors which subconsciously influenced my choice of *The Music Room*. Here was a dramatic story which could be laced legitimately with music and dancing, and distributors loved music and dancing. (Ray, 1994 [1963]: 45)

The Hollywood continuity script has been referred to as a 'blueprint' (Staiger, 1979) that reflected the industrial nature of film production, facilitating the division of labour, allocation of roles, organisation of schedules and calculation of budgets. It is interesting to note that Ray's *kheror khata* performed all these tasks but hardly in the manner of a meticulously drafted continuity script:

> We had chalked up a programme of sorts, but we had no cast-iron schedule. As I've said before, we didn't seem to have a proper shooting script. I have already acquired the habit of doing sketches of shots which would almost look like the story treatment of what the editing would be. Subrata, Bansi and Shanti, my first assistant, got used to the system and found it more expressive than a cold sheet of typewritten text. My notes were handed over to them just a few days before they were needed for the shooting. The dialogue was kept to a minimum and taken straight from the book. (Ray, 1997: 54)

These documents also throw ample light on the development of characters. In *Parash Pathar*, Ray lays out the 'emotional pattern' of the protagonist Paresh Dutta. Adapted from Parashuram's (Rajsekhar Basu) short story of the same name, the film was about an ordinary

middle-aged clerk who stumbles upon a magical stone that turns any base metal object into gold. He becomes very wealthy in short time but eventually disposes of the stone after recognising the danger and futility of his newfound affluence. Ray's *kheror khata* shows how he developed Paresh's character arc through successive changes in his emotional state while in possession of the stone - 'religious fear', 'natural drive', 'greed', 'remorse', 'fear', 'definite decision'. In *Apur Sansar*, Ray develops adult Apu's character through a range of *bhadralok* tastes in art, music, literature, astronomy and travel that are listed in detail in the *kheror khata* but mostly do not find any explicit mention in the film. Apu's years in the diegetic time of the film are calendarized from July-August 1939 to October 1947, although these precise months and years are hardly mentioned in the film either. Ray's mapping of emotional graphs, cultural inclinations and calendrical specificities onto the fictional protagonist adds more depth to their characterisation, which may not necessarily be reflected in the film itself. Sometimes even fully developed characters were excluded. For *Aparajito*, Ray had developed the novel's character Lila, as a child as well as an adult, as evident from her sequences and dialogues with Apu in the scenario along with a possible set of sketches. The final film, however, did not include the character.

Unmistakably, characterisation was also a visual process in the pages of the *kheror khata*. Ray's artistic skills are a testament to his professional background in advertising as a graphic designer at D. J. Keymer (now Ogilvy), and in publishing as an illustrator at Signet Press. From young Apu to paranoid Paresh, Ray's sketches of important as well as minor characters allowed him to picturise characters originally crafted for the literary medium. His pre-visualisation techniques were arguably the most significant intermedial process of adaptation as they attributed pictorial dimension to fictional characters and envisioned corresponding camera angles to frame them (See Fig 9):

> I knew that *Pather Panchali* would have a very different look from the usual Bengali films, so I decided to draw fairly elaborate sketches which would normally describe the film in sequence like a storyboard. (Ray, 1997: 31)

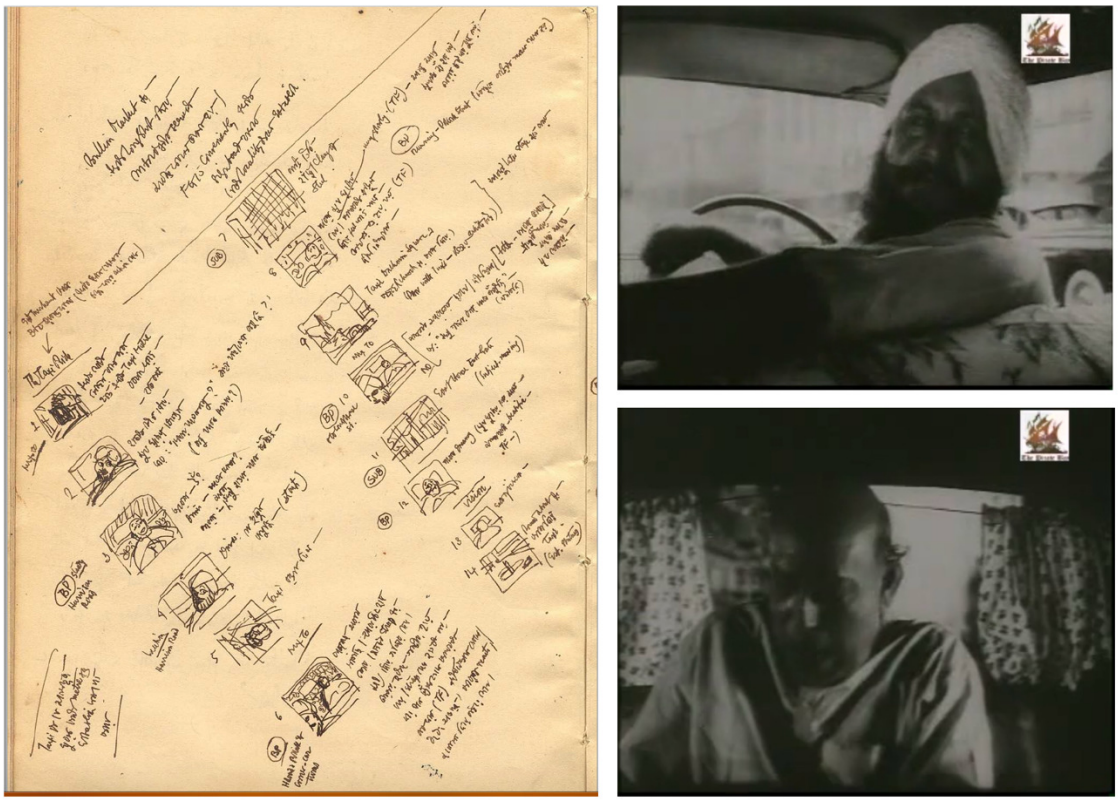


Figure 9: Taxi sequence in *Parash Pathar*

Pallant and Price (2015: 6) have argued that while concept art in Hollywood is intended to represent the graphic and architectural design of a film, the function of the sequential storyboard is to develop a film's visual narrative. Ray's quick illustration of scenes as well as rough sketches of characters, sets and objects arguably perform both functions, highlighting how these neat industrial distinctions often collapsed outside their Western originary contexts. In *Aparajito*, for instance, rough sketches of the scene where Apu sees school children and follows them to their school strongly resembles the corresponding sequence in the film. In *Apur Sansar*, when the new bride Aparna (played by Sharmila Tagore) sheds tears next to the window, the iconic moment was captured through a hole in the curtain. In the synopsis in

Ray's *kheror khata*, this visual detail was added later and also supplemented with a rough sketch of the frame (See Fig 10).

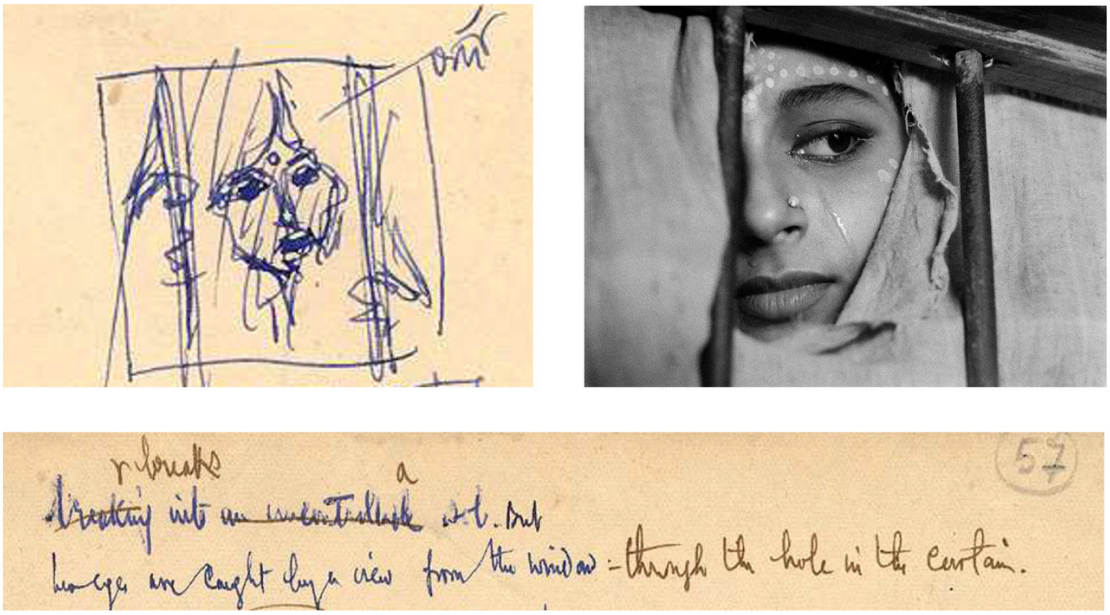


Figure 10: Conceptualisation of Aparna's iconic curtain shot in *Apur Sansar*

Some scenes, figures and objects occupied Ray's imagination more than others. This is evident from several sketches of the decadent *zamindar*'s horse and elephant in *Jalsaghar*, and over 50 pages of diagrammatic reworking of the cocktail party sequence in *Parash Pathar*, a pivotal part of the narrative that also included several star cameos. In *Aparajito*, the visualisation of Apu's room and house from different angles (See Fig 11) and sketches of Kajal's childish movements add a non-diegetic dimension to Ray's visualisation process, as many of these additional sketches did not necessarily translate to cinematic frames and sequences.

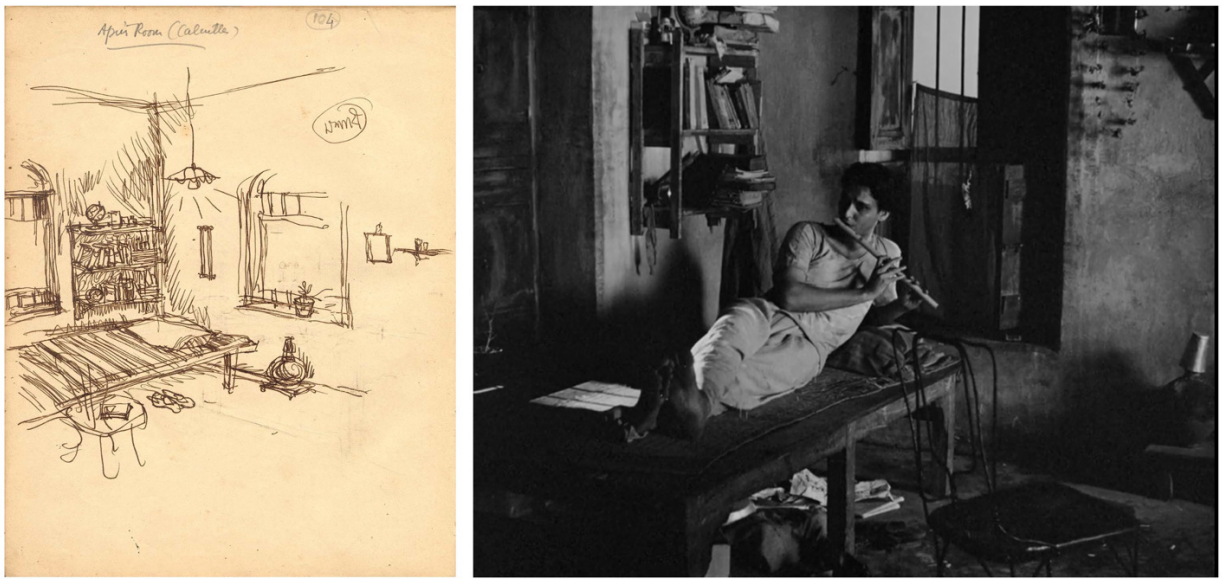



Figure 11: Ray's sketch and corresponding still from *Apur Sansar*

Visual and sound editing self-notes and instructions included reel numbers and sometimes rough sketches of related sequences. In *Aparajito*, rough cut editing instructions were numbered reel wise with clear instructions such as 'delete', 'improve editing', 'insert', and 'reduce length'. A separate list of 'back projection shots', which mainly included process shots of characters inside moving cars, was drafted in *Parash Pathar*. Dubbing instructions were listed according to characters and their specific scenes. While some self-notes such as "*College chhatroder roll call e Musalman naam chai*" (Muslim names to be added in the college student roll call scene) in *Aparajito* are not reflected in the final cut of the film, other inconspicuous instructions, such as "We concentrate on the lower income group" for the opening Dalhousie Square sequence in *Parash Pathar*, help establish Ray's specific intentions for the scene.

Last but not the least, Ray's documents are characterized by an unmistakable playfulness despite the conventional understanding of scripting work as one of the most rational processes of filmmaking. Whimsical contents such as random doodles of human and animal figures, calligraphic experiments with names and film titles, and limericks about mythological

women and female film stars (See Fig 12) make for an amusing excavation of Ray's creative idiosyncrasies. Sifting through the contents of *Aparajito*, I fortuitously came across an unpublished 7-page essay by Ray titled 'Thoughts on Film Making', which essentially reads as an apologia for his unfaithful approach to literary adaptation. More generally, the playful and palimpsestuous quality of these *kheror khata* allowed for adequate improvisation on the film set and location:

> As in *Pather Panchali*, I find it has helped in not having a tight script. Working in these circumstances one must leave a lot of room for improvisation within the framework of a broad scheme which one must keep in one's *head*. (Ray, 1994 [1957]: 27, emphasis mine)

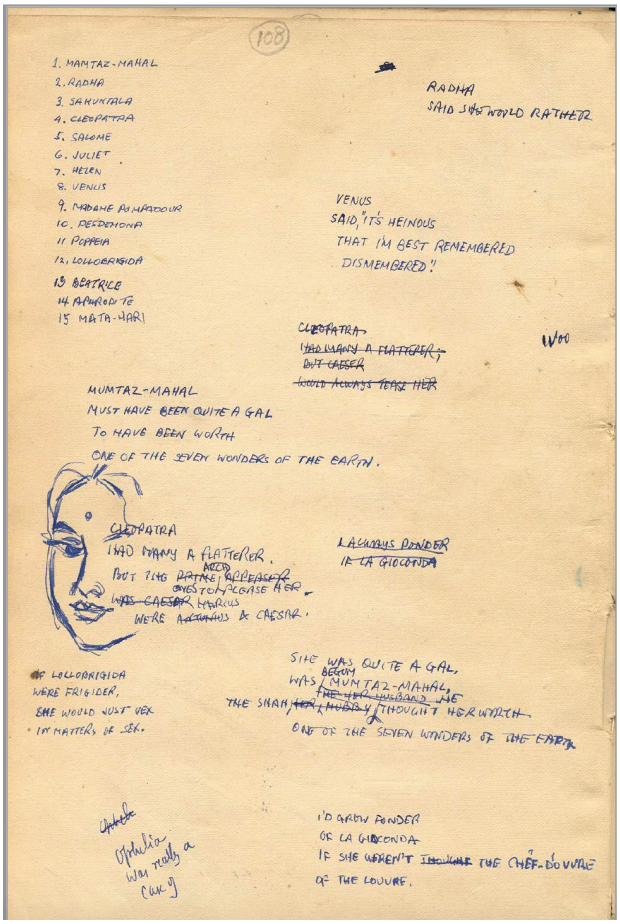



Figure 12: Ray's playful limericks

Ray claimed that he did not need a "dossier" because he "knew the whole story by *heart*" (Ray, 1997: 30, emphasis mine). His scripting practices were self-avowedly auteurial matters of the head and the heart, indicating both rational and creative control over the film's production. While I have tried to apprehend the method in Ray's madness, it is important to reiterate that the *kheror khata* does not in any way resemble the Hollywood continuity script that facilitates a strict division of filmic labour. Instead, the cryptic and chaotic contents of Ray's documents extend his status and self-fashioning as an auteur who oversaw all aspects of his film's production. From screenwriting and direction to costume design and background score, Ray is well known to have controlled nearly every step of the filmmaking process. While the notion of the film director as the *author* of the film was a popular French construct since the late 1940s, Ray's auteurial ambitions also emerged from Bengal's interlinked film and literary cultures. Ray's auteurial self-fashioning as the very locus of control and creativity finds a strong expression in his scripting work. At the same time, while his practices are undeniably tied to the tradition of literary adaptations in Bengal, the visibilisation of his script work points to a new form of Bengali film authorship that is prepared to lay bare the intermedial processes of adaptation. Much like Bengali film directors from the 1930s-40s, Ray was pleased that his adaptations were never criticised by literary authors themselves, demonstrating his own authorial status through a personal association with original writers:

> In my own experience, I am happy to say, these purists have never included the authors of the original stories. Parasuram was living when I made a film of his ten-page short story *Paras Pathar*. He read the script and heartily approved of the liberties I had taken. The same applies to Premendra Mitra (*Kapurush*) and Narendra Mitra (*Mahanagar*). The critics made no comments on the changes in these stories, presumably because they were afraid the

> authors might take my side against them if they did. The main invectives, predictably enough, have been hurled against my Tagore adaptations. (Ray, 1994 [1966]: 64)

The criticism did not only come from critics. After the regional success of the faithful adaptation of *Pather Panchali*, urban filmgoers who constituted Ray's target audience were "irritated by the deviations" in *Aparajito* (Ray, 1994 [1958]: 42). The film had lost money but opened up for Ray a different non-readerly, international exhibition circuit for his adaptations: "It was at this point that the European film festivals came into the picture. The awards won by the two films put a new complexion on the situation, and I realised that a Bengali film maker did not have to depend on the home market alone" (42). From readerly attractions in the 1920s and 30s, film adaptations of Bengali literature in the 1950s had claimed a high degree of autonomy from source texts and original authorships. An enhanced visual form of storytelling in Ray's films was crucial in supporting this transition. Ray's films were not subtitled for domestic markets such as Bombay, Madras and Delhi where a significant Bengali population could watch them.[102] However, Ray's biographer Marie Seton (2003 [1971]: 5) recalled watching *Pather Panchali* in 1955 at the Delite Cinema in Delhi in the midst of "a largely non-Bengali audience", which was possible because "the sparse dialogue was subordinated to the imagery".

**Remapping Bengal in Bombay**

After the 1940s' predominance of studio socials, the partition of India and the consequent ban on Bengali films in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) introduced significant ruptures in Bengali

[102] Ray (2007 [1979]: 101-102) claimed in an interview that the lack of subtitling was also an infrastructural problem: "… we do not have proper titling machine in India. It's done on a Heath-Robinson home-made device. If you want your film subtitled then you have to do it in Beirut, and for that you need foreign exchange which would probably take six months to come from Delhi."

cinema which reshaped film production practices and filmgoing cultures. The regional market privileged popular romances starring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, while the realist films of Ray struck a chord with international distributors and audiences, if not always the educated middle classes in West Bengal. There was another significant development that coincided with the creation of West Bengal and East Pakistan. With the decline of New Theatres around the late 1940s, Bombay studios accommodated the windfall of Bengali film personnel who continued the tradition of seamless literary adaptations well into the late 1950s. Bimal Roy's *Biraj Bahu* (1954), mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, was one of the several Hindi adaptations that remapped Bengali literature in Bombay cinema after the decline of New Theatres. Just as Kamini Kaushal meticulously prepared for *Biraj Bahu* by reading Saratchandra's novel as many as 20 times, Dilip Kumar also read the Hindi translation of *Devdas* diligently to prepare for the titular role in Bimal Roy's adaptation. The screenwriter Nabendu Ghosh recounted meeting a stressed Dilip Kumar who was apparently encumbered with the weight of three cultural giants. When Ghosh inquired who they were, pat came the reply: "Pramathesh Barua, Kundanlal Saigal and Saratchandra" (Ghosh, 2008: 362). The creative legacies of the legendary director, star actor and original writer of the 1935 version of *Devdas* all haunted Dilip Kumar for his role in the 1955 remake, indicating how the aura of authorship in adaptation was now cognitively distributed among different figures.

As I have shown earlier in the chapter, the problem of attributing authorship in 1930s and 1940s Bengali cinema was resolved by invisibilising the screenwriting process or subsuming it under film direction since the idea of a second writer figure would undermine the cultural prestige associated with 'original' literary authorship. The 1950s' adaptations of Bengali literature in both Bengal and Bombay, were more transparent in two significant ways. If Satyajit Ray's extant scripting documents point toward a demystification of the textual craft of filming literary fiction, Nabendu Ghosh's first independent credit in *Biraj Bahu* (1954) for

'Screen Adaptation' and then for *patkatha* (screenplay) in *Devdas* (1955) reveal a new recognition of screenwriting in adaptation as a specialised creative practice. Ghosh (2008: 351, translation mine) wrote about his first credit as a screenwriter in *Biraj Bahu* exuberantly: "This time my name was in the credit titles as *chitranatyakar* (screenplay writer)! Oh what joy! Finally Bimal Roy gave Nabendu Ghosh full credit". The practice of screenwriting in Bengal and beyond had become more visible by the late 1950s, although it continued to remain inseparable from literary concerns.

**Conclusion**

The history of screenwriting in Bengal (as well as the work of Bengali filmmakers in Bombay) is inseparable from the history of Indian cinema's relationship with Bengali literature.[103] This chapter has studied the regional specificity of screenwriting in Bengali cinema, while alluding to its afterlife in Bombay. In Bengali film studios, the primacy of the book in film production often invisibilised the screenplay, as the 'book' had to metamorphose into 'film' in spontaneous, unmediated ways to evoke the Romantic notion of a genius as the artistic creator. Screenwriting as an intermedial practice complicated questions of textual trace, authorial identity and marketable creativity, and these complexities were initially overcome by studios through subtle forms of invisibilisation and integration of screenwriting practice within directorial work. However, developments from the 1950s and onwards point towards an increased recognition of screenwriting in adaptations of Bengali literature in both parallel and popular cinema. Unlike the glaring epistemological inconsistencies discussed in the previous chapters, the disjunction between screenwriting practice and discourse in early Bengali cinema

[103] Even Debaki Bose, who made films on the lives of medieval saint poets such as *Chandidas* (1932) and *Bidyapati* (1937), appreciated "how deeply they were connected to literature and have become beautiful because these are linked to fine arts like music, dance, acting etc" (Bose (n.d.), quoted in Mukherjee, 2017: 131).

was not as striking due to the overlapping of literary concerns. The Western medium of cinema, whose commerce in Bengal was tightly controlled by the non-Bengali community of Parsis till the early 1930s, had to be gradually indigenised. Bengali literature emerged as the essential repository of local subjectivities and cultural assertions, whether consciously in film practice or subconsciously in reformist discourses.

In this chapter, I have shifted my critique of the cultural lag of Indian screenwriting from a modernizing discourse of industrial inefficiency to a modernist discourse of aesthetic deficiency. I have studied '*boi*' not only as an informal homograph that annoyed the *bhadralok* but also as the mass-cultural logic of intermediality in Bengali cinema.[104] Even critics who categorically abandoned the dualisms of *boi* ironically contributed to a similar intermedial understanding of Bengali cinema as literary through their discussions on screenwriting. This superficial conflict marks a deeper cultural divide between medium specific discourses of the *bhadralok* and intermedial idioms of the masses. As I have shown in the chapter, screenwriting in reformist writings and auteurist practices was essentially an extractive technique of *visualising* literature. The emphasis on visuality returns us to the previous chapters' critical focus on the medium specific disavowal of film dialogues vis-à-vis *munshis* as inessential screenwriting work. The next chapter's critical focus on the perceived incompatibility of film songs and filmic diegesis, also largely a Western/*bhadralok* construct, builds on this critique of aesthetic deficiency and challenges the universalist understanding of screenwriting as a purely visual storytelling practice.

[104] While growing up in the outskirts of Calcutta in the 1990s, I often used *boi* interchangeably for book as well as film. However, its dual usage gradually became outdated and hardly anyone I know uses the term to indicate both anymore. This might have had something to do with the steep decline in Bengali literary adaptations from the 1980s and 1990s when an urban-working class cinema emerged with new 'action heroes' like Prosenjit, Chiranjeet and Mithun Chakraborty. (See Bhattacharya, 2017)

Chapter 4

# Scripting Songs

## Cineliteracy and the Bombay Film Lyricist

### Introduction

> And at the most exciting part of the picture, everything stops for a song-and-dance interlude!
>
> - Alfred Hitchcock (quoted in Norris, 1956: 45)

While Alfred Hitchcock's films are well known for their suspenseful narratives, that he had a view about diegetic interruptions in Bombay cinema is perhaps little known to film historians and scholars. Moreover, Hitchcock's above quoted remark, made to a Hollywood journalist after his brief visit to India in 1956, may seem like an odd entry point into a chapter on lyrical storytelling in Hindi cinema. However, Hitchcock's statement illustrates and throws into sharp relief Western biases about song sequences of Indian films. What constitutes "the most exciting part" of a film narrative, and for whom does "everything stop" when a song begins? Is the film song an abrupt interruption for Indian film audiences, or can it in fact be the most exciting and awaited part of a film? Does the film song constitute a key segment of the scripted narrative, and can songwriting be considered a form of screenwriting? This chapter opens up these questions historically and tries to rethink the organisation of Bombay film grammar through

the *scripting* of the film song. By scripting, I refer to the lyrical composition of the film song as well as its strategic inclusion in the film narrative. Drawing on film music discourses, production histories and well-known song sequences from the 1940s-50s, I argue that the Hindi/Urdu film song's lyrical address, sonic legibility and 'situational' realism introduced diegetic affordances and alternative 'cineliteracies' for mass audiences.

Cineliteracy has been defined as "the understanding and appreciation of cinema and of the grammar of the moving image" (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012: 75). In India, cineliteracy was primarily the preserve of highbrow film societies and clubs that had mushroomed in parts of metropolitan India over the late 1940s and 1950s, primarily in Calcutta (Majumdar, 2012; Cherian, 2016; Ghosh, 2018). These film societies offered educated urban Indians a window into "different currents of European (and some Japanese) cinema, particularly realist, neorealist, modernist cinemas and some Film Noir . . . Soviet and other 'eastern bloc' films" (Majumdar, 2012: 743). The contemporaneous Indian art/parallel cinema, which radically distanced its political and aesthetic objectives from mainstream Hindi cinema, had its cultural roots in the film society movement. Like Hitchcock, many 'cineliterate' Indian film critics have historically decried songs as inessential, non-diegetic elements of a film narrative:

> The most irritating aspect of the song in the Hindi film is its sheer irrelevance. Many of them can be deleted entirely without in any way affecting the film's content, and many of them suppressed would do much to improve the general quality of the film. (Sarkar, 1975, cited in Bhattacharjya, 2009: 70)

Conversely, as a critique of classical Hollywood's narrative continuity, South Asian film scholars have positioned the Hindi film song as part of a "constellation of interruptions" (Gopalan, 2002: 3) whose self-consciousness constitutes a frontal mode of direct filmic address

(Prasad, 1998: 77). This analytical understanding of the film song as extra-diegetic undercuts narrative logics of causality and linearity that typify classical Hollywood cinema and its ideological sway over audiences. More recent scholarship has explored the social afterlife of the Hindi film song whose popularity spirals out of the diegetic time of cinema and finds autonomous expression across other media forms (Manuel, 1993; Morcom, 2007; Beaster-Jones, 2015; Duggal, 2015; Ravikant, 2015). Such transmedial popularity of the Hindi film song has archival ramifications as well. Many songs are better known than the films they were once *picturised* in, which would also explain why many songs have materially survived while the associated films have been long lost. Therefore, the musical soundtrack of a Hindi film is more likely to survive than its story, its diegetic setting. All these factors have together contributed to a scholarly consideration of the Hindi film song as an autonomous unit of South Asian popular culture which extends before and beyond filmic narratives. Arguably, both the highbrow rejection of film songs as superfluous and the scholarly reading of film music as extra-diegetic contribute to a Western model of cineliteracy wherein film songs constitute a source of irritation or pleasure that is experienced largely beyond the narrative. In contrast, this chapter studies songwriting as a form of screenwriting by paying attention to film lyricists from the 1940s and 50s whose textual craft introduced alternative forms of film grammar and diegesis in alliance with the visual and musical registers of Bombay cinema. This is, of course, not the first time that songs have been studied as an integral part of film narratives. My research builds on the work of South Asian film scholars who have discussed the significance of songs in relation to narrative realism and verisimilitude (Thomas, 2014: 236-239), disembodied voice and aural stardom (Majumdar, 2001), emotional mapping (Dwyer, 2018) and melodramatic address (Vasudevan, 2010: 42-46). The chapter will return to their foundational work in different sections. Where I try to break new ground in parts is by shifting the focus from the

textual domain of representation to the material domain of practice and by reimagining the work of film lyricists as a form of screenwriting.

The production and reception of a film song have changed considerably over the different decades of popular Hindi cinema, but it is from the late 1940s onwards that a clear division of creative labour emerged across the visual and aural production units of a film story. If the visual unit comprises of a screenplay writer, director and actor, there is a corresponding aural unit of lyricist, music director and singer, whose collaborative work, I will argue in this chapter, is *not* intended to be non-diegetic or extra-diegetic.[105] Departing from the Frankfurt School's approach to mass media practices as reflective of an ominous 'culture industry', Tejaswini Ganti (2014) has highlighted the ethnographic value of studying the 'sentiments and subjectivities' of media producers. My study of the accounts of early as well as contemporary lyricists and music directors will suggest that a song sequence has always been *scripted* into its filmic situation, irrespective of its extradiegetic function, transmedial afterlife or formulaic plotting. An ethno-historical focus on the film lyricist's practices is therefore a return to their *intentionality* – the creative desire to contribute to a specific filmic moment and to simultaneously transcend it. During my interview, Varun Grover, a well-known contemporary Bollywood lyricist and screenwriter, persuasively articulated this meta-narrativity of the film song and its cultural significance for South Asian film heritage:

> Songs are the most unique thing about Hindi cinema and it's unfortunate that we are trying to lose it. If you compare a Hindi film song video to a music video, you will see that the audience is more

[105] Alison Arnold (1991: 75) has made an interesting distinction of division of labour between film and classical music: "In film song production the creator of melody is the film music director/composer and the performer is the film actor-singer or playback singer who accurately reproduces it. This division of labour differentiates film song from Indian classical music, for example, where the performer himself acts as both creator and performer, drawing and improvising upon the musical storehouse of Hindustani rags".

> connected to the former because the Hindi film song is part of a narrative. This is a layer of the abstract on narrative content and it generates greater emotional appeal… When we are lying on the screen anyway through fictional cinema, why try to create this facade of realism? The West can't understand it but we shouldn't give up on songs. (Varun Grover, personal communication, 24 December, 2018)

Grover's complaint about the West's inability to appreciate the emotional compression and narrative layering of Hindi film songs is arguably an appeal to de-Westernize the 'songless' understanding of film diegesis. The 'Westernization' of the film narrative in India emerged with the urbanization of its audiences. Ian Garwood (2006) has studied how a boom in multiplex cinemas in the early 2000s created a commercially viable 'songless' narrative form whose niche market constituted the emergent urban middle class.[106] Over the past few years, there has been an increased emphasis on 'story' over stardom, songs and spectacle as the selling point of non-threatrical Hindi film, which has either museumised the film song as a nostalgic background melody or rendered it completely redundant. Songless Hindi films and web series produced for streaming platforms, instead of traditional theatrical release, have raised concerns among fans about the future of Hindi film music (Ghosh, 2020). The increased emphasis on scripting today as a non-lyrical practice arguably has its roots in notions of "a Hitchcockian pure cinema . . . anchored in a visual sensibility" (Isaacs, 2020: 4) that jettisons the film song as a non-essential storytelling component of the film. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the discourses of technical modernization and aesthetic reform went hand in hand in Indian film cultures. The contemporary modernization of cinematic diegesis as non-lyrical is more

[106] Bollywood films like *Bhoot* (2003) and *Black* (2005) were some of the first successful 'songless' films that catered to elite and urban multiplex audiences.

than a lament for a vanishing craft. In this chapter, it becomes a media archaeological vantage point that puts the 'film' back into the film song and ethno-historically reconstructs the film lyricist's work as fundamentally diegetic.

**Film Lyricists**

Unlike the screenplay writer, the Hindi film lyricist (*geetkaar*/*naghmanigar*) has historically been the object of public admiration and subject of political discussion. Even in contemporary times, veteran lyricists such as Javed Akhtar and younger songwriters like Varun Grover have been outspoken critics of the Indian government, while others such as Prasoon Joshi have found favour with the establishment.[107] While the younger generation may be less familiar with early lyricists than with their *remixed* verses, the life and work of such lyricists have been adequately documented in biographies and encyclopaedic compilations[108] as well as other forms of documentary media.[109] Within academia, notable scholarship includes the ethnomusicological work of Alison Arnold (1991: 146-47), whose doctoral dissertation offers a brief historical

[107] Prasoon Joshi has been the Chairperson of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) since 2017.

[108] Har Mandir Singh's painstaking efforts of compiling a definitive encyclopaedia of Hindi film songs in the multi-volume *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* is well-known among film music fans and scholars. Rajiv Vijayakar's (2019) book on Hindi film lyricists offers an extremely useful chronological, decade-by-decade history of the songwriting craft. After interviewing numerous lyricists over multiple decades of his journalistic career, Vijayakar has put together an important ethnographic resource for popular music and film scholars. Ganesh Anantharaman (2008)'s book on Hindi film songs does not offer such an encyclopaedic overview of songwriting, but his canonical periodization of Hindi film lyricists is insightful. Constructing 'generational' shifts reminiscent of traditional literary historiography, Anantharam discusses D. N. Madhok and Kidar Sharma as *first-generation* lyricists, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Shakeel Badayuni, Sahir Ludhianvi, Shailendra, Kaifi Azmi as *second-generation* lyricists, and Javed Akhtar, Gulzar and Anand Bakshi as *third-generation* lyricists.

[109] The television show *Unki Nazar Unka Sheher* was originally broadcasted on Rajya Sabha TV and is now available on YouTube. None of the lyricists who were active during the 1930s-1950s are alive today. However, radio and video interviews with eminent songwriters such as Kavi Pradeep, Qamar Jalalabadi, Hasrat Jaipuri, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Rajinder Krishan are easily available from a quick search on YouTube.

overview of songwriting in Hindi cinema, and Jayson Beaster-Jones (2015: 79-95), who has discussed the Hindi film song's varying degrees of dependence on its lyrics.

I begin my discussion with a caveat. Bombay film lyricists were extraordinarily prolific, and it is practically impossible to do scholarly justice to songwriting and its changing social significance over nine decades of Indian sound cinema in the limited space of a dissertation chapter. In fact, the period of my focus, 1947-1960, is also remarkably eventful in terms of lyrical production.[110] It goes without saying that senior film scholars, journalists and critics, who have had longer exposure to film music of the period, will undoubtedly be more successful at capturing the magical lyricism of Bombay cinema. In lieu of such an ambitious historical account of songwriting, this chapter focuses on the scripting of film songs from the perspective of lyricists and music directors. Hindi film songs have mostly been explained through the register of the *popular* – but for the period of my research this is a post-facto analytical lens, given the scale of musical and lyrical experimentation that was underway to make music for the masses. In other words, film songs *became popular* because they were *made accessible* at a particular historical juncture through careful musical arrangement, affective vocal

[110] The period of Hindi film music from 1947 to 1960 is significant for social, industrial and technological reasons. Firstly, it is a period of profound nation-building in the aftermath of the independence and partition of India. Postcolonial cinema's role in the formation of affective media publics has been studied extensively (See Chakravarty 1993, Sarkar 2009), especially in the context of Hindi cinema's 'golden era' during the 1950s (See Vasudevan, 1996). Secondly, significant changes were introduced in film financing during this period. The Indian studio system, which flourished well through the 1930s, was unable to match the financial clout of independent film producers, mostly wartime profiteers with untaxed money. Since the mid/late 1940s, these producers were able to lure the established and upcoming actors and directors away from erstwhile successful studios and effectively consolidate the contract-based star system by the early 1950s. Thirdly, the playback technology that had been developed in New Theatres in 1935 finally replaced the singing actor much later in the late 1940s (see Booth, 2008: 37-41), with the death of K. L. Saigal in 1946 and migration of Noor Jahan to Pakistan in 1948. With the introduction of specialist singers such as Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi, the Hindi film song acquired a new layer of authorship (see Majumdar 2001). The actor's body and the singer's voice were more radically dissociated, which introduced long-term changes in the musical production of Hindi films.

manipulation[111] and, more pertinently for this chapter, intelligible lyrical composition. As the music director C. Ramchandra argued, the words of a song had to be intelligible and well-tuned:

> The lyric must be composed with imagination. The words should be simple, easily understood and should put the meaning across poetically. It otherwise is lifeless. Then it should be "tuned" to be in keeping with its mood, emotions and the feelings it expresses. The tune should be unusual and arresting. It should bring out the soul of the lyric. (Ramchandra, 1956: 19)

The words of a Hindi film song have long carried semantic possibilities and sonic pleasures that have resonated across the Global South.[112] The hermeneutics of a film song is informed by both its textual and contextual processes. While recalling his favourite old songs, Varun Grover explained to me how the song '*Yahan kaun hai tera*' in *Guide* (1964) "compresses the film's message into itself", making the film "practically rest on that one song" (Varun Grover,

[111] For instance, Saigal's singing style performed the task of meaning-making for film audiences and radio listeners: "Saigal was the first artiste to sing Ghalib in a way that appealed to the masses, thus contributing towards the poet's fame and popularity even with people not well versed in Urdu. . . Saigal employed his musical genius to emphasize not the literal meaning of the poetry but its deeper interpretation. He manipulated his voice to play a subordinate role to his music and gave prominence to the text of poetry sung by him" (Neville, 2011: 52-55).

[112] Transnational studies of Bombay cinema have predominantly focused on South Asian diasporas (Dudrah, 2012), networks of globalisation via Hollywood (Punathambekar, 2013; Govil, 2015) and the popularity of Hindi films in Soviet Russia (Rajagopalan, 2009; Salazkina 2010). The historical popularity of Bombay cinema in numerous parts of the Global South since the 1930s can be traced through a small body of scholarship (Larkin, 1997; Ingawanji, 2012; Fish, 2018; Askari & Sunya, 2020) but remains severely under-researched due to archival, ethnographic and linguistic challenges in reconstructing these South-South film histories. While there has been little academic study of Bombay film music's popularity across many countries of the Global South, there are quite a few journalistic accounts that reveal transnational circulations fandoms of the Hindi film song. For instance, Mofas Khan, an Indophile singer based in Mali, "presents a weekly radio programme called India Gaana dedicated to Bollywood in which he painstakingly interprets Hindi songs in Bambara, the lingua franca of Mali and West Africa" (Siddiqui, 2020).

personal communication, 24 December, 2018). The part becomes the whole, and the whole becomes the part.

The *synecdochic song* is one whose lyrics are not tied to a particular situation but to a significant moment in the plot when such a totalizing lyrical address to the audience is possible. For instance, at the end of *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959), Kaifi Azmi's haunting refrain encapsulated the film's melancholic themes of separation and loss in two simple lines: *Dekhi zamaane ki yaari*, *Bichhade sabhi baari baari* (I have known a time of companionship; One by one they all leave). In *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* (1960), Sushil (Raaj Kumar) and Karuna (Meena Kumari) are attracted to each other but an unexpected turn of events leads to Sushil's marriage to another woman against his wishes. Karuna, still coming to terms with her loss, finds herself in the impossible position of celebrating Sushil's wedding with an impromptu song in a boat party. Shailendra's lyrics not only voice Karuna's overwhelming feeling of betrayal but also capture the narrative tensions introduced by this dramatic development. These famous lines offer an emotional summary of the film – the first couplet communicates the conflict, and the second couplet seizes on the synecdochic quality of the situation to create one of the most memorable verses of Bombay cinema:

*Mubarekein tumhe ki tum kisi ke noor ho gaye*

*Kisi ke itne paas ho ke sabse door ho gaye*

*Ajeeb dastaan hai yeh, kahan shuru kahan khatam*

*Yeh manzilen hai kaunsi, na woh samajh sakein na hum.*

Congratulations, you are now the light of someone's life

Now you're so close to someone that you're far from everyone else

Such a strange tale with no clear beginning or end

Where we are headed, neither I know nor does he.

In the song, '*kisi ke'* refers to 'of someone else' who is not the subject, implying a painful contrast to the first word '*mubaraken*', setting out the song's ironic tone of felicitation. In a similar way, '*itne paas*' (so close) is contrasted with '*door*' (far) in the next half-line. The use of *'sabse'* (everyone) instead of '*mujhse*' (me) is intended to hide the subject and conceal her feelings of loss. '*Ajeeb dastaan*' (strange tale) raises the painful dilemma of the subject to a shared experience as '*woh*' (he) and '*hum*' (I) become the two subject positions, in the tradition of the Urdu ghazal. '*Manzilen*' (destination) is a key term because of its plurisemantic quality as a stage or journey of the subjects' love lives as well as a metanarrative of the film's uncertain diegetic destination. In four short lines, the song communicates the emotional truth of the characters and the emotional core of the film's story. Though the poetic idiom is that of Urdu lyric poetry, the words and syntax in themselves are simple without diluting the emotional compression of the verses. The hidden meanings of the words are visually represented through a series of alternating close ups of the actors' restrained changes in expression. However, as was true for many popular song sequences of that decade, the visual action is poignantly measured, and the characters' expressions aptly understated as music and lyrics take centre stage to communicate emotional information (Dwyer, 2018) to listening viewers. The song's inclusion at this apt ironic *situation* of grief and celebration enhances the film's diegetic pleasures primarily through a set of poetic contradictions set to lilting music.

**Inclusion of Songs**

Although the ethnomusicologist Gregory Booth (2008: 29) has claimed that "the cultural expectation of music scenes was never subjected to substantive internal critique within the mainstream film industry", a closer look at the well-documented discussions of the Film Seminar in 1955, organised under the aegis of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, tells a different story.[113] In the seminar, the writer Pandit Narendra Sharma launched the discussion on songwriting with a scathing criticism of the frequency of songs in film narratives. He also argued that lyrical compositions were bound to their cinematic situations and therefore did not constitute an independent aesthetic form that would express a distinctive poetic style and artistic subjectivity:

> A film song is not an end in itself. It is there to serve a certain situation at best. . . If art is the projection of an artist's personality, then film lyrics have ceased to remain works of art. For it is situations and circumstances outside the lyricist's personality that go to shape the lyrics he produces. (Sharma quoted in Ray 1956: 158)

There were several noteworthy responses to Sharma's suggestion that songwriting did not constitute a standalone art form because it was tied to a filmic *situation*. The novelist Probodh Kumar Sanyal argued that a song undeniably has a place in the artistic medium of cinema due to "its fitness in the film story and its appeal in the entire setting" (Sanyal quoted in Ray, 1956: 163). In a similar vein, P. V. Rajamannar, then chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi, argued that comparisons between film music with classical music were inappropriate

[113] The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) in New Delhi had organized the first ever official Indian film seminar in 1955, from February 27 to March 4. This seminar was the first of four major annual seminars on the Indian arts – film (1955), drama (1956), music (1957), dance (1957) – where eminent professionals from the Indian film industries discussed a wide range of topics pertaining to the growth and development of cinema in independent India. Ashok Ranade (2006: 12-16) briefly discusses the SNA Film Seminar report in his book on Hindi film songs.

because a film song was "connected with its situation" and its importance lay in how it built on a specific emotion depicted on the screen: "In a film song it is more a transient mood than the permanent mood which is sought to be evoked in a classical song" (Rajamannar quoted in Ray, 1956: 166). Raj Kapoor[114] stressed the socialist appeal of the film song in Russia contrasting it with classical music which was an "individual art" and could not be "sung collectively" (Kapoor quoted in Ray, 1956: 165). Conversely, K. A. Abbas cited the example of China, another socialist country where film producers were subsidized, to demonstrate the financial feasibility of making 'realistic' films without songs: "Let us have songs if the story demands them. . . and if the story so demands, let us not have any songs" (Abbas quoted in Ray, 1956: 167). Incidentally, only a year earlier, K. A. Abbas had directed the commercially unsuccessful *Munna* (1954), the second mainstream Bombay sound film without any songs after Wadia Movietone's *Naujawan* (1937).

Finally, S. S. Vasan insightfully explained how the Bombay film market had to cater to a wider audience than regional film markets and therefore had to rely on elements of entertainment such as songs, dances and comic situations which had a reiterative value. Narrative material alone could not ensure "repeat audiences" for producers: "You read a story; you know the climax; and you do not read the story again. That is not the case with music. You would like to hear the same song many times" (Vasan quoted in Ray, 1956: 165). Vasan bluntly pointed out that a discussion on whether songs should be a part of films might be symptomatic of Western cineliteracy:

> If it is necessary to include songs, we will include them; if it is not necessary to include songs, we will not. But I have yet to appreciate

[114] In an interview in 1983, Raj Kapoor claimed, "In my films, if you miss a song, you have missed an important link between one part of the narration and the next." (quoted in Thomas, 2015: 236)

> why there should be a demand for producing a film without something.
> Is it because we see Western pictures without songs? (1956: 164)

While the jury was out in reformist circles of film discourse, the actual planning of a film song in the 'music rooms' of film studios revolved around the construction of a *situational realism* rather than a diegetic interruption. The music director Naushad maintained that there was a method in the supposed madness of film songs, which necessitated a smooth collaboration of the music director and lyricist that would cut across authorial tensions:

> Such film music can be planned scientifically and with precision. My first job usually is to sit with the director and determine the musical "situations". Once these are agreed upon, I start composing the melodies, in harmony with the "mood" of those situations. Then the lyricist writes the words of the approved tune. (Naushad, 1955: 35)

Sometimes multiple lyricists would work for the same film and with the same music director. Shailendra and Hasrat Jaipuri, both famous lyricists in their own right, worked under Shanker-Jaikishen for several films without much difficulty: "Shailendra and I never had a fight because he used to write on his situation and I used to write on mine. He had a more philosophical approach than me." (Jaipuri quoted in Lehren Retro, 2012, translation mine)

Figure 1: Lyricists Shailendra (left) and Hasrat Jaipuri

Source: *Cinemaazi*

The lyricist Rajinder Krishan dryly detailed how the process of lyrical composition was preceded by the sifting of the film story for simplified/stock song situations.

> . . . first, the story is shaped and the situations which are suitable for songs are fixed. The lyricist is acquainted with them in full detail. In our films there are only three song situations: (1) when the heroine meets the hero; (2) when the hero and the heroine are parted, and (3) the "straight" song-and-dance situation. (Krishan, 1956: 67)

The challenge lay in introducing a new vocabulary for these hackneyed situations, especially at the frequency in which genre films were made and formulaic songs had to be written:

> Now, how many song-variations can there be on these three basic situations? Let me ask those who criticise film songs how many alternative words there are in the dictionary for "Mulaqat" (meeting)

> and "Judai" (separation) which can be permuted and combined in different lyrics? . . . nobody gives the lyricist different stories or unusual song situations on which to work. (Krishan, 1956: 67)

Arguably, such complaints were more suggestive of the lexical constraints of commercial songwriting rather than a rejection of the song as a narrative component. Lyricists met these challenges through compromise, negotiation and experimentation. As I will discuss later in the chapter, even 'realist' Bombay filmmakers like Bimal Roy and Zia Sarhadi saw songs not as a threat to continuity but as an essential diegetic component with its own realist strategies and aesthetic conventions. The actor David offered a percipient account of his experience of singing a few film songs and how it made him realize that songs were an essential component of the narrative:

> When I was trying to understand the content of the songs, both the part content and the emotional content of the songs, I discovered that they were part of the drama. What I would have normally spoken in prosaic terms I spoke through the medium of the song. In many places in the body of a film story the song takes the place of what has been very ably exploited by William Shakespeare in his plays, the soliloquy. To decry the song as disturbing the dramatic continuity of a story is, I think, a little wrong. (David quoted in Ray, 1956: 166)

I refer to David's musical equivalent of the soliloquy as *lyrical exteriorization* - the expression of a character's interiority that communicates her predicament, often in an emphatic manner. Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951) had a famous title track which was poignantly worded by Shailendra and soulfully sung by Mukesh despite the cheerful accordion-based music. In the

song sequence, the petty thief Raj (Raj Kapoor), freshly released from prison, lyrically announces his rootless existence while performing Chaplinesque antics. Raj is neither without home nor family given that he has a house, and his mother is well alive. However, the words "*Aabad nahi, barbad sahi, gaata hoon khushi ke geet magar*" (I'm homeless, I'm ruined, but I sing songs of happiness) is a vocal exteriorization of his Chaplinesque pathos, expressing how he has come to terms with an unfair world that once left him fatherless and forced him into a life of crime.

Lyrical exteriorizations could bring out otherwise inexpressible emotions. *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) is about two star-crossed lovers, Suresh (Guru Dutt) and Shanti (Waheeda Rehman). Halfway through the film, when Suresh informs Shanti about his marital status, she admits that she had known it all along. A song follows as the playback singer, Geeta Dutt, voices their onscreen silence:

*Waqt ne kiya kya haseen sitam*

*Tum rahe na tum, hum rahe na hum*

*Beqaraar dil iss tarah mile*

*Jis tarah kabhi, hum juda na the*

*Tum bhi kho gaye, hum bhi kho gaye*

*Ek raah par chal ke do qadam.*

Time has brought such sweet sorrow

You no longer are yourself, I no longer am myself,

Yearning hearts have met

As if we were never apart

Even you drifted away, and I got lost too

No sooner than the journey had begun.

The contrastive pairs '*haseen*' (beautiful) and '*sitam*' (cruelty), '*mile*' (meet) and '*juda*' (separate) convey the impossibility of their union, while the shared experiences of '*tum*' (you) and '*hum*' (I) bring them together in the sad irony of their predicament. Like the earlier example of '*Ajeeb dastaan hai yeh*', this song too is accessibly worded in the tradition of Urdu lyric poetry, and informed by its specific situation as well as the film's emotional core. However, the function here is not one of compressing and camouflaging personal feelings but of communicating complex emotional situations to audiences in lyrical registers. The frames remain poetic as the scandalous prospect of adultery is subtly expressed as an elegy of separation through cinematographer V. K. Murthy's chiaroscuro lighting and Kaifi Azmi's melancholic verses.

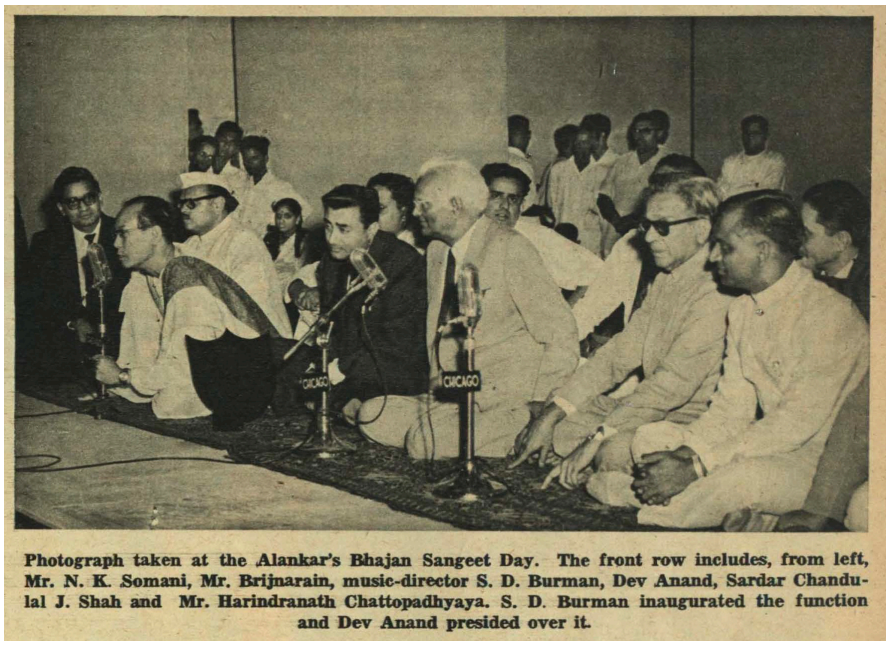
**Poetic Frames**

Film songs lyrically embodied active genealogies of popular performance traditions of poetry. Film directors would frequent *mushairas* (Urdu poetry symposiums) and *kavi sammelans* (Hindi poets' gatherings) in search of their choicest wordsmiths. Kavi Pradeep was scouted from a *kavi sammelan* and hired by Himanshu Rai in Bombay Talkies in 1939. It was in *mushairas* that A. R. Kardar spotted Majrooh Sultanpuri in 1945, the Fazli brothers found Shakeel Badayuni in 1946 and Raj Kapoor discovered the Dalit lyricist Shailendra in 1948.[115]

[115] During his lifetime, Shailendra (1923-1966) was never open about his Dalit identity. Many years after his death when his son Dinesh Shankar Shailendra revealed his caste, he was hailed in some quarters as 'the greatest Dalit poet after Sant Ravidas'.

Although there was an initial learning curve, such prolific poet-performers were ideally suited for composing film lyrics. *Mushairas*, *kavi sammelans* and *bhajan sangeet* meetings were very common in Bombay during the 1940s-50s. Film professionals attended, performed and often organised such symposiums (See Figures 2 and 3). These performative platforms offered them a public stage to affirm their identity and practice as poets, and also create a community of poet-lyricists. The Bombay film song also extensively incorporated performative traditions such as *ghazals, bhajans, qawwalis, kirtans* as well as folk traditions from different parts of India. The music director Madan Mohan affirmed the popularity of *filmi* ghazals and bhajans as a secular triumph of Hindi film music:

> To have made Urdu *ghazals* popular in Hindi-speaking regions and Hindi *geets* and *bhajan* known to Urdu-speaking audiences is only one example of the way in which film music has broken through linguistic and provincial barriers and established its claim to be regarded as our national music representative of the entire country. (Mohan, 1957: 19)




**Photograph taken at the Alankar's Bhajan Sangeet Day. The front row includes, from left, Mr. N. K. Somani, Mr. Brijnarain, music-director S. D. Burman, Dev Anand, Sardar Chandulal J. Shah and Mr. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. S. D. Burman inaugurated the function and Dev Anand presided over it.**

Figure 2: Bhajan Sangeet Meeting

Source: Filmfare (March 27, 1959)

Image Courtesy: National Film Archive of India, Pune


Figure 3: *Mushaira* organised by Film Journalists' Association

Source: *Filmfare* (March 1, 1957)

Image Courtesy: National Film Archive of India, Pune

The *ghazal* and the *bhajan* were complementary formats for the film song – the *ghazal* has a rigid poetic structure, while the *bhajan* does not have a prescribed form. I pay close attention to how the former was commonly used for romantic and sad situations, while the latter was basis for devotional and patriotic sequences. Ravikant (2015: 67) has pointed out that lyricists with a flair for Hindi had to be prepared to write lyrics in Urdu and vice versa. This was true for Parsi theatre *munshis*, such as Narayan Prasad Betab and Radheshyam Kathavachak as well. Similarly, film lyricists were often required to write both *ghazals* and *bhajans* despite their initial lack of training in either of the two forms:

> I recited a few "Nazms" and "Ghazals" to him (a music director). So he took me to a producer he knew and got him to give me a song-situation for a "Bhajan." "Bhajans" were new to me. So the first thing

> I did was to buy several books of Meerabai's "Bhajans" and other devotional poems, and acquaint myself thoroughly with their structure and diction. (Krishan, 1956: 65)

Unsurprisingly, one of the commonly credited lyricists from the 1930s and 1940s was the 19th century Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib (1797-1869), whose *ghazals* were often used as lyrical material.[116] The *ghazal* is a poetic genre of Perso-Arabic origins, which was long cultivated in South Asia as in other languages of the Persianate world.[117] It is a collection of couplets or *shers* of identical metre, ending with the same refrain word that is preceded by the same rhymed motif.[118] Over the period of 1930s-50s, the Hindi film song incorporated the poetic Urdu couplet form of the traditional *ghazal* into the *mukhda-antara* structure of Hindustani classical music. Gradually, film lyricists and music directors developed Hindi cinema's own specific *mukhda-antara* format, which continues to be the norm for film songs.[119] The *filmi* ghazal was

[116] One of the earliest Ghalib *ghazals* recorded for cinema was *Nukta chin hai gham-e-dil*. It was performed by the legendary singer-actor K. L. Saigal for *Yahoodi ki Ladki* in 1933. Other famous Ghalib *ghazals* performed by Saigal included *Main unhe chhedun*, *Har aik baat pe*, *Laayi hayat aaye kaja*, *Aha ko chahiye*, *Ishq mujhko nahin* and *Woh aake khwab mein*.

[117] Traditionally associated with Islam and more particularly with Sufism, *ghazals* have dealt with religious as well as secular themes. This poetic form revolves around the loss of a loved one, praise of female beauty, and the pleasures of intoxication and flesh. The *ghazal* is thus an alliance of the sacred and the profane. Since their earliest manifestations, they have celebrated love, beauty and desire without shame, and recorded emotions that cut across ages and cultures.

[118] To break it down, a *ghazal* generally has 5 to 15 couplets called *shers*. Each of these couplets is considered an independent entity in terms of meaning. The *ghazal* is, therefore, a collection of *shers* with each couplet functioning as a poem in itself, like pearls of the same necklace. There are several strict rules applicable to the composition of a *ghazal*. The first verse or *sher* is referred to as a *matla*. Each line ends with the same refrain or *radif*, which is either a single word or a short segment of the line. This refrain is then repeated at the end of the second line of each of the following verses. As a rule of the *beher* or meter, the words should be of equivalent length. The *ghazal* is therefore a collection of *shers* in the same meter. A *qafiya* is an internal rhyme found before each *radif*. Finally, the ghazal ends with a *maqta*, a verse which often includes the signature of the poet.

[119] Film songs typically open with the *mukhda/sthai* (refrain), followed by a musical interlude and the *antara* (verse), which loop back to the refrain. The *mukhda* gives the film song a mnemonic quality and often the film its title. According to the lyricist Javed Akhtar (2005: 7), "As a rule, Indian film songs

used extensively in romantic situations to express unyielding love for the female protagonist and poetic appreciation for her ethereal beauty. Film songs based on Urdu poetry could also be the free-verse *nazms*, which often included *ghazal* tropes and vocabularies but in a looser verse structure. The eponymous title song from *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960) evoked the ghazal and expanded its repertoire of poetic natural images. Almost every simile used by Aslam (Guru Dutt) to serenade Jameela (Waheeda Rehman) finds an exact visual counterpart. The lyricist Shakeel Badayuni's poetic imageries of *chand* (moon), *jhil* (pond) and *kaval* (lotus) are translated into a visual montage against prolonged close-ups of Jameela's moonlit face, adding multiple layers of semantic pleasure (See Fig 4). Due to his reputation as "a master of the ghazal" (Kodikal, 1961: 43), Shakeel Badayuni was hired as the additional lyricist in *Mirza Ghalib* (1954), a biographical film about the poet. Badayuni was especially commended for his ability to "express philosophical truths in the most unpedantic manner" and his conviction that "the excellence of a phrase is to be determined by its easy intelligibility" (Kodikal, 1961: 43-44).


Figure 4: Still from *Chaudhvin Ka Chand*

have a *mukhda* (refrain), which comes again and again and two or three, and sometimes more, *antaras* (stanzas)."

The *bhajan*, on the other hand, is a devotional song that is a part of everyday devotional practices primarily addressing Hindu deities. It typically involves a *dholak* (drum) and cymbals, and the choral repetition of each verse after the lead singer.[120] It was most popularly used in film songs by Kavi Pradeep (See Fig 5), who appropriated its devotional quality in the patriotic children's film *Jagriti* (1954) for the well-known hagiographic song about Gandhi – "*De di humein azadi bina kharg, bina dhal, Sabarmati ke sant tune kar diya kamal*" (You gave us freedom without a sword or shield; the saint of Sabarmati, you worked a miracle).[121] "The background was a children's school, and I was required to write three patriotic songs" (Pradeep quoted in Ministry 2013, translation mine). The extensive use of *bhajans* in prayer sequences prepared audiences for the *deus ex machina* or summarised the film's moral message for them. Lyricist Bharat Vyas' famous composition '*Aye Malik Tere Bande Hum*' was scripted for a prayer sequence in *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957), a film about an open prison experiment where six dangerous convicts are rehabilitated as virtuous men:

*Hai teri roshni mein jo dum,*

*Tu amavas ko kar de poonam.*

*Naykee par chalein aur badhee se talein*

[120] The words *bhakti* (devotional religion) and *bhakta* (devotee) come from the verb *bhajan* (to share). The shared devotional experience is that which unites listeners who share the same religious feeling (*bhakti*). This combination of sharing and union merges into the performative publicness of the *bhajan*. Some of the devotional songs have ancient origins, while many are contemporary creations. *Bhajans* are traditionally performed with musical instruments such as the harmonium, *dholak* and *tabla*, and the feats of the gods are highlighted along with their attributes and virtues.

[121] Kavi Pradeep's patriotic songs were, however, not always based on a bhajan. For instance, in the film *Talaq* (1958), Pradeep's refrain '*Sambhal ke rahna apne ghar men chhipe hue ghaddaron se*' (Beware of traitors hiding in your home), which "drew round after round of applause at Nagpur and even the Prime Minister clapping over and over again" (Ramchandra, 1959: 19), was not written or performed like a *bhajan*.

*Taaki hastein huye nikale dum*

There is such force in your aura,

You make a moonless night glow bright.

May we walk the path of virtue and abstain from evil

So that we may smile when we breathe our last.


Figure 5: Jawaharlal Nehru watches Kavi Pradeep perform

The religious overtones of '*amavas*' (moonless night) and '*poonam*' (full moon night) are combined with the ethical binaries of '*naykee*' (virtue) and '*badhee*' (evil) to communicate the social transformation of the convicts as well as the story's moral values. The *bhajan's* emphasis on rhythm and instrumentation over any metrical norms made it an accessible form with which

Hindi film music directors and lyricists extensively experimented.[122] The accessibility of film songs was also facilitated in large part by the publicness of performative forms like the *ghazal* and *bhajan*, and the familiar romantic and religious idioms they would draw upon.[123] If Urdu *ghazals* formed the situational backbone of love songs, Hindi *bhajans* captured the devotional fervour of Hindu prayer sequences as well as the spirit of Gandhian nationalism in patriotic scenes.

**Sonic Legibility**

Most film lyricists were well known through their published poetry as well as *mushaira* and *kavi sammelan* performances, ensuring the legibility of their works across print and oral forms. Additionally, the mechanical reproduction of film songs generated mass cultures and social communities of listening (Duggal, 2015). This sonic form of legibility, in particular, served their will to reach out to the masses and breach the borders of the 'lettered city', in stark

[122] Even C. Ramchandra, who was better known for introducing Western musical and lexical influences with songs such as '*Aana meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday*' and '*Mere piya gaye Rangoon*', went so far as to claim that the publicness of the *bhajan* resulted in film music's popularity. The *bhajan* "is sung by, and for, large groups of people. This has brought people in close touch with music and made them music-minded. I would go to the extent of saying that it is the *bhajan* which has spread music to all parts of India, and popularised it among people everywhere." (Ramchandra, 1956: 19)

[123] Farhat Hasan (2005: 102-3) has used the example of *mushaira* to discuss the public sphere in pre-colonial India as a pluralist and contested cultural space. *Mushairas* were originally "inter-elite affairs" that would be organised only in respected households, but common people began to create analogous spaces "in the bazaars, the fairs, the festivals and the *kothas* of dancing girls – to express themselves in the domain of textuality and culture." (102-103) Ali Khan Mahmudabad (2020) has shown how "big political *mushairahs*" in the first half of the twentieth century provided propaganda and entertainment in equal measure attracting "people from various religious and socio-economic backgrounds". (109) Hindi *kavi sammelans* during the same period had become "the typical 'cultural programme'" with "large meetings in public halls or under makeshift tents (*pandal*) for paying audiences". (Orsini 2002: 82) The increasing publicness of such spaces enabled the accessibility of culture. Tejaswini Niranjana (2020) has argued that musical appreciation in twentieth century South Asia was a 'public' phenomenon because "the musicians they are listening to are no longer, or not exclusively, singing in the princely courts or in the private homes of the wealthy." (n.p.) Vebhuti Duggal (2015, 2018) has also extensively studied radio listeners as a music-centred 'community'. This access-oriented understanding of the 'public' does not necessarily correspond to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere of a spirit and structure of discussion, debate and democratic consensus, and may even be a "contentious, affective, and volatile public" (Niranjana, 2020: n.p.).

contradistinction to the *bhadralok* practice of culturally distancing themselves from the masses. The desire to reach the *awaam* (masses) was common to most, from Hindi poet-lyricists such as Kavi Pradeep to Urdu ones like Hasrat Jaipuri. Several poet-lyricists, such as Sahir Ludhianvi, Shailendra, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Kaifi Azmi, were affiliated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. For Sahir Ludhianvi, the mass media practice of songwriting was automatically a political project:

> *Meri hamesha koshish rahi hai ki jahan tak mumkin ho filmi naghmon ko takhleeqi shayari ke qareeb la sakun aur is sanaf ke zariye jadeed samaji aur siyasi nazariye awaam tak pahuncha sakun.*
>
> I have always tried to bring film songs as close to creative writing as possible in order to convey current social and political issues, through this medium, to the common masses. (Ludhianvi (n.d.), quoted in Iyengar, 2016)

Shakeel Badayuni, who was not ideologically affiliated with any political organisation,[124] expressed a similar desire: *"Woh sada-e-ahle dil kya, jo awaam tak na pahunchey!"* (How can the poet's voice be said to have been inspired by his heart if it is incapable of reaching the masses!) (Badayuni, quoted in Kodikal, 1961: 45). While fiction writers such as Premchand, Manto, Upendranath Ashk and Saradindu Bandyopadhyay usually recounted their screenwriting stints in Bombay as tales of disenchantment with the commercial world of cinema, film lyricists rarely expressed such disdain about their work in the industry. Their desire to be heard by millions co-existed with the prestige of enjoying a highbrow readership.

[124] According to the music director duo Shanker-Jaikishen (1959: 59), "Hasrat Jaipuri … is the very picture of the traditional poet. In his personality as in his work, Hasrat resembles the poets of Urdu literature. Neither politics, nor newspapers, nor the deeds and misdeeds of others, interest him".

Building upon the film lyricist's desire for sonic legibility, can we rethink cineliteracy beyond the *lettered city* of reformist elites?

Satyajit Ray (1994 [1967]: 72), a founder of the Calcutta Film Society and perhaps the strongest advocate of cineliteracy, was regularly asked abroad about why Indians were so fond of film songs. With no "ethnic evidence" that Indians were fonder of songs than other foreign film cultures, Ray would explain how Hindi film songs catered to "tired untutored minds with undeveloped tastes needing an occasional escape" (72-73). Cultural chauvinism, often masquerading as sociological analysis, constituted the modernist core of cineliteracy. Manishita Dass (2016: 171) has shown how both unlettered and semi-educated filmgoers in Bengal were "separated from the elites of the lettered city by a gulf of taste and/or a lack of cine-literacy". Matters of good taste in cinema for elite critics and educated viewers were therefore inseparable from concerns of alphabetic literacy. I find highbrow calls for cineliteracy particularly interesting for their metaphorical use of the term 'literacy' in a context with significant non-literate populations.[125] Arguably, a songless understanding of cineliteracy also ignores the social fact of non/neo/oral-literate audiences in colonial and postcolonial India. It is important to revisit this highbrow understanding of cineliteracy against this socio-cultural backdrop of pervasive non-literacy.[126] Since colonial times, cinema's influence in India was understood to be greater than in the West where the medium had to "compete with established institutions such as the Press, the advertising agent and propagandist literature all dependant for their efficacy on a high percentage of literacy" (Rasool, 1944: 26). K. A. Abbas (1941: 60)

[125] As per census data, India's literacy rate has grown considerably from 18.33% in 1951 to 74.04% in 2011. Illiteracy in India still remains an actual condition for millions of children and adults, although it is often used inappropriately as a cultural slur to reinforce exploitative social hierarchies.

[126] Such concerns have been echoed by contemporary scholars of South Asian popular culture as well. William Mazzarella (2013: 10), for instance, has discussed how mainstream Indian cinema is more prone to censorship because "cinema spectatorship is a way of belonging to a mass public without having to be literate".

argued that "in a country of less than 10 per cent literacy" cinema's potential in nation-building was greater than the printed word and radio. Concerns about literacy were discussed in film magazines during the 1950s as well, often with statistical data:

> Statistics on literacy and education revealed that only 6 crores out of India's total population of 36 crores are literate, that is 16.6 per cent of the total population are acquainted with a letter or two. The remaining 30 crores are illiterate. (*filmindia*, 1955: 65)

Dewan Sharar, a well-known screenwriter and actor in the 1940s-50s, argued that the advent of the talkies had a more 'revolutionary' impact in India than it did in the West. Sound introduced language and musicality through the *spoken word* which was essential for oral-literate Indian audiences: "At least half the story was now told by the dialogue and not by the action. This inevitably added to the enjoyment of the masses who understood the language" (Sharar, 1954: 37-39). The written word was consciously avoided by Indian filmmakers, and in case of foreign films, this meant that subtitles could not be used for mass audiences. Popular Hollywood films screened in India did not have subtitles[127] and were rarely dubbed in regional languages either.[128] The written word demanded a literate audience in a largely non-literate India. As a result, for a long period crucial on-screen text had to be read out loud for audiences.

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[127] For instance, Hindi advertisements of the exhibition of American superhero films in the 1950s reassured readers how "action, comic and terrifying sequences make up these famous English films which can be understood even by those who don't know English" (*Rajatpat*, 1952: n. p., translation mine).

[128] On the other hand, Indian films were exhibited abroad with subtitles. Dr. Edward Hais, a representative of Czechoslovak-Film, discussed how high literacy promoted the use of subtitles for Indian films screened in Czechoslovakia. "Indian films exhibited in Czechoslovakia have been shown in their original version with Czech sub-titles… As there is practically no illiteracy in our country (the literacy percentage in Czechoslovakia is one of the highest in the world), our cinegoers have no difficulty in understanding a picture with the help of sub-titles." (*Filmfare*, 1958: 19)

Anyone who is familiar with Hindi cinema will easily recall how love letters or suicide notes are eloquently read out by the disembodied voice of the absent writer. During the 1950s, a magazine reader even made the case for announcing the film credits instead of textually projecting them on the screen "because most cinegoers are illiterate" (*Filmfare*, 1957: 41). [129] Using an insightful account by the music director Naushad, Gregory Booth (2008: 32) has claimed that "issues of literacy . . . made music and live narration essential" in the silent period of Indian cinema as well, especially in non-urban sites of exhibition.[130]

Interestingly, the cinematic combination of language and music with the technology of radio presented viewers and listeners with new sonic pleasures and readerly aspirations. Vebhuti Duggal (2020: 147) has argued that the synesthetic quality of the Hindi film song extended "the *maza* (pleasure) of listening to cinema and the radio to the printed text." Using Hindi film song books from the 1950s-70s, she has highlighted how the literate audience's listening practices were shaped through radio as well as print. In the context of North Indian print culture, Francesca Orsini (2009: 5) has discussed how local publishers in the late 19th and early 20th century attracted "neo- or non-literate audiences" through publication of song books that remediated oral genres in print. It is possible that film song books were an attraction for neo-literate cinegoers as well, though there is no historical evidence yet to substantiate such a

[129] Announcements from beyond the screen were common in the first decades of film exhibition in the USA and Japan. A 'film lecturer' was employed initially for "providing a spoken commentary to accompany films as they were projected" and later "to interpret the more narratively complex action in stage and literary adaptations" (Gunning, 2004: 150) During the silent film period in Japan, a narrator called the *benshi* gave audiences a detailed introduction of the plot and characters, both for foreign as well as Japanese films. (See Dym, 2000)

[130] According to Naushad, "Before [sound film], there had been some one in the theaters to play the music, maybe on tabla or harmonium. If there was a fight scene, they would play music for that, or if there was a chase, they would play differently. That was very good, and people liked it very much. Then they also had one boy for singing. And so if there was a love scene, he would sing a ghazal [a romantic poem, usually in Persian or Urdu]. And also on the side would be one announcer who would give an accounting of the scene. "This girl has fallen in love with this boy, and her parents do not approve, and now they will meet to decide what to do." (Naushad Ali, quoted in Booth, 2008: 32)

claim. Instead, in a media archaeological move, I wish to extend this neo-literate desire for reading with foreknowledge of the song text to a more contemporary literacy practice.

Introduced in the 1970s, Same Language Subtitling (SLS) is the practice of synchronised captioning of audio-visual content in the same language as the audio track, primarily aimed at audiences with impaired hearing. It is well known that historical intersections between disability and media technologies date back to the nineteenth century.[131] In India, the same SLS technique found a different purpose in 1996 when Brij Kothari, an academic and social entrepreneur, introduced it as a literacy tool. Kothari's novel idea was to subtitle television shows that were based on popular Hindi film songs, matching the audio and on-screen text of the song lyrics in real time. These subtitles were targeted at 'neo-literates', or people who had recently acquired basic literacy but were in danger of relapsing into illiteracy due to a lack of sustained practice. The idea was first successfully implemented by *Chitrageet*, a regional Gujarati television show in 1999 and then by *Chitrahar*, a national television show in 2002 (See Fig 6):

> While enhancing the entertainment value of popular song programmes, SLS simultaneously makes reading practice an incidental, automatic and sub-conscious process… songs provide some advantages that ordinary dialogue does not. There is widespread interest in knowing song lyrics. In songs one can anticipate the lyrics: repetition is inherent. (Kothari et al, 2010: 64)

[131] Typewriters were invented by the blind for the blind, and the phonograph and telephone were a result of Thomas Edison's and Alexander Graham Bell's experiments with deaf people. OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technologies came to be developed for facilitation of reading practices among the visually impaired.

Figure 6: Brij Kothari's demonstration of SLS as a literacy tool

Source: *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

The use of film songs in particular, over other audio content, offers us a media archaeological perspective into the affective and mnemonic quality of the Hindi film song that makes it accessible for oral-literate audiences and readable for neo-literate ones. Here, accessibility is a key conceptual framework that can be borrowed from disability studies.[132] The adaptation of SLS as a literacy tool points not only to an intersection of literacy and accessibility techniques but also the possibility to rethink cine-*literacy* in the context of Hindi cinema.

[132] Since the 1970s, disability activists and scholars have foregrounded the social model of disability over the medical model. The former shifts the emphasis from personal inadequacies to socio-structural barriers that create conditions of disability. A critique of the *inaccessibility* of information systems, public institutions, transport infrastructures has built the foundation of critical disability studies.

**Literacy, Orality and Cinema**

Before his well-known proclamations about the medium itself being the message,[133] Marshall McLuhan's (1962) grand theory of communication had introduced literacy and orality as two irreconcilable cultural timelines and sensory regimes.[134] What is more pertinent for this chapter's focus on cineliteracy is McLuhan's claim that "non-literate societies cannot see films or photos without much training" (36).[135] This problematic discourse around literacy, orality and film has also found its way into scholarship on popular Indian cinema. Sheila J. Nayar's (2010) study of oral and literate epistemes in cinematic narratives offers a McLuhanian and Ongian[136] approach to Hindi films. She argues that literacy, or the lack of it, determines the

[133] Media scholars have argued that changes in society can be explained through the transformations in communication technologies, with the invention of writing often privileged as the originary moment. Hailed as one of the pioneers of media studies, Marshall McLuhan had famously argued that a message was not reducible to its manifest content. It was in fact shaped by the nature of the means of communication used, be it the human voice, printed textbooks or television screens.

[134] McLuhan (1962) argued that phonetic writing reconfigured the human sensorium and transported humans "from the magical world of the ear to the neutral visual world." (18) In an oral civilization, human beings are closer to the 'magical' world of nature, their perception of time is circular, and their actions are thoroughly governed by collective rules. On the other hand, in a world of writing, thought and action have been split apart, language has lost its innovative force, a linear understanding of time is predominant, and individualism and rationalism reign supreme. McLuhan's universalist approach ambitiously divided the world into oral and literate populations, without explicitly hierarchizing the communicative practices of developed and developing nations. Along with Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong, other scholars directly or indirectly associated with the Toronto School of Communication, were influential in promoting and popularising the idea that every new technology radically reconfigured human perception and culture. Their universalist approaches to writing and orality have been appropriately described as "a modern-day reworking of the Hegelian narrative" (Bush, 2010: 144) of world history told through the story of communicative technologies.

[135] In McLuhan's view, the phonetic alphabet reconfigured human perception, and its new sense ratios made possible not only the reading of print but also the visual experience of cinema. Extending the argument that only literate societies could interpret motion pictures, McLuhan even linked the chronological arrangement of words on a printed page with the sequential projection of a film's images: "The mechanization of the scribal art was probably the first reduction of any handicraft to mechanical terms. That is, it was the first translation of movement into a series of static shots or frames. Typography bears much resemblance to cinema, just as the reading of print puts the reader in the role of the movie projector. The reader moves the series of imprinted letters before him at a speed consistent with apprehending the motions of the author's mind" (1962: 124-125).

[136] In Walter J. Ong, we find both McLuhan's alphabetical determinism and his implicit cultural chauvinism. For Ong (1982), the shift from orality to writing, and subsequently to electronic

narratological processes of popular Indian cinema, and that the widespread consumption of such narratives is indicative of an oral consciousness writ large. For Nayar, mainstream film aesthetics represent the 'oral consciousness' of Indian and non-Western audiences in the Global South. The frequent use of flashbacks, formulaic plots, larger-than-life protagonists, and an exaggerated verbal and visual quotient all point towards the presence of 'residual orality' in Bollywood audiences. The problem with Nayar's conceptualisation of orality is that it is often reduced to an abstract aesthetic form with little empirical relation to the creative and commercial practices of the Hindi film industry. Moreover, she explains Hindi cinema's historical popularity across the developing postcolonial world through the predominance of oral modes of communication in such locations of the world. Her repeated references to an African country[137] seem oddly congruent with literacy-orality paradigms developed by Marshall McLuhan and furthered by Walter J. Ong:

> orality not only hints at these films' resilience of form, it also illumines how a Hausa villager in Nigeria could possibly watch the 1957 classic

processing, transformed social, economic, political and religious structures in profound ways. Ong discussed how the advent of writing in the West introduced deep cognitive changes beneath the superficial transcription of oral speech on paper surfaces and computer screens. He defined primary orality as the orality of civilizations untouched by literacy and secondary orality as the orality of literate civilizations where contemporary media technologies such as the telephone, radio and television exist with the support of writing and print. Jonathan Sterne (2010) has painstakingly critiqued Ong's conception of orality. Firstly, he has pointed out how Ong's Christian worldview has led to a misreading of Hebrew concepts and Jewish practices in his theorization of orality. Secondly, and more importantly, Sterne discusses how the "psychosocial, developmental concept" (222) of Ong's notion of orality "denies coeval existence to different cultures" (220). Ong's theory of communication was based on a wilful omission of the coeval existence of orality and literacy across different cultures. In fact, a teleological analysis of technology made it possible for Ong to explain cultures through their exposure to specific tools of communication, and sweepingly differentiate one culture from another. Again in a McLuhanian vein, the West was literate and visually oriented, and the non-West was pre-literate and aurally oriented.

[137] Using a study by the African Institute of London University, McLuhan (1962: 37) explained why the non-literate eye does not have a three-dimensional perpective: "Literacy gives people the power to focus a little way in front of an image so that we take in the whole image or picture at a glance. Non-literate people have no such acquired habit and do not look at objects in our way. Rather they scan objects and images as we do the printed page, segment by segment.

> *Mother India* – in Hindi – undubbed – and still manage to find it comprehensible and culturally familiar. (Nayar, 2004: 14)

While Nayar's approach remains unique in Indian film studies for its emphasis on orality rather than visuality, there is some cause for caution in positing Indian film audiences and narrative conventions as distinctively representative of an 'oral consciousness' vis-à-vis literate audiences in the Global North. Religious, musical and theatrical performance genres across South Asia reveal the intersection of oral and written traditions of poetry and performance that contradict any binary understanding of orality and literacy.[138] 'Oral literate' people recognise poetic genres with their rules and protocols even though they are illiterate.[139] To borrow a useful term from Purushottam Agrawal's (2009: 312) monograph on the poet-saint Kabir, oral literate people may be "*bahusrut*, 'well-listened', if not *bahu-pathit*, 'well-read'" (Orsini 2015: 446).

A more critical cognitive model of cinematic spectatorship such as *darshan*[140] not only reveals what is unique about the oral-textual crafts of Indian cinema but also departs from "antiquated notions of sensation and cultural difference" (Sterne, 2010: 222). Instead of mapping physiological binaries of seeing and hearing onto cultural dichotomies of literacy and orality, the affective dynamics of *darshan* render spectatorship a multisensorial experience

[138] One of the essays in Orsini and Schofield's (2015) rich volume on orality and textuality in early modern South Asia focuses on the practices of Marathi *kirtankars* (religious performers), which is particularly insightful in its unambiguous revelation of "a systematic interweaving of orality and literacy that nevertheless privileges orality" (Novetzke 2015: 184).

[139] This is different from oral-literate texts that are written down but meant for oral recitation or singing.

[140] The concept of *darshan* (seeing) has received significant academic attention in studies of Indian visual culture. In Indian philosophy and religion, *darshan* is the moment during which the devotee looks at divinity and is simultaneously seen by it. The practice of *darshan* in the religious sense transfers the aura from the deity to the person who draws spiritual energy from it.

rather than an ocular-centric one. Christopher Pinney (2004) has extensively studied Indian visual culture through this religious and reciprocal experience of looking, and has argued that visual engagement in the *darshanic* mode mobilises all the human senses.[141] It has been widely acknowledged that iconicity in Indian films[142] is largely "reinforced by the manifestation of premodern ways of looking in cinema, notably that of *darshan*" (Dwyer 2006: 19). Mindful of these insights, my study of the Hindi film song does not foreground a rigid oral consciousness in Indian cinema as antithetical to literacy but reconsiders the words of a song as vehicles of diegetic expression and sonic pleasure, what we may call 'lyrical address', in relation to its visual address.

**Lyrical Address**

As mentioned earlier, much of the scholarship on the Hindi film song focuses on the recorded performance and its pre- and post-filmic circulation. My argument in this chapter has been that the film song is also embedded in the narrative through the circuitous interplay of word, image and music which makes its cinematic experience more immersive for audiences. In relation to *darshan*, the idea of the direct 'address' has been used quite often to explain the construction of melodramatic spectatorships in Indian film cultures, particularly in relation to the film song's function of frontal address:

[141] Pinney coined the term *corpothetics* – "embodied, corporeal aesthetics- as opposed to 'disinterested' representation, which over-cerebralizes and textualizes the image" (2004: 8) – to encapsulate the tactile possibilities of *darshan* which were not confined to religious experiences.

[142] Scholars of Indian cinema have explored the relationship between adored film stars and adoring spectators as the actor becomes an icon inseparable from the role s/he plays, even beyond the duration of the film. Vasudevan (2011: 68) has engaged with premodern visual and lyric practices such as *darshan* and *kirtan* to "understand the complex, hybrid dimensions of a modern cultural form such as the cinema", while at the same time repudiating "a clear cultural identity opposed to other identities, or even a modern vs pre-modern culture."

> The song fuses subjectivity with a public address that subordinates and enfolds the diegetic public into its sensory orbit, its lyrics, melody, and sound structures, with musical strains impacting the textures of what we see. (Vasudevan, 2011: 46)

Can we disaggregate spectatorial address into its visual and aural registers, and investigate what it means for a lyrical form to address film audiences, supplementing moving images with the force of musically charged words? In narrative cinema, the 'establishing shot' in cinematographic terms is the opening shot of a scene that informs the audience about the location of the story. Its aural counterpart in Hindi cinema can be called the *establishing song*, which attributes the ensuing scenes with a central theme. *Nastik* (1954) is about an atheist, Anil (Ajit), who is caught in the throes of the bloody Partition of India and Pakistan. In the opening moments of the film, we see a dazed and incapacitated Anil escaping the violence with his injured siblings in a train. A song begins in the background in the tempo of a *bhajan* while visceral visuals from the Partition are combined with close ups of an unchanging, distraught expression on Anil's face. Kavi Pradeep sings his own poignant lyrics, self-avowedly written in '*saral bhasha'* (simple language) for the nation to mourn the victims of the horrific communal violence across overnight borders:

*Dekh tere sansar ki halat kya ho gayi bhagwan*

*Kitna badal gaya insaan [. . .]*

*Ram ke bhakt, Rahim ke bande*

*Rachte aj fareb ke phande [. . .]*

*Inhi ke kaali kartuto se hua yeh mulk masaan*

God, look at the condition of your world

Humans have changed so much [. . .]

Ram's devotee, Rahim's disciple

Today look for ways to deceive people [. . .]

The nation is burning because of their evil deeds.

As evident again from the above example, the lyrical affordances of the *bhajan* use familiar ethical and religious idioms to great patriotic effect in this opening song. The establishing song can also set the mood and tone for the film story. In the very first sequence of *Pyaasa* (1957), Vijay (Guru Dutt), an unemployed poet, is shown lying lazily on an open field next to a lotus pond where he engages in the poetic appreciation of the daily delights of nature – *yeh hanste hue phool* (the smiling flowers), *yeh mehka hua gulshan* (the fragrant flower garden), *yeh phoolon ka ras pee ke machalte hue bhanvre* (the bees drunk with the nectar of flowers). However, the poetic inspiration he draws from these sights is undercut by the accidental trampling of a bee. The camera cuts to a close up of Vijay's face as he winces at the tragic fate of the oblivious bee. Through this succession of point-of-view shots, the camera not only connects the poet's visual field with the spectator's but also generates a sense of empathy for the loss of his object of poetry. The *face* and *voice* operate simultaneously to render the poet's emotions more palpable through visual and aural registers. The camera rests on the changing expression on his face allowing the viewer to identify with his emotional transition. Vijay finally gets up and leaves in resignation while the playback singer Mohammed Rafi croons to Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics:

*Main doon bhi toh kya doon tumhein ae shokh nazaro?*

*Le de ke mere paas kuch ansu hain, kuch aahein.*

What can I offer to the splendour of your views?

I have only tears and sighs to offer.

Here Vijay personifies nature, but the 'you' can also be identified with the cruel beloved of the Urdu ghazal. The lyrical address cues in the listening viewer to identify with Vijay's – to use William Wordsworth's Romantic definition of poetry – *spontaneous overflow of emotions*. These opening orations establish Vijay as a sensitive poet whose poetry is one of sorrows articulated with the emotional depth of a sufferer.

The *communicative song* is another instance of Bombay cinema's lyrical address. Here the diegetic information is actually conveyed to the listener(s) in the film, often in the presence of a conversational hurdle. Spatial barriers of distance are overcome by travelling sounds, characters are swayed to pursue diegetic arcs, and couples' conflicts are resolved through playful conversation. In *Nastik* (1954), the song '*Tere hote hue aaj main lut rahi*', written by Kavi Pradeep, executes an essential diegetic function. Anil (Ajit) is searching for his sister Kamala (Roopmala) who has been forced into the life of a courtesan in his absence. As she performs a sorrowful song and dance in a private boat, her brother walking across the river can listen to her laments but is unable to identify her singing voice. Suddenly a couplet – '*Kisi bhai ki bichdi hui ek behen, bata kab tak kare tere dukh re sehen?*' (How long will a brother's separated sister endure such sadness?) – communicates the courtesan's identity, and Anil dives into the river and swims to the boat to rescue his sister. In *Baazi* (1951), an undecided Madan (Dev Anand) is persuaded to choose a life of crime when Leena (Geeta Bali) croons *'Tadbeer se bigadi hui taqdeer bana le; Apne pe bharosa hai toh yeh daov laga le'* (Change your destiny, which you've till now ruined by excessive deliberation; If you have faith in yourself, take a

chance). Conversational songs are common in situations when the romantic pair is going through a period of *roothna-manana* (sulking-reconciling). For instance, '*Achcha ji main haari*' from *Kalapani* (1958) is a lyrical tête-à-tête between a petulant Karan (Dev Anand) and a placating Asha (Madhubala). The initial misunderstanding between the two is short-lived but creates enough dramatic room for a situation worthy of S. D. Burman's lilting tune and Majrooh Sultanpuri's playful verses.

Asha: *Chhote se kusoor pe aise ho khafa!* (You're so angry over a small mistake!)

Karan: *Roothe to huzoor the; meri kya khata?* (Your Highness was annoyed first, what's my fault?)

As is evident from the above examples, the words of a Hindi film song do not operate autonomously in the spectatorial experience. From the actor's close ups and singer's voice to the dramatic situation and mise-en-scène of the song, film lyrics are always accompanied by image and music. Multiple visual and aural signifiers coalesce and crisscross to give the words of a song their intended and unintended semantic associations. In the following sections, musical production histories from the 1940s and 50s will show how image and music in Bombay cinema were recombined with lyrical pleasures of the film song to introduce modes of cinematic legibility and diegetic appreciation that were alternative to conventional ideas of cineliteracy.

**Tunes or Lyrics?**

The originary question of whether words or tunes come first in a song reflects both competing and constructive creative energies at play in the making of songs. This conundrum is apparent from accounts of lyricists from the late 1940s and through the 1950s, and dates back to musical practices in the Parsi theatre. Kathryn Hansen (2011: 42) has noted how the autobiographical

writings of playwrights Narayan Prasad 'Betab' and Radheshyam Kathavachak document "the blend of innovation, adaptation, and parody that produced catchy new tunes". While composing the play script of *Vir Abhimanyu* for New Alfred Theatres in 1916, Betab had a creative conflict with the senior harmonium master Nihal Chand:

> The tradition was that the harmonium master would first establish the tunes, and then the playwright would write lyrics to fit them. I wanted to change this tradition because it did not give priority to the words, and as a *kathavachak* I thought the words were what made the greatest impression on the audience. In the end a compromise was reached. I wrote the lyrics for certain songs first, and for the others I supplied lyrics to match pre-composed melodies. (Betab, 2011 [1937]: 124)

The key word here is 'compromise'. The competing creative energies of musical production were negotiated through a reciprocal understanding of tunes and lyrics as interdependent components of a film song. In the context of Bombay cinema, Alison Arnold (1991) has argued that during the 1940s as well as the early 1950s, it was still a common practice for music directors to seek song lyrics prior to composing the tune, which allowed them "to interpret the song text in their musical expression, and thereby enhance the meaning of the lyrics" (167).[143] The converse was also true, as evident from S. D. Burman's "music first, words next" approach (Beaster-Jones, 2015: 88). Hasrat Jaipuri was specifically hired by Raj Kapoor to write lyrics for composed tunes. Majrooh Sultanpuri's account of writing film songs for the first time under the supervision of Naushad for *Shah Jehan* (1946) is particularly illuminating in this regard.

[143] In the earliest sound films, "songs were lifted directly from the stage plays upon which they were based and given new musical accompaniment" (Arnold, 1991: 146). Therefore, the requirement of writing lyrics from scratch was minimal. Gradually, Urdu *munshis* and Hindi *pandits* were required to compose original lyrics.

Sultanpuri claimed that it was one of the initial attempts in Bombay cinema to write film lyrics for a pre-set tune with dummy words:

> Naushad *sahab* told me that the tune has a meter as well as a phonetic quality. I needed to follow the breaks and the flows of the tune. My words had to correspond with the phonetic quality of the tune. The meter had to be correct, and the overall composition should be in sync with the situation. (Sultanpuri (n.d.), quoted in Broadcast, 2017, translation mine)

Rajinder Krishan claimed that the facts that top music directors made lyricists write for tunes set "a limitation on the lyricist and he must sacrifice his own individuality to it" (Krishan quoted in *Filmfare*, 1958: 18). The music director Shanker thoroughly disagreed with this view:

> Poets are not "lekhars" (masters of rhythm).[144] They know very little of "taal"-three at the most: "ek taal," "do taal" and "teen taal." The music director, on the other hand, knows different rhythms and all the "taals" and "lehs". So, when the music director composes the tune first and the words are written afterwards, greater variety and freshness are obtained. (Shanker quoted in *Filmfare* 1958: 18)

C. Ramchandra's musical compositions are understood to be the harbinger of Western influences in Indian film music.[145] His successful songs with lyricist P. L. Santoshi, "whose lyrics are so full of delightful nonsense" (Ramchandra 1959: 19), performed the functions of

[144] A better transliteration would be *laykar*.

[145] Gregory Booth (2008) has written about his collaboration with the Goan musical arranger, Antonio Vaz, which popularised the use of orchestra in film music.

compression and polysemy. The song '*Aana meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday*' in *Shehnai* (1947), which established Ramchandra's reputation as a pioneer, was initially not approved by the studio chief. Ruth Vanita (2009: 209) has written that the song is one of the earliest instances of the usage of Hinglish, a mix of Hindi and English words that radically steered clear of otherwise highbrow Persianate and Sanskritic vocabulary of love and devotional songs from the period. The song's code-switching, through words such as 'brandy', 'whisky' along with '*pandit*' (Brahmin scholar), '*pujaari*' (Hindu priest), may have rendered the comical encounter of modernity and tradition a risky venture. According to Ramchandra (1957: 37), the proven pleasures of the tune, with everyone in the recording room "humming the tune", ensured its commercial viability.

Sometimes a strategic selection of words would camouflage anti-imperial songs against colonial censorship. *Kismet*'s (1943) nationalist song '*Door hatho aye duniyawalon, Hindustan humara hai'* (Go away, foreigners! India is ours!) was a rather obvious battle cry against the British Raj. However, writing in the heyday of World War II, the lyricist Kavi Pradeep carefully included a reference to the Axis powers: *Tum na kisike aage jhukna, German ho ya Japani!* (Do not bow in front of any one, whether German or Japanese!) When the film came out, Kavi Pradeep had to go underground for a while: "CID officers harassed us. We were able to save the song by including the words 'German' and '*Japani*'" (Pradeep quoted in Ministry 2013, translation mine).

The Bombay film song was informed by the lyricist's desire and ability to make Hindi and Urdu idioms as well as complex thoughts accessible and pleasurable for millions of Indians. However, there were differences over which language most Indian cinegoers were more familiar with. In an article on film lyrics titled 'Communicating with Illiterate Millions', the writer reinforced linguistic ideologies by stating that "Hindi writers and poets were inclined to live and think in an ivory tower, considering it beneath their dignity to communicate the

illiterate millions" while "Urdu poets … cared for the common man and celebrated him in verses which were simple yet meaningful." (Bishnoi 1977: 34) In my view, however, the writer generalized and overemphasized the highbrow attitude of Hindi lyricists as well as the dominance of Urdu lyricists. Hindi songwriters such as D. N. Madhok, Pandit Indra, Kidar Sharma, Pandit Sudarshan, P. L. Santoshi, Kavi Pradeep, Pandit Narendra Sharma also dominated songwriting through the 1930s and 40s. Interestingly, Pandit Indra and D. N. Madhok were also skeptical of "how the language of the Hindi film can be Urdu when 80 per cent of people lived in villages and spoke Hindi or its dialects like Bhojpuri or Brajbhasha" (Madhok, P. quoted in Vijayakar 2019, n. p.). What such attacks on the "other language" ignored, besides the fluidity and multiplicity of linguistic registers within a single film, was the conscious attempt by film lyricists to produce lyrics that combined accessibility with aesthetics.

Despite such ideological stalemates, lyrical communication went beyond the question of which language most Indian cinegoers were more familiar with.[146] David Lunn (2015) has persuasively argued that writing for cinema in the 1930s-40s was a secularized profession with the crystallization of the oral/aural register of Hindustani on the film screen. Famously, in *Pyaasa* (1957), for instance, Sahir Ludhianvi changed chaste Urdu lines from his poem "*Sana-e-khwaan-e-taqdees-e-mashriq kahan hain?*" (Where are they who praise the sacredness of the East?) to the more accessible "*Jinhe naaz hai Hind par woh kahan hain?*" (Where are they who are proud of the nation?). The musicality of words largely exceeded linguistic concerns of an explicit socio-religious predisposition, and the eclectic nature of film songs was not limited to the hybridisation of genres such as *ghazals* and *bhajans*. Theatrical and musical audiences in India, whether elite or non-elite, were familiar with a range of poetic idioms in a variety of linguistic registers. The pleasures of reading (Orsini, 2009) and listening (Duggal, 2015) were

[146] There is some brief yet relevant scholarly discussion on song lyrics in essays on the contested terrain of language in Urdu/Hindi/Hindustani cinema. (See Kesavan, 1994; Trivedi, 2006; Lunn, 2015; Ravikant, 2015)

not restricted to one language, and the cultural as well as commercial emphasis on syncretic Hindustani as the lingua franca of Bombay cinema challenges such partisan approaches to lyrical communication.

**Division of Musical Labour**

> A lot of controversy has raged over the question whether the lyricist or the music director is more important, and I feel it is a pointless one. Both are of equal importance and complement each other's work in the creation of a song. (Mohan ,1959: 15)

Who is the author of the film song? The question remains ever relevant. In the recent #CreditDeDoYaar (Give us credit, dude) campaign in Bollywood, film lyricists have fought for credits in music streaming applications like Spotify where the concept of singer-songwriter algorithmically denies a cinematic craft its due. Historically, the authorship of a Bombay film song has varied across film studios, musical platforms, record labels and even listeners. For instance, fans could attribute the authorship of the song '*Jaane woh kaise log the*' from *Pyaasa* (1957) to its music director S. D. Burman, its lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi, its singer Hemant Kumar or even the on-screen actor Guru Dutt. One quick look at YouTube or Spotify's greatest old Hindi film songs reveals that this particular song has been included in the separate canons of all four figures. Collaborative work on film score spawned different sonic stardoms, in addition to the aural stardom of playback singers (Majumdar, 2001). As evident from complaints in film periodicals from 1950s-60s, the All India Radio's (AIR) practice of not crediting all the creators before playing a song found much public disapproval, which led to "different unions/workers' collectives of singers, lyricists, composers battling it out with AIR to get their names aired

along with the song and their labour acknowledged" (Duggal, 2015: 126). Even in early film reviews, the lyrical composition of a song was treated as a craft whose artistic merit was not entirely dependent upon the final product. The compositional break-up of a song corresponded to the division of labour in musical production. The music director would compose the melody, the lyricist would write the song and the singer would perform the song in accordance with the tune. Film reviews, such as the one below, would not assess the song as a whole but as a sum of its parts:

> The worst job, however, is done by the music-director. "Anhonee" has the most unmusical music ever heard on the screen. The beautiful words of four well-known lyricists are ruined by the uninspiring music which is still further spoilt by poor orchestration. The playback singers seem to suffer from a bad attack of flu. (*Filmfare*, 1952: 26)

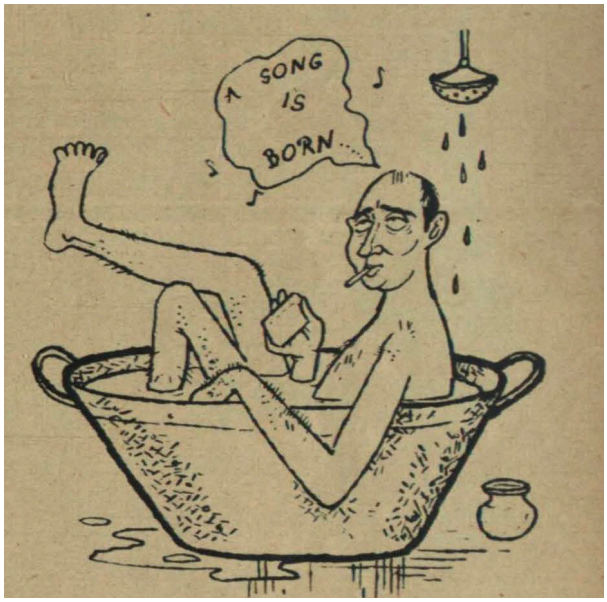


Figure 7: Rajinder Krishan's prolificacy illustrated as Archimedean genius

Source: *Filmfare* (Nov 9, 1956)

Courtesy: National Film Archive of India

While the film song has always been a collaborative composition with multiple author figures, I focus my attention in this chapter on film lyricists whose intermedial work has largely remained unrecognized both within South Asian film scholarship and in screenwriting studies. The role of words in the cinematic interplay of image, music and speech is my primary object of analysis. This is not to suggest that the film lyricist is the sole or main 'author' of the film song. Film lyricists were extremely popular and commanded great respect from producers and fans alike. Most of them were advertised in publicity material, and some even had cameos[147] in films. The music director duo Shanker-Jaikishen attested to the huge demand for Shailendra's lyrics who "converted our music-room into a waiting-room for producers" (Shanker & Jaikishen, 1959: 59). Music directors were often comfortable working with different lyricists despite their different worldviews and working styles. Shanker-Jaikishen worked with the progressive "torch-bearer" Shailendra[148] and the relatively apolitical Hasrat Jaipuri, while the disciplined Rajinder Krishan "often expresses surprise at the informality he sees in the music-room" (Shanker & Jaikishen 1959: 59). C. Ramchandra worked closely with P. L. Santoshi, D. N. Madhok, Qamar Jalalabadi, Rajinder Krishan, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Kavi Pradeep, and expressed fondness and admiration for all his lyricists (Ramchandra, 1959: 19). Kavi Pradeep was one of the highest paid lyricists, who received 2,500 rupees for one song and 25,000 rupees for an entire film soundtrack without tarnishing his literary reputation:

[147] Shailendra starred in a song sequence in *Boot Polish* (1954) and Shakeel Badayuni was seen reciting one of his *ghazals* for a *mushaira* sequence in *Paak Daman* (1957).

[148] As a member of the Communist Party of India, Shailendra was once on the run during the early years of Congress rule and apparently had to go underground in a university hostel in Delhi. Shailendra's life as a lyricist and an activist continue to remain separate. Fans of Bombay film music swoon over his songs like 'Pyaar hua ikrar hua hai', 'Yeh mera deewanapan' and 'Dil tadap tadap ke' while activists are usually more familiar with his slogan 'Har zor zulm ke takkar mein, hartal hamara nara hai' (For every atrocity and injustice, strike is our rallying cry) and song 'Tu zinda hai'.

> Today there are many 'financiers' in the film industry who can pay Kavi Pradeep more but he has never paid attention to them. Saraswati's devotee can never become a slave to Lakshmi. (*Naya Rajatpat*, 1955: n. p., translation mine)

The elevation of lyrical work to divine worship, however, was not enough to prevent the perception of the film song as a cultural threat. All India Radio's ban on Hindi film music in 1952 was an ideological attempt to nationalise music in the postcolony (Lelyveld, 1995). The then minister of Information and Broadcasting, B. V. Keskar's bureaucratic fantasy of acquainting the common man with classical music through radio was an attempt "to transform the auditory experiences of the citizens of the newly independent nation" (Alonso, 2019: 118). Bombay cinema's response to this official move was to incorporate more classical instrumentation in songs as well as producing biographical films about classical musicians (Jhingan, 2011). While well-known for his incorporation of classical music into Hindi film music, Naushad was a great proponent of popular music who kept his accessible compositions "free from complicated *alaps*, *tans* and those notational cascades which the man-in-the-street (who has no musical training) cannot easily remember and hum" (Naushad, 1955: 35). Other music directors, such as Madan Mohan, responded to the AIR ban with polemical opinion pieces in popular film magazines of the day: "The classical music of India … was never meant for public performance before mass audiences" (Mohan, 1957: 19). O. P. Nayyar blamed his debut failure in *Aasmaan* (1952) on his extensive use of classical music in the composition of the film's score. Recounting his experience as a music director for a touring theatre company, he argued that classical music was "not meant for the masses, for it did not vibrate with the rhythm which is so essential for more universal appeal" (Nayyar, 1959: 19).

Popularity demanded accessibility. Such discussions on Indian classical music vis-à-vis popular music generated "the oppositions of artistry vs. commercialism, of authenticity vs. accessibility" (Brackett, 2000: 38). Beyond the binaries of classical and popular, exploring the dialectic of popularity and accessibility helps broaden our understanding of what it meant to make commercially successful film songs for a postcolonial population with varying abilities of appreciating music and lyrics. Accessibility became a contested terrain of film financing, experimentation and collaboration as producers, music directors and lyricists had their own ideas about mass accessibility. For film producers, greater accessibility ensured greater returns on investment, while music directors often cited accessibility to distinguish film music from its classical counterpart. Lyricists, most of whom straddled the worlds of print and cinema, were conscious of the accessibility of songs for a non/neo/oral-literate audience. It is not possible to discuss the lyrical accessibility of Bombay film songs without exploring how it squared with notions of musical accessibility and concerns of financial feasibility. Just as the words of a film song do not operate outside the force field of image and music, the lyrical production of a film song cannot be explored in isolation from its musical and commercial contexts.

Figure 8: Lyricist Shailendra (right) with music director Jaikishen

Figure 9: Lyricist Sahir Ludhianvi (right) with singer Mohd Rafi and music director Madan Mohan

The *popular* as the formulaic best characterises the film producer's demands. In this section, I differentiate it from the *accessible*, which constituted the music director's and lyricist's creative experimentation with diverse technical practices and aesthetic forms. It is important to ask who determined the popular/accessible codes and conventions of composing lyrics. C. Ramchandra mentioned how music directors sometimes had to act as mediators between the film's producer and the lyricist, who often had very different ideas about what the masses could and could not understand:

> … the producer runs foul of the lyricist who, convinced that his song is the best for the situation in the film, is dead-set against changing it. Then the producer, a great lover of peace as long as his picture is still incomplete, comes to me and requests me to persuade my lyricist to be more amenable to reason and re-phrase his lyric to suit a simpler level of understanding! (Ramchandra, 1957: 37)

Creative conflicts were common between producers and lyricists. A notable exception was the lyricist Rajinder Krishan who had been paid a handsome amount of three hundred rupees for his debut composition. He was more conscious of the craft of songwriting as a commercial one: "The best lyrics are useless if nobody will pay for them. That is why I write to the producer's requirements. So far as I am concerned, he who pays the piper calls the tune, or rather the lyric" (Krishan, 1956: 67). Hasrat Jaipuri recounts how songwriting was often a long process that entailed multiple stages of creative collaboration and rigorous revision. The film director, music director and lyricist would "sit together, listen to the story and identify situations" (Jaipuri quoted in Lehren Retro, 2012). If the tunes were set beforehand, they would discuss where they would fit. With so much planning involved, a song could take a month to write: "Sometimes I would finish an entire exercise book to write and revise one song" (Lehren

Retro 2012). Majrooh Sultanpuri claimed that the *aql* (brain) of the producer and the *qalam* (pen) of the songwriter were incompatible in lyrical composition, and bringing them together often resulted in unpopular songs.

> Only the music director and I should work on a song. The producer should tell us the situation and then do nothing. (Sultanpuri quoted in Broadcast 2017, translation mine)

As Anna Morcom (2007: 39) has noted, the "essential information" required by the music director and lyricist to compose the song melody and the lyrics respectively was the emotional and dramatic context of the characters in the song. For Majrooh Sultanpuri, this diegetic information constituted the *situation.*

**Situational Realism**

Rosie Thomas (2015: 236) has argued against the commonplace assumption of 'anything goes' when it comes to Hindi film songs and highlighted how songs were "usually tightly integrated, through words and mood, within the *flow* of the film." Song situations were created by the screenplay writers, and the producer's interference in musical aspects of a film could often be frustrating for them as well. Film stories would have to make room for situations that would give rise to musical interludes. Rajinder Bedi suggested that producers often invoked the popularity of music to pressure screenplay writers to situate as many songs as possible in the script:

> And what can you do when the producer, after making the solemn declaration, 'Our Indian masses are very fond of music,' tells you to make room for at least eight songs in your screenplay**.** Assuming that

> the picture is a 100-scene affair, about forty-five scenes are sure to be appropriated by the songs. In the remaining scenes you must tell the story. (Bedi, 1961: 37-39)

The frequency of songs was a concern for viewers as well, as magazine readers pointed out in their letters. One reader complained, “If the director is bent upon including a number of songs in a film, the script should justify their inclusion in appropriate situations” (*Filmfare*, 1954: 43). Another reader addressed the same problem. This lack of diegetic fit was undesirable as “what destroys the realism in our films are the songs which do not fit into a situation” (*Filmfare*, 1956: 35).

An emphasis on realism is conspicuous in Hindi film discourse through the 1950s. Realism was “not new to the fifties but privileged in that period as a nation-building tool” (Chakravarty, 2006: 82). A wide range of historical factors – the availability of high fidelity sound equipment and the anticipation of Technicolor, increased access to outdoor locations, the international prominence of Italian neo-realist cinema, and later Satyajit Ray's style of filmmaking – contributed to discussions on realism throughout the 1950s. Nostalgic readers and reviewers often lamented the decline in cinematic realism, measuring Bombay cinema against the erstwhile social films of New Theatres in Calcutta and Prabhat Studios in Pune. Through the first half of the decade, Zia Sarhadi and Bimal Roy were often mentioned as rare filmmakers who were reinventing realism on the Bombay film screen. Zia Sarhady had written and directed gritty realist films like *Humlog* (1951) and *Footpath* (1953), while Bimal Roy’s internationally acclaimed *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) was inspired by Vittorio De Sica's neo-realist classic *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

Sarhady and Roy's articles in *Filmfare* give us an insight into their realist craft. In Sarhady's articulation (1952: 32), realism was to be differentiated from actualism – "the point-to-point depiction on the screen of the happenings of life" – and naturalism – "the depiction of life in all its baseness and ugliness". Realism was not reducible to films with grave socio-political themes, since "musicals, comedies, and historical films can have a realistic approach to life" (Sarhady, 1952: 46). Bimal Roy too expanded the definition of realist cinema by reminding readers that cinema was an assemblage of different creative practices, each of which had its own conventions of realism:

> When I say I believe in realism in films, I include all the other art forms involved in it, like the song, music, dance, picture-composition, drama, comedy, rhetoric, costume and architecture. I desire to create the illusion of reality in every branch of a film… Realistic art means realism transformed into art – realism which becomes "Rasa". (Roy, 1955: 27)

*Rasa*, or aesthetic pleasure, is the non-mimetic philosophy of Indian art predicated on the audience's multisensory engagement and emotional fulfillment. The scripting of the Hindi film song recombined such longstanding aesthetic models with contemporaneous realist conventions.[149] The concerns of realism were primarily associated with the strategic production of different aspects of a film song whose cumulative results would ultimately be reflected in the final production. However, often the producers' own ideas and insights caused obstacles for the creative teams to overcome.[150] The consciousness of realism was not limited to visual

[149] Lyricists, such as Rajinder Krishan, associated the love song with the *sringara* rasa.

[150] Interestingly, Sarhady (1952) claimed that only the state's financial intervention could restore cinema's true social and artistic role of realism. Unrealism in cinema was a product of unorganized

creators. Situational realism also translated into sonic realism for the musical production unit. A key term that often emerges from historical and ethnographic accounts of musical production in Indian cinema is 'picturisation', which refers to the visual representation of a song in a film.[151] Articulating an awareness of the filmic apparatus beyond purely aural concerns, C. Ramchandra complained that taking too many shots during a song spoiled its visual continuity and made it "jerky". He also pointed out blatant instances of inappropriate picturisation: "Once I used a sitar "piece" in a song meant-to be used in shots of the heroine weeping in jail. But it was picturised with shots of twenty galloping horses!" (Ramchandra quoted in *Filmfare*, 1958: 20). There were more subtle instances of incorrect *picturisation* where particular musical instruments were inaccurately represented on the screen. Shanker pointed out how "when the hero 'plays' the piano, high notes are heard while his fingers are on the low keys" (*Filmfare*, 1958: 21), and Naushad recounted how films often showed the organ for a piano piece or the flute for a trumpet piece. For Rajendra Krishan, the formulaic picturisation of the sad song was a perpetual disservice to the diegetic work of a lyricist:

> This is how it goes: The hero and heroine part. The heroine sings. In the song, the "alaap" comes first, then the "mukhda". In the next shot, she walks into her bedroom, puts her head on the pillow and sings the first "antra". Then she goes and stands by a pillar, with the branches of a tree full of flowers over head, and sings the second "antra". Then she wanders to the window, looks out, and sings the third "antra", and in

financing: "to understand the unrealistic state in which the Indian film industry finds itself today, we must study its financial structure. The lack of organised finance places the film-maker at the mercy of the moneylender. Even an inspired and honest newcomer, caught within this spider's web finds himself a helpless victim, forced to abandon all those ideals which brought him to the film industry" (33).

[151] Song 'picturisation' fascinated advocates of cineliteracy such as Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta as well. Ray (1994 [1967]: 74) claimed that the choreography of "each line of a lyric sung against a different scenic background" was "a daring innovation, wholly cinematic and entirely valid if it is related in style to the rest of the film." Interestingly, a couple of years later, Ray made *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969), a fantasy-musical film with "a sustained semblance of non-reality" (74).

> the long-shot you see the hero going away on foot, in a bullock-cart, by car, on horseback or by train. (*Filmfare*, 1958: 20-21)

Rajinder Krishan's grievance about the formulaic picturisation of songs may be oversimplistic but it is certainly indicative of the lyricist's investment in the visual and diegetic treatment of their lyrics. A good film song was preferably always a well scripted one, which entailed intelligible composition, situational plotting and 'realistic' picturisation. Throughout this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate the *situated* nature of the film song through a selective list of dominant song situations that show how the film song was largely embedded in the narrative (and vice versa). This is not to deny, as Rajinder Krishan complained, that song situations were often uninspiringly scripted. Even then, songs were necessarily tied to a situation in the narrative. Although I have used well-known film songs as examples, my concern here has not been one of merit but of function. Song lyrics introduced events and emotions that were unavoidably tied to a particular dramatic arc, necessitating in varying degrees the accessible wording and realistic scripting of songs.

**Conclusion**

Traditionally, film songs are developed after the film story has been conceived. However, when I interviewed the screenwriter Robin Bhatt, he revealed that the source material for his debut script of *Aashiqui* (1990) was an audio cassette with ten pre-recorded songs. The producer, Gulshan Kumar, the founder of the T-Series music record label, wanted a film story and screenplay to be developed from the songs! Even as anecdotal evidence, instances such as this show how essential songs have been in the script development of a Hindi film. A more

dedicated ethnographic study of film producers and music professionals in Mumbai is bound to throw more light on the dialectics of lyrical composition and scriptwriting.

This chapter has tried to demonstrate the scripted-ness of the Hindi film song through its situational realism, sonic legibility and lyrical address. In the chapter, I have used several song examples to introduce a situational typology – *synecdochic song*, *lyrical exteriorization*, *communicative song* and *establishing song* – that brings out the diegetic significance of the Hindi film song. The typology is inexhaustive and only intended to give the reader a sense of where and how songs were positioned in keeping with the films' diegetic rhythms and communicative functions. Mass media practices that seem formulaic today once engaged with social concerns and experimented with aesthetic conventions in inventive ways. The popularity of the Hindi film song cannot possibly be overstated, but its place within film diegesis as a scripted component has largely been overlooked. Any understanding of the Hindi film song as non/extra-diegetic arguably detaches its lyrical pleasures from its intended diegetic setting and perpetuates a 'songless' understanding of cineliteracy. Through an ethno-historical study of the collaborative work of lyricists and music directors, I have tried to put the 'film' back into the film song and also examined the metaphor of 'literacy' in cineliteracy. Using the deployment of same-language subtitling of Hindi film songs as a literacy tool in contemporary India, I have attempted to archaeologically critique the elite discourse of cineliteracy. The lyrical address of the film song announced specific emotions and events to the listening viewer and made film stories more immersive through a scripted interplay of image, music and words. As much as it may have irritated cineliterates of the day, this intermedial experience on screen gave Bombay cinema its unique accessibility/popularity and introduced alternative cineliteracies.

As mentioned earlier, this chapter was motivated to some extent by the increased Westernization of the popular Indian film narrative with the emergence of urban multiplex and streaming audiences. I have already argued that processes of modernization in Indian film

history and historiography have tried to discard pre-existing and parallel practices as the debris of tradition. In talkie manuals, film songs were an afterthought despite the great number of songs included in the early talkie films. In cineliterate accounts, film songs were not just a disruptive element in continuous realist storytelling but also a polluting presence in the medium specificity of cinema. Satyajit Ray (1994 [1967]: 72) complained that "the vitality of the medium is being inexorably sapped by this sprouting, spreading musical infection" of Bombay film songs. The pedagogic and reformist framing of cinema as a pre-eminently visual medium *silenced* other screenwriting practices in India that were in actual practice neither an afterthought nor an aberration. In fact, as this chapter has shown, songwriting was often one of the most meticulously planned processes of film production that created its own specificities of situational realism and communicative address. The discourse of aesthetic deficiency in cineliterate and reformist accounts had little impact on the 'sprouting, spreading' film music practices. However, cultural forces of neoliberalization have arguably appropriated this longstanding urban, elite rejection of the film song as non-diegetic for new urban, elite audiences of multiplexes and streaming platforms. The modernist discourse of medium specificity has today contributed to the increased modernization of cinematic narratives as songless. As I argued in Chapter 1, screenwriting modernity is a recursive loop that constructs enduring epistemic processes of technical lag, aesthetic deficiency and cultural obsolescence. In the Conclusion, I return to the question of screenwriting modernity and its broader implications for film history and historiography in the Global South.

# Conclusion

## Recursive Modernity, Pluriversal Practices

My thesis has offered an alternative history of screenwriting by unravelling some of the epistemological entanglements of its practice and discourse in South Asia. What began for me as an archival challenge soon snowballed into larger conceptual questions around early Indian cinema's production, authorship and diegesis, which the chapters in this thesis have presented as a non-exhaustive set of epistemological impediments – the archival determinism of the continuity script, the 'scientificity' of scenario manuals, the medium specific aspirations of the *bhadralok* and a 'songless' understanding of cineliteracy. Through empirical research and critical reflection, I have shown how these discourses of industrial inefficiency and aesthetic deficiency have historically constructed screenwriting as the absent technique of Indian cinema. This conclusion reiterates some of the theoretical aims of the project and charts out the methodological stakes for undertaking similar historical and critical inquiries in other film cultures of the Global South.

### Discursive Modernity

An archaeology of screenwriting in Indian cinema entails an epistemological journey into its pedagogic and reformist discourses as well as a necessarily fragmentary excavation of the intermedial and multimodal origins of its practices. The combination of Foucauldian archaeology with media archaeology has allowed me to excavate forgotten, neglected and hushed histories of screenwriting practices in the face of a discursive modernity. As I have shown, discourse can take many forms – archival, pedagogic, reformist and academic – and

perpetuate the epistemic misrecognition of film practices as well as fuel anxieties of aesthetic deficiency and cultural lag. The non-typographic *munshi*, the precarious amateur, the dualism of *boi* as both book and film in Bengali, and the scripted film song fit uneasily in a linear historiography of the industrial and aesthetic progress of Indian cinema; indeed, a 'modern' history of screenwriting would discard these 'backward' and 'inefficient' people and practices as the debris of tradition and as contingencies of culture. Conversely, my non-linear and fragmented account of Indian screenwriting has included flashbacks of 'obsolete' *munshis* as the first talkie writers, close ups of scenario manuals, jump cuts between Bombay and Bengal, long takes of Tagore and Ray, and sound bridges of lyrical storytelling in a build up to this extreme wide shot of 'modernity/coloniality' in global film history.

*Modernity* is a key term that emerges from both Northern and Southern film histories. Tom Gunning (1994) had famously linked the early non-narrative 'cinema of attractions' with the urban experience of capitalist expansion and technological transformation in the West – "what a primarily German tradition describes as 'modernity'" (192). This metanarrative of film history has been called the *modernity thesis*, which in the tradition of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer embeds cinema in the Western commodity culture of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his seminal work on the relationship between early Hollywood melodramas and urban modernity, Ben Singer (2001: 28) stated that the experience of modernity was "predominantly a European and American one", although "colonized societies, by the very nature of colonialism as a form of sociocultural phenomenon, experienced modern cultural upheaval just as powerful as that of the West". In this way, Northern film histories have touched upon the fact of colonialism as a largely neutral phenomenon that facilitated the global traffic of cinematic technologies and techniques. Early cinema's ontological status as a commodity characterises the medium as a stable object that simply reproduced itself culturally and technically in urbanized environments across different colonial societies.

Why is colonialism's 'sociocultural penetration' an afterthought in film history's metanarrative of the modernity thesis? Does cinema participate in similar modern-urban environments across the coloniser/colonised divide? Ana Maria López (2000) has argued that as an import in Latin America, early cinema constituted "the appeal of the other, the shock of difference" rather than "any purported fit with the experience of modernity in local urban life". Brian Larkin (2009: 80) has also shown how early mobile cinemas in colonial Nigeria were marked by "a very different mode of exchange between image and spectator – one governed more by politics than by the commodity". Larkin coined the term 'colonial sublime' to describe the spectatorial experience of these short films, newsreels and documentaries that flaunted technological and infrastructural achievements of the British Empire. The urban experience of modernity in the metropole was inevitably the colonial experience of modernization in the margins.

The concept of 'hybridity' in postcolonial studies has imbued colonial and neocolonial encounters with the possibility of "cultures of a postcolonial *contra-modernity*" (Bhabha 1994: 6). More radically, Latin American decolonial thinkers have stressed the question of epistemology over cultural identity. Modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin in decolonial thought. In this sense, Larkin's *colonial sublime* would be an apt Southern translation of the *modernity thesis* of film history. As discussed in the Introduction, I have found the decolonial school's ethico-intellectual commitment against an epistemological framing of the world around 'modern' tropes of universality, rationality and progress very relevant for my archaeological approach. An 'epistemic delinking' of screenwriting from these categories of modernity/coloniality, rather than the postcolonial search for cultural hybridity and 'contra-modernity', was the first intellectual objective of this study. This critical approach has also informed my archaeological focus on the discourse of screenwriting. My second objective has been to introduce a richness of historical information about alternative local

practices instead of using stray extant scripts as fragmentary evidence of scripting work in Indian film studios. As I have shown, the archival trap of screenwriting is an epistemological trap. Instead, a media archaeological approach has opened this project up to wider possibilities of *knowing* screenwriting, from *munshis* to film lyricists.

**Pluriversality of Practices**

Building on the critical scholarship on South Asian cinematic specificities (geographical, socio-cultural and linguistic) and the epistemological praxis of decolonial thinkers, I have tried to present the *pluriversality* of a specific practice in Indian cinema as a critique of its universalizing discourse. I narrowed down my focus from early cinema as an indigenised object to early screenwriting as a set of vernacularised practices. I focused on the coming of synchronised sound in the 1930s as a transformative moment for Indian screenwriting for three main reasons: i) sound gave vernacular voices to cinema; ii) the cinematic medium was gradually pluralized through the proliferation of regional cinemas; and iii) synchronised music introduced a range of diegetic pleasures and problems unique to popular Indian cinema. 'Speech' practices, both in their dialogic and lyrical form, indigenised screenwriting in India. A purist (Western/*bhadralok*) understanding of cinema as a predominantly visual medium and screenwriting as a visual technique arguably *silences* Indian cinemas and their screenwriting practices. As I have shown in the thesis, the practices of studio *munshis* and Bombay film lyricists run counter to any universalist or antiquated understanding of screenwriting as a visual practice wherein words ought to remain on the page and only images should tell a film story.

The focus on a specific film practice shifts the ontological status of cinema as a travelling global commodity to an assemblage of local media practices. Additionally, a media archaeology of *practices* (and not *objects*, as in materialist media archaeology) recentres the

role of the human practitioner in the Global South. Practices illustrate cultural agency and human improvisation, while techniques as evidenced in manuals often standardize media practices. Mindful of this, I have tried to explore cultural tensions between the technological automatism of cinema that obscures human labour and the human hand of writing that tries to tame the technological through discourse as well as practice. For instance, the first chapter has shown how the obsolescence of the *munshi* was rhetorically engineered by the discourse of continuity scripts as the harbinger of Taylorist efficiency in film production. In a different vein, the third chapter has explained the scripting of Bengali literary adaptations in late colonial Calcutta as a way of inscribing local subjectivities on celluloid.

The question of human agency in the face of increased technological encroachment has occupied several philosophers of the 20th century.[152] More recently, as a critique and an extension of both Martin Heidegger's *techne* and Bernard Stiegler's *technics* (See Note 152), Yuk Hui's (2016) pluralist understanding of European and Chinese 'cosmotechnics' problematizes the anthropological universality of technology as a Western phenomenon. In this sense, technologies become profoundly linked to different cultural worldviews. The pluralization of *technics* (as tools, technologies and techniques) in the spirit of decolonial thinking is key here. In keeping with Hui's pluralist philosophy of technology, the question I have tried to address is: is there a *cosmotechnics* of screenwriting that would not only continue to de-ontologize cinema as a stable object but also help align non-Western media practices with

[152] Martin Heidegger (1977 [1954]) famously distanced the essence of modern technology from the ancient Greek understanding of *techne* as making (*poeisis*) and knowing (*episteme*). He critiqued modern technology as a force of human instrumentality and resource extraction rather than a source of art and revelation. Conversely, building upon the Greek myth of Epimetheus, Bernard Stiegler (1998) has argued that humans and technologies have always been mutually constitutive in a process of 'prosthetic' exteriorization: "anthropogenesis corresponds point by point to a technogenesis" (45). He understands 'technics' not in the narrow sense of techno-scientific objects which shape human society in causal ways but any 'inorganic organized matter' from pre-industrial writing tools to modern computational devices into which culture is always already embedded through human 'prosthesis'. (See Roberts, 2012)

cultural subjectivities and local cosmologies? As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, the dualism of *boi* offers an in-depth perspective on intermediality vis-à-vis Bengali culture and society. A departure from the prescriptive epistemology of the manual and a wider cultural engagement with screenwriting disaggregates its technique across as a set of heterogenous practices and crafts, socio-cultural discourses and regional attitudes.

**Modernization and the Global South**

While postcolonial scholarship has largely studied colonial modernity as a hybrid phenomenon, my understanding of this encounter in the thesis stems largely from the decolonial school which equates modernity with 'coloniality' – the epistemological legacy of colonialism. Popular cinema in South Asia has been generally studied as a hybrid form because its aesthetic features and moral concerns constitute a dialogue between 'Indian' tradition and 'Western' modernity.[153] Beyond the aesthetic and representational domain of this encounter, I have critically mapped the conflict of modernity (as discourse) and culture (as practice) onto screenwriting. In addition to the production of cultural hybridity, modernity also constitutes a profound sense of cultural lag for new nations that become "perpetual consumers of modernity" (Chatterjee, 1993: 5). Since the dawn of filmmaking in colonial South Asia, dreams of industrialisation and discourses of technical lag have concomitantly captured the cultural imagination of Indians. In Chapter 2, I have shown how foreign and local manuals mythologised screenwriting as a stable, scientific technique whose scrupulous study would guarantee professional success in the film world. From film critics to professionals, the pleas and proclamations of catching up with Hollywood technically and European cinemas

[153] See Footnote 89 for a brief overview of the question of modernity in Indian cinema.

aesthetically has characterised local film practices in India as inherently deficient and in perpetual need of modernization.

Arguably, the absence of scripting has been at the forefront of this discourse of deficiency. It has also been rhetorically deployed by some Indian filmmakers as a rare practice of distinction (Ganti, 2012) that sets them apart from the unprofessional, non-technical 'others' of the film industry. The 'bound' script is not only a fetish that characterizes Indian cinemas as perpetually backward but also a rhetorical manoeuvre that internally hierarchizes the industry. In Chapter 1, I have discussed how this discourse of technical lag has contributed in large measure to laments of archival lack. Therefore, the excavation of inconsistencies between film discourse and practice is a significant first step in the 'epistemic delinking' of Indian screenwriting from archival complaints, colonial prejudices, pedagogic fictions and reformist laments. I have therefore strategically positioned continuity scripts and the *munshis*, scenario manuals and the Parsi theatre, medium specificity and literary adaptations, and cineliteracy and the film song as oppositional rather than hybrid encounters to investigate the tensions of cultural lag between tradition and modernity, practice and discourse, and culture and technique.

While broadly oppositional to the West in spirit and structure, the purpose of this research has not been to project a monolithic, national form of screenwriting in antithesis to an equally monolithic Western practice. In lieu of an essential 'Indian way of filmmaking' (Lutgendorf, 2006), I have tried to demonstrate the plurality of screenwriting practices both outside Western prescriptive forms and inside the disaggregated terrain of Indian cinema. Vasudevan (2011: 209) has argued that disaggregated histories of film within and beyond the Indian subcontinent "point to the complexities of projects for a national cinema in a multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic nation state". Southern film historians are particularly mindful of how colonial boundaries were once redefined as the borders of new nation states, and the framework

of national cinemas is largely eschewed or used cautiously by critical historians today.[154] Although my project focuses on 'Indian' cinema with a focus on the specificities of Bombay and Bengal, the epistemological focus on a particular film practice emphasises the project's broader comparative potential. The project of 'epistemic delinking' from the discursive modernity of screenwriting is relevant beyond the specific film cultures I discuss in the thesis. It is not only sympathetic to the archival challenges faced by film scholars in other parts of Global South but also in conversation with new revisionist histories of cinema and colonialism.[155] As a process of imagination and marker of industrialisation, screenwriting is privileged as one of the most cerebral, analytical and rational processes of film production. The stark absence of screenwriting histories in other film cultures of the Global South makes it the absent technique of other non-Western cinemas as well. Moreover, the widespread reach of Western screenwriting manuals across different Southern film cultures has arguably perpetuated a similar discursive modernity. It is important therefore for Southern film scholarship to reclaim screenwriting as a 'pluriversal' set of practices rather than a universal discourse of technical lag.

[154] In the Global North, national cinema histories continue to be the preferred model because of its empirical convenience of studying film audiences and reception. (See Christie, 2013)

[155] Educational and instructional cinema originally made for the natives has emerged as a critical film-historical resource through a subversive engagement with the British Empire archives. (See Jaikumar, 2006; Chan, 2015; Newell, 2017; Rice, 2019; Vasudevan, 2020) The study of transnational flows of Indian cinema in the Global South (Ingawanij, 2012; Chatterjee, 2014; Fish, 2018), and the recent emphasis on South-South film histories (Askari & Sunya, 2020) have offered a strategic geo-politicisation of cinema's circulation outside the Global North. Within production studies, the ethnographic focus on specific centres of filmmaking such as Mumbai (Ganti, 2012), Malegaon, (Tiwary, 2015), Chennai (Pandian, 2015), Lagos (Miller, 2019) and Cairo (El Khachab 2021) has explicitly contextualised filmmaking through site and cultural specificity rather than technological determinism.

**Recursive Modernity**

The temporal poetics of archaeology in this thesis is not merely limited to the discrete arrangement of historical events and practices in Indian cinema. While I focus on this non-chronological historiographic mode mostly within the timeframe of 1930s-50s, the 'modern' encounter is not to be understood as a historical event restricted to the first half of the twentieth century and merely a product of colonial industrialisation and nation building. Modernity is a recurring *topos* that animates early colonial pasts as well as our neo-colonial presents. It was, and continues to be, a perpetual object of desire. Notably, the Indian film industries today have largely forsaken all the local practices and cultural attitudes that I have excavated as oppositional to the Western/elite discourse of screenwriting. The studio *munshis* and *pandits*, the use of *boi* to denote both film and book, and the scripted film song have all been rendered obsolete to varying degrees, while the screenwriting manual has endured as a key Western textbook whose authoritative indigenization remains an unfulfilled project.

Therefore, this historical account of screenwriting is not a precursor to contemporary pre-production practices. It is instead a *recursive* history of what we have long abandoned and are in the process of forsaking due to a continued epistemic mischaracterisation of screenwriting through a set of 'modern' and 'universal' discourses. After the multiplex boom in the new millennium, the re-modernization of Bollywood is presently being facilitated by 'songless' scripting techniques of platform capitalism à la Netflix and Amazon. The advent of continuous storytelling, especially through the web series format, is increasingly streamlining and standardizing screenwriting practices. The desire for modernization in screenwriting is therefore the discourse of a recursive filmic modernity writ large. Modernization remains a historical as well as a historiographic process. Precursivity presupposes the teleological linearity of film history, while recursivity shows how discourses of cultural lag from a colonized past continue to characterise our postcolonial present.

It is fairly common to hear that a good film cannot be made without a good script. As a pre-production practice, screenwriting shapes the futurity of a film. Socially, it generates the recursive rhetoric of cultural lag through reformist writings on eternally 'backward' film industries in dire need of 'modern' scripting techniques. Screenwriting therefore informs an industrial and social imaginary to which film histories of the Global South have not yet paid close attention. This thesis is a step in that direction.

Manuals present techniques as truisms, while the chimera of modernity continues to obscure local film practices. If the screenwriting manual is one of the many discursive flows that authoritatively travels and circulates knowledge outside its originary contexts and forecloses alternative ways of *knowing* a film practice, as I had argued in the Introduction[156], the solution is not to write more local manuals. I have shown in the thesis how a historical and cultural study of screenwriting beyond the prescriptive model of the manual reveals a wide range of inconsistencies between film practices and discourses. The modern as a *topos* informs our screenwriting pasts and futures. An epistemic delinking from conventional truisms and an ethno-historical reconsideration of local film practices opens up a pluralist history of screenwriting outside the singular domain of the prescriptive.

[156] See pp. 11-13 and pp. 26-30

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