

WORD: SILENCE.  
SPEECH.MUTE  
SOUND AND SILENCE  
IN BAMBAYIYA CINEMA

RAJULA SHAH

**Fade in.** I am born in Bambai; Mumbai is yet to come. It is where my grandmother lives ... there's the sea, the local train and coconut water. My mother was brought up in a suburban 'Jain' household here, and happily wore the cross gifted by Father D'Cruz to college while the children asked her younger brother if his sister was a proselyte! At home, grandmother soon came to hate books. The younger uncle who went to NID later, often histrionically broke into a 'filmi' number 'representing' his unwilling heart faced with his mother's stern command...

Duniya mein hum aaye hain to jeena hee padega,  
Jeewan hai agar zahar to peena hi padega.

(If we have come into the world, live we must,  
If life be the poison, drink we must.)

– 'Mother India', dir. Mehboob Khan, 1957

It was one of my earliest memories of a Hindi film song playing back in an everyday context. The youngest uncle styles himself after Shatrughan Sinha and there are stories of the elder one having played the role of a child artiste with Ratan Kumar and Mohan Choti in the Pancholi production 'Bhai Saheb' (1954). Grandmother however could not see a film career for her eldest son at the cost of his studies. Little did she suspect that the imprint of Bambai would remain indelible in the child's heart, enough to one day make him an expert on popular culture.

The younger aunt compering film programmes like 'Bela ke Phool' and 'Aap ki Farmaish' on Vividh Bharati<sup>1</sup> was another exciting element. In the pre-television age, her knowing people with the famously familiar voices of an Ahmed Wasin, a Kamal Sharma or a Renu Bansal was somehow more thrilling for us than knowing a film star. Perhaps the absence of a craze for film stars had something to do with the fact that grandfather was a writer of considerable repute in Hindi; and among his literary friends, was also one Harivansh Rai Bachchan – there were stories of Amitabh and Ajitabh coming home as kids. However this was only till he came to be re-cognized as 'Amitabh Bachchan's father'.

Meanwhile, inspired by the literary atmosphere, mother started writing poetry in junior college; cropped her hair short and dropped the 'jain' in her name by her second year at college. My father-to-be eventually met her through a column in one of these poetry journals – the same guy who as a teenager had stood for hours outside Jagnath Talkies, Almora, in pouring rain, waiting for the Sita of 'Ram Rajya' (dir. Vijay Bhatt, 1942), Shobhana Samarth, to come out on the balcony to dry her hair! Mother-to-be at that time must have been baby-sitting one of her siblings, while watching the other children play. Later of course she would also have her own memories of saving money to see 'Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam' (dir. Guru Dutt, 1962) or 'Mahanagar' (dir. Satyajit Ray, 1963) in Opera House, as also Sahir Ludhianvi praising her poetry at the college fest. She would say – 'the Pyaasa shair, you know...' – and invariably lose herself in the verse she was quoting:

Ye mahalon, ye takhton, yeh taazon ki duniya  
Ye insan ke dushman samajon ki duniya  
Ye daulat ke jhoothe rawazon ki duniya  
Ye duniya agar mil bhi jaye to kya hai...

[This world of palaces, thrones and crowns,  
Of societies – the enemy of man,  
Of the false rituals of riches  
What do I care for this world]

– 'Pyaasa', dir. Guru Dutt, 1957

One day, many years later, I would find myself all over again a student of cinema. **Fade out.**

<sup>1</sup> An entertainment channel of All India Radio (AIR) with a film song request programme that started in 1957.

It can be said that India found its voice for the first time, all over again, in 1931. The first talkie, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*, was advertised as the 'All Talking Singing Dancing' Indian film. In addition to a very well-crafted dialogue track, it gave the Indian screen its first on-screen singer: W.H. Khan. Its success led other small and big productions to shift focus to the dialogue track, as well as increase the number of songs – eventually achieving a record 71 songs in *Indrasabha* (dir. J.J. Madan, 1932).

Prior to this cinema was silent, and negotiated the absence of sound with the use of gestures, pantomime and title-cards. However, in the story of cinema sound was an absence at once noticed and immediately addressed. The idea of combining motion picture with recorded music/sound started very early on and the art of motion picture grew to full maturity much earlier than the coming of the talkies. The visual codes in silent cinema were hitherto complex, multilayered and carefully woven. It took a while for sound to actually 'arrive' with all its other dimensions. Some even argue that the aesthetic quality of cinema decreased successively for several years before filmmakers warmed up to the new 'talkie'.

From then on, the story of cinema followed another route. In its graduation from silent to sound, the multiple layers with their rich visual codes were either discarded or lost. But while on the one hand the visual codes got thinner, on the other, the sound acquired layers and began to overpower the visual domain. Prior to the coming of sound cinema, drama companies were the rage of the cities and the talk of the towns. Dialogues and songs were the steam on which the shows ran. Cinema, taking its cue from the erstwhile popular *Ramlila* and Parsi Theatre travelling troupes, for once revived the logic of dramatic narrative over and above the cinematic logic; the verbal began to take over the visual in cinema. From then on the life of the Indian film, like the mighty mythological demons, came to rest in the dialogues often worked within the parameters of social melodrama, invoking God, duty, love, mother, family, manhood, self-sacrifice, etc. Dialogue-writing came to rest invariably on language skills that were highly specialized and in great demand. One of the most popular writers of this transitional time, Radheshyam Kathavachak, mentions in his autobiography that the idea of one person writing the story, dialogues and songs was in fact a carry-over from drama to cinema. Himanshu Rai of Bombay Talkies had even approached Radheshyam to join the company as a writer.

A line pops up in my head: 'Chhoota hua teer tarkash mein kabhi wapis nahin aata' ('Once shot, the arrow cannot be recalled'). Word has often been compared to the arrow that goes astray and cannot be recalled; therefore the caution across civilizations and cultures to speak only the considered thought. Because once a word is out, it must resonate. Language must slowly make use of all its powers and get the lost layers back. It must become what André Martinet calls double articulation. So while a kiss or an embrace may connote love or sexual desire in cinema, only an articulation or declaration of it implies commitment. Language with all its dimensions comes to determine the impact of cinema in various contexts. Word comes to rule the big screen by annotating and qualifying the given visual narrative in various ways. Language aspires for polyphony, and so begins the search for the right synonym, the double meaning, the pun, the irony, the paradox, the oxymoron and the portmanteau.

K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) is one such landmark film that along with the visual spectacle, relies equally heavily on the word. When Prithviraj Kapoor delivers

his lines – ‘Anarkali, Salim tumhe marne nahin dega aur hum tumhe jeene nahin denge’ (‘Anarkali, Salim won’t let you die and I won’t let you live’) – the quiver in his voice strikes a lump in the throats of the viewers while their hearts ache for the condemned lovers. The epic status of the film, apart from the lavish production and star cast, owes its immense success equally to the dialogue and song tracks. The sheer fact that a host of writers like Ehsan Rizvi, Amanullah Khan, Kamal Amrohi (director of *Pakeezah*) and Wajahat Mirza came together to write the film, is telling. It is said that the song ‘Pyar kiya to darna kya’ (‘In love, there is no fear’) was rewritten 105 times by Shakeel Badayuni, costing a whopping 1 million rupees at a time when entire films were made for less than a million. The other very popular song, ‘Ae mohabbat zindabad’ (‘Long live love’), used a chorus of 100 singers. Tailors were brought from Delhi to stitch the costumes, specialists from Surat-Khambayat employed for the embroidery, Hyderabad goldsmiths made the jewellery, Kolhapuri craftsmen designed the crowns, Rajasthani ironsmiths crafted the weapons, and the elaborate footwear were ordered from Agra. For the battle sequence, 2,000 camels, 4,000 horses and 8,000 troops were used, with most of the soldiers on loan from the Indian Army!

The film was the biggest box-office hit in Indian cinema until *Sholay* (dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1975) came on the scene. It is perhaps the most expensive film (counting Bhansali’s *Devdas*) ever made in Indian film history. However such a decoupage of elements from across the subcontinent is a curious phenomenon peculiar to Bamaia cinema, and can be read as indicative of its ambition. The lofty ambition must however be spoken of as a humble aspiration after all – as very aptly put by Javed Akhtar via Aziz Mirza’s *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (2000): ‘Chaand taare tod laaon / Saari duniya par mein chhaon / Bas itna sa khwab hai!’ (I’ll pluck the moon and stars / I’ll take over the world / It’s just a little dream of mine!)

After all it only aspired for a national cinema; it only dreamed of becoming sovereign – of projecting an idea of ‘India’ on screen that the audience would look for off screen: an almost ‘incredible India’ where a tragic love tale could play out between Prince Salim and the slave girl; where a *tawaif* in love could renounce the world to become a *jogin*; where a social outcast would one day buy off the very building where his mother plied bricks; where a Mother India would shoot down her favourite son to defend the honour of the wicked moneylender’s daughter; where an Afghan Pathan would lay down his life in camaraderie for the honest Inspector Vijay. An India that held the promise of work, shelter and food for all; where the beggar, the drunkard and the prostitute could hold their own with dignity; where impossible love stories could come true making a hash of insurmountable class barriers, and so on. In short, it constructed the fable ‘India’ where anything was possible. It fashioned itself bit by bit as the imaginary city ‘everyone’ desired to wake up to.

The city’s call: Bombay emerges as the first veritable advertisement of independent India – a new lullaby-like melody, gently shoving poor, hungry, homeless people into a starry reverie. The city they imagine entering in their half-dream state invariably resembles Bombay. It remains one of the most popular dreams sold yet to the proverbial common man; a standing invitation to try his luck in the dream city – just once. There is an uncanny force in that image; as they enter it, they seem to enter the sea. Suddenly everything seems possible. The image of the city literally reflects the sea in its humanscape, the city so identified with the sea that the human sea eventually

comes to be the image of Bombay itself – the city that has place for a thousand new entrants who come here every day. Besides, the multitude that finds refuge here joins hands with the cinema back offices to help build and sustain this glamorous Annapurna image of Bumbai.

This status of Bombay as the most eligible city however started to build much before the silver screen took over the stage. Radheshyam Kathavachak writes:

There was a spate of drama companies with a peculiar similarity about them – their names were invariably in English and no matter from which city the company may be from, it had 'of Bombay' tagged with its name. The name 'Bombay' seemed to hold special prestige for the company owners. New Alfred and Parsi Alfred companies along with their drama shows, actually spread the name of 'Bombay' across the country.

However, as is evident in the epithet 'dream', it isn't possible to ever fully realize it. By default the dream city forever remains a 'possibility'. The 'arrival' is forever deferred to the day when something will suddenly make life come full circle. Till then there are endless spirals of television, FM radio and street film shows at Ganpati festivals, the tent cinemas in fairs and the video parlors where dialogues and song-lines are reiterated again and again, sustaining the myth of Bumbai. Lines repeating umpteen times across a billion TV screens and a trillion radios prompt an everyday exodus from cities big and small to the city of dreams. Gulzar writes: 'Chhote chhote shahron se, khali bore dupahron se / Hum to jhola uthake chale / Baarish kam kam lagti hai, nadiya maddham lagti hain / Hum samandar ke andar chale... (From the empty bored afternoons of odd small towns / We get up and leave, bags on our shoulders / The rain seems less, the river seems slow / Off we go into the sea of the town...) – *Bunty aur Babli*, dir. Shaad Ali, 2005.

One can shut one's eyes and keep the camera anywhere in the city, and every shot would be a giveaway. The face of the city is famously familiar from every nook and alley; the more you hide it, the more the city with a million mysterious, underground pockets reveals itself. In the pre-mobile age, it was still possible to get lost in that 'seascape' for a while and resurface some place else, some other time. Needless to say, none used these pockets to more advantage than the chase-and-dream sequences of Bumbaiya cinema. After all it wasn't without reason that the film industry settled for good in what can be called the underbelly of India; the underground that willy-nilly makes place for all – the drunkard, the destitute, the orphan, the prostitute and the mad.

An Indian immigrant in Paris says to me: 'Paris is like Bombay. The police catch you but then lets you be.' He is from Punjab and sells plastic Eiffel towers on the sidewalk. A Bombay taxi driver retorts, when we say we live in Kolkata: 'Dilli dilwalon ki, Bumbai paisewalon ki, Kalkatta kangalon ki ...' ('Delhi of the large-hearted, Bombay of the moneyed, Kolkata of the poor'). I keep wondering if it could be a dialogue from a Hindi film. Maybe it is his own little rhyme or something he adapted to suit the context. While I see my memory playing games with me, another line pops up into my head: 'Ye Bumbai hai babu, yahan taqdeeren mita kar dobara likhi jaati hain' ('This is Bombay my dear, here fates are wiped and written all over again') – *Shree 420*, dir. Raj Kapoor, 1955.

Yet again I am not sure if it is the echo of an existing film dialogue in my head or if I am concocting one myself. And there is simply no way of checking it out. That is perhaps the extent to which a certain interiorizing has happened via language. One cannot even Google it! But that the film audio tracks eventually become the corollary

to the All India Radio programming and later the basis of some of the most popular programmes on Doordarshan is history. Film-based programmes seldom fail to attract attention. All India Radio still runs a programme based on individual film sound tracks. In retrospect, it is not difficult to imagine how the walls between real lived life and constructed dialogue must have subsequently become porous; how dialogues from films would have subsequently entered daily parlance; how a new community sharing a common *lingua franca* would have grown around the bonfire of popular cinema. This language would eventually become the memory of an entire people defining, influencing and shaping generations to come. Gaston Roberge reflects:

I found a fourteen year old school boy in Patna, who knew by heart all the Bobby songs, although he had not been allowed by his parents to see that film. The presence of the all India film is pervasive and whether the films are actually seen or not, they do school the public into the prevalent capitalistic pleasure seeking and consumer oriented ideology. Anyone who calls these films irrelevant shows his own irrelevance.

After all cinema is about the senses. The people do not have to necessarily know its aesthetic or technical jargon to be able to recognize Amitabh Bachchan's voice. He is a superstar and everyone knows his voice. An Amitabh fan is supposed to know the precise dialogue in the film at which the young kid will grow up into Amitabh. In fact filmmakers are expected to script such little puzzles into their films to delight committed audiences.

Off screen, however, the drama is often located elsewhere. Amitabh Bachchan asks: 'Ritu, where is my voice?' He is talking to director Rituparno Ghosh during the audio-mixing of the film *Raincoat* (2004). Through the session, he repeats the query until everyone is able to hear the familiar, iconic baritone. This is a voice treated in audio consoles. Once tempered for the 'angry young man' constructed in the socio-realist workshops of Salim–Javed, it soon becomes Amitabh's signature tune. It is an 'unreal' voice with a timbre that no one in 'real' life has, but soon becomes his identity. Almost everyone can mimic or reference it for use. Thence Amitabh Bachchan must cling to this 'voice' as to an identity card. Rituparno, alas, has no way to take him without the baritone! The ear is a precision instrument. People may fail to 'recognize' him, this image built over decades, which he would rather not risk.

This is what Barthes calls the polysemous image with multiple meanings, of which the desirable one must be anchored with annotations. So postcards, paintings and photographs are required to have captions. In cinema, speech is used to that effect, situating the image in one of many possible meanings. The audience listens carefully, striving not to miss a word of what is being said. People in the know of a language usually do not use it beyond workaday speech. Language's more precise and persuasive powers remain hidden from most. While they may relate easily to the character, perceive its conditions and respond to its predicament, they often find themselves at a loss to identify and articulate the heart of the matter; however they listen carefully to the well-versed/articulated dialogues and even try to memorize them in anticipation of a similar situation.

**Devdas:** Tumhari kabhi yaad nahi aayi Paro.

**Paro:** Sach Dev, main kabhi yaad nahin aayi?

**Devdas:** Baat to wo yaad aati hai na Paro, jisme koi baat ho par tum mein to koi baat hee hai hi nahin, na Paro...

**Paro:** Sach kaha Dev, baat to sirf tum mein hai...

**Dev:** Right!

**Paro:** ...Isiliye tumhari likhi un paanch chitthiyon ko main din mein paanch baar padhti thi ... to saal mein kitni baar padh li hongii Dev? Aur dus saal mein? 18,250 baar ... aur tum mein itni baat hai Dev ki dus saal pehle tumhare naam ka diya jalaaya tha maine aur use aaj tak bujhne nahin diya ... wo kitne ghanton se jal raha hai Dev? 87,600 ... aur tum mein itni baat hai Dev ki din ke har pal mein main tumhe yaad karti thi ... din mein pal kitne hote hain Dev? Tum hisab mein bahut kachche ho Dev...

**Dev:** Ek baat hoti thi tab tum bahut yaad aati theen.

**Paro:** Kab?

**Dev:** Jab jab main saans leta tha tab...

**Paro:** Isshh!

**Devdas:** Yaad to unhe kiya jata hai jinhe bhulaya ja sakta ho ... ganwaar! Kitni aasani se ginwa diya ki har pal tumhe meri yaad aati thi, lekin ye nahin socha ki un palon mein bitata to mein hee tha ... diya tum jalaati theen par jalta to mein hee tha...

– A dialogue track in *Devdas* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002)

A young girl in a remote Punjab village keeps me awake late into the night over Sanjay Bhansali's *Devdas*. Her heart seems to miss a beat at the sheer idea of such gloriously impossible love even as she asks me if such love is possible; she wants me to confirm if it is possible to remember the beloved with each breath. It is difficult to know if she is in love with Devdas, Shah Rukh, Paro, Aishwarya, or the idea of love itself. Perhaps looming large over the glorious heartache, it is the seduction of what we call language; if only she had someone to speak the same words to. I can hear her toss and turn in bed all night; the idea of love comes to her wrapped in the precisely chosen covers of a film dialogue – a bouquet of carefully arranged select words similar to the Amitabh baritone that no one in 'real' life speaks. So for the gloriously aching love located in these words, she will keep returning to the film. *Devdas* is a runaway hit. It is the 'n'-th remake based on the novella of the same title by Saratchandra Chatterjee.

Popular cinema arguably serves as a veritable school for language; the film's argument helps groom the audiences into not just listening carefully, but also finding an articulation of their own half-felt emotions. Before the multiplex avatar of cinema, a film used to be a box-office success only when people saw it many times and knew it by heart; the lyrics and dialogue booklets selling alongside the film reinforced this need. While the film market has shifted to multiplexes in the metros and found new audiences among the diaspora scattered beyond the seven seas, a curious reverberation of it can be seen to be continuing in the 'I love you' SMS booklets on the pavements. Everyone still falls in love, many continue to search for the most apt articulation of the vague, half-formed emotions in well-constructed beautiful phrases; the need manifests itself in the myriad templates on offer. In addition to constructing gender and cultural stereotypes, normative behavioural patterns, moral codes and image structures, *Bambaiya* cinema gives speech to the speechless and gets constructed equally in turn by the echo of its own sound tracks.

Hannah Arendt reminds: 'We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it and in the course of speaking, learn to be human.'

Sarah Kozloff argues: 'Speech however is not some abstract neutral communicative code; issues of power and dominance, of empathy and intimacy, of class, ethnicity and gender are automatically engaged every time one opens one's mouth.'

Roland Barthes declares: 'To speak is to already be on the side of the Law.'

Extending the argument, those outside speech are 'outlawed' by default. Consequently, when they speak, it has to be war. When the outlaw opens her mouth to speak, technically it must be a dissent; a revolt against whatever the proposition. While a man's honour is usually seen as tied to his word, the elusive woman is to be watched for her next move. Following this bracketing, she is often held accountable for her look or gesture while a man is haunted by his speech or promise – the popular perception being that she should be seen and not heard. More often than not, her silence is required to be taken as assent.

Hero sings: 'Dil tera deewana hai sanam' ('My heart is mad for you').

Heroine replies: 'Jaante ho tum kuchh na kahenge hum' ('You know I won't say anything to that'). – *Dil Tera Dewana*, dir. B.R. Panthulu, 1962.

The woman on screen is what she appears to be and nothing or very little beyond that. Every movement of the body, every gesture of the face is a cryptic clue in the puzzle: the way she looks, smiles, lowers her eyes, turns her head, stares, walks, stops, turns – each movement is ascribed a meaning. So the hero says she must either explain why she looked at him 'like that' or admit love!

In a system where speech has been regulated and made to work within variously granted sanctions, the study of silence becomes pertinent. In a society already operating on the basis of auto-censors, the Censor Board can only operate as a second filter. It may be seen in a news item reporting a society in Haryana ostracizing a woman for 'talking directly to her father-in-law' in 2011. The community leaders argue that she challenged the tradition which decrees that young daughters-in-law must speak only when spoken to.

Mrinal Pandey writes: 'Truth however is that the amount of talk by women has been measured less against the amount of male talk than against the traditional expectation of silence from women. As media we usually chase the spoken word: talks between heads of state, speeches made in Parliament or outside on the streets, lectures by eminent thinkers, the chatter of Page 3 socialites and the resounding fury of public processions and riots.'<sup>2</sup>

John Berger argues: 'A woman smoking is never just a woman smoking, but always indexical, of some other meaning that implicates a larger moral code.'

Madhav Prasad explains: 'Women are regarded as the guardians of the national culture, their appearance becoming the mark of distinction. Thus while colonialism leads to changes in men's clothing, what women should wear becomes a subject of national debate.'

Young girls from a college in Bhopal say: 'There is always someone who will tell you to shut up. Yesterday, I stopped my scooty on the road because Uma called to say the coaching had been shifted elsewhere; there was this uncle ji, who stopped his scooter and told me, "you shouldn't speak for so long on the road!" I feel, nobody wants a girl to speak, they just want her to be quiet.'

Rama asks: 'So do you manage to have a conversation on the mobile...'

Girl: 'Mobile is in my control, I can move with it, at least send an SMS from the bathroom.'

Another one: 'I too sometimes chat up late in the night inside my blanket...'<sup>3</sup>

It is curious to note how language skills have also largely remained a predominantly male domain with hardly any women script writers or lyricists in popular cinema.

<sup>2</sup> 'When an enforced silence speaks volumes', *Mint*, 2 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Rama Rao's study paper presented at the 'Youth Expressions in Transition' conference held at the Goethe Centre, Colombo.



Taboos have more debilitating powers than we imagine them to have. Irony however is not entertaining.

'Justice' cried the sparrow

Armed with bow and arrow<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1980s entertainment made new colonies with television. A series of developments paved the way for private access to public entertainment as a basic human right. In the wake of the arrival of cable television in the 90s, the remote control redefines power equations within nuclear families. In the middle-class Indian home, the late night patriarch discovers FTV on mute. The making of the voyeur is galvanized with TV as the peep-hole. From here it can now only move towards CCTV with the sound component becoming peripheral. It is the persistent male gaze upon the woman reborn as electronic surveillance that manifests itself as the Close Circuit Camera and TV network. In spite of its huge following the world over (the largest user being Great Britain), monitoring remains an issue – thank god – affecting its expansion plans. However the split between the eye and the ear turns more glaring henceforth. And with the fixed line telephone finally walking out on 'home', sound appears to break for good with the visual. In the mobile age, image now follows speech, turning all evidence shaky. All over the globe,

One asks the other: Where are you? Advertising companies promptly cash in by selling it as 'certain liberation'. The man in the barber shop lies on his cell in an advert: 'Am in an urgent meeting. Will be late.' The excitement of a 'hard to catch' lie clicks with the audience and quickly finds its way into readymade template folders. From this point on the voice on the other side is forever suspect.

If film was born to the age of love and marriage, TV is the illegitimate child left at its doorstep and DV, the grandchild born to the age of the single parent. Image and sound, no longer co-travellers of Robert Bresson's notebooks, meet and part to go their separate ways post the cool break-up party. Finger on the pop pulse, the lyricist underlines the irony in a pungent rhyme.

People flock to the box office to hear the hero sing of what they have always wanted: 'Zor ka jhatka hai zoron se laga / Shaadi ban gayi umar qaid ki saza!' (refrain from Kamil Irshad's song in *Action Replay*, dir. Vipul Shah, 2010). The word resonating through the electronic cables joining scattered townscapes makes a universally felt private emotion public through a song. At first it creates a little discomfort; then the stark plainspeak perhaps shows the reality of marriage as the farce it has mostly been. The one trait that stands out in 'We the people', is the doublespeak, the ubiquitous double standard. Popular axioms like 'Haathi ke daant, khane ke aur, dikhane ke aur' ('The elephant's teeth are different for the double purposes of show and use') serve to subtitle the very self-consciousness of a people in this regard. Only language, because it holds the key to the memory of an entire people, is also capable of returning that which may have gotten lost in historical transitions. And what better critique than the poet's! So much for poetry; it takes a critic sepoy to encounter the moral police.

The music legend Kumar Gandharva used to say: 'The musical note must be tossed up in the air so that even the note says – "Now that's some throw!"' If Bambiya cinema is looked at as a game of cards played by a group of men at a small-town street corner, the song can be seen as the joker – a denomination that acquires changing value in different contexts, often becoming the trump card. Sometimes the sub-text

<sup>4</sup> Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables*, UK: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981.

expected to be countered by the censors quickly morphs itself into a song. With its characteristic playfulness, it acquires the ability to expand/contract time into a moment or eternity; it is the site where the suppressed speech can suddenly find voice, breaking into a song. Those thrown to the margins – woman, beggar, madman, orphan, lover, poet, prisoner, philosopher – often lash out in song here; while at others, words muted out of dialogues find expression. Like dialogue, song acquires a life independent of the film, and lives many subsequent lives outside its context. In urban India after people have forgotten their own songs, folk or otherwise, they can still play *Antakshari* (a game of popular film songs) and re-bond over a community fire.

While *Bambaiya* cinema has drawn considerable flak for its regular servings of social, cultural and gender stereotypes in its rote representation of people on screen, its exposé of the same society, its biases, injustices and malpractices by design or default can also not go unnoticed. Yet behind all the glitter, it has been a gold rush after all. It is a necessary corollary to its nation-conquering and now globe-conquering aspirations, in the face of which an inclusive, liberal, democratic, majoritarian, humane, just and secular face would only be termed good diplomacy. In building that India on screen, the pretext of speaking for 'everyone' is prompted by the free market, that invariably gives in to the very hybridization that marks it.

Samsung jingles: Everyone's invited.

Market discriminates against no one. It is as secular as you can imagine anything to be. Basically everyone who can afford to pay in cash or kind is welcome. Some of the best minds in the subcontinent are working for the jingle industry today. However the shairs with their liability of a critical bent, a heart warming to the people, don't still seek/find employment here. They must knock at the doors of the silver screen where the word as dialogue and lyric has continued to loom large over the visual domain. There is still space to create the crucial interface with the proverbial common wo/man here. Behind the considered articulation as popular verse, the explosive stuff has often been poetry, worked subliminally into given contexts in the language of poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Pradeep, Gulzar, Shailendra, Javed Akhtar and now Irshad Kamil. Sahir was a very good poet who took film song-writing seriously. He was the first person to bring the film song closer to the poem. And we know how states and authorities in all space and time, seemingly indifferent to the subversive powers of poetry, are nevertheless scared of it. Its escaping their sharp scissors can be attributed to the very nature of song, with its sacrosanct bond with music. And how does one ban a song! How does one stop a beggar, a child, a bar singer from singing?! Once the word is out, it will resonate. The poet thrown out of the Republic will still sing from across.

And categorically, it is in this interstice that an imperceptible change is wrought with far-reaching impact; through the poet's voice, the vague, unspoken thoughts of people not only find expression, they even become memory. However, while the poet is busy dreaming a little wilder, seeing a little farther, rebelling a little more, the rest seem content being rear-view mirrors reflecting the images back to the objects – the images forever appearing farther and farther than they actually are. Having the longest rope, poets always stray a little farther than the rest. The poet asks: Where does the 'word not spoken' go?

The politics of speech in the subcontinent takes us to the poet-archer with the word as arrow withheld for centuries in her/his quiver; it is 'speech' imploding the

enforced 'silence' from within in the crucial movement of poetry called Bhakti (beginning roughly around the eleventh century). For once it quintessentially reconfigures sound and silence. One fine day the word walks out of its own will and holds its own; like a mighty river it slows down its pace to take along all – women, men and children. All of a sudden, Machhindernath, Gorakh, Kabir, Nanak, Bulleshah, Meera, Tukaram, Janabai, Lalan, Narsi, Lal Ded and others begin to speak in simple everyday words accessible to an illiterate, but at the same time imbued with the rebellion of truth. It is able to become a stupendous movement with the broadest base; perhaps because simplicity for them is not a limitation of need, but a guarantee for inclusiveness.

Ela Bhatt reminds gently: 'Inclusiveness and reciprocity are only for equals. Aid, charity, philanthropy reinforce hierarchy, while a shared meal is shared peace and a shared environment is a guarantee against war.'<sup>5</sup> Bhakti poets give voice to one and all. They sign off at the end of the verse with their names as Kabir does with his name: 'kahe Kabir' or 'says Kabir'. Words held back for centuries are released. It is called rebellion and war then, and peace later. The form they choose to speak in words is *ulatbansi* (paradox). To the rescue of peace comes war in its finest imagery.

**Says Kabir:** 'Guru Ramanand ki fauj mein, sanmukh tare re Kabir / Sabad wala bann chalaaya re haan ... marjeeva laaviya re' ('In the army of Ramanand, Kabir leads upfront / He shoots the word-arrow'). The poet speaks directly to the common folk in their language. Cinema responds with a number of super-hit films on the lives of the poet-saints in practically every dialect and language of the subcontinent. This happens in Bombay as much as elsewhere. People flock to cinema halls in bullock-carts to see the poet work a miracle, defy the norm, define rebellion and break into song.

In Indian thought, the word has been studied from two main angles: as sound, *sabda*, and also as the object to which that sound refers, *artha*. In both cases, investigation has led to underlying, hidden depth and layers. Lofty meanings live in the higher mind. In this sense, words have a meaning beyond the commonplace experiences of man. But no one may take more than s/he puts into them. Language is made by the people who speak it; equally, the language of a people cannot rise above the vision of its poets and thinkers. A language lives through its men and women of truth, vision, seeking and austerity, even though they may not write a single sentence or compose a single line.<sup>6</sup> **Dissolve.**

By the time I come out of film school, the charm of Bombay has begun to fade. In Mumbai locals there is no more space for romancing the city; the sea has moved out of focus. The city meanwhile has upgraded itself finding new prestige in the neo-colonial title 'Bollywood'. This rhyming with Hollywood betrays its new ambition. No longer aspiring for a 'national' cinema, global Bollywood has finally set shop opposite Hollywood...

The fisherman's wife was the pope now. She could not sleep and tossed from one side to the other through the night wondering what else she could become, but she could think of nothing higher. As the sun began to rise, and she saw the rosy dawn she leaned over and looked out of the window. 'Ha!' she thought, 'couldn't I too, make the sun and moon go up?' 'Man,' she said, poking him in the ribs with her elbow, 'wake up, and go there to the fish. I want to be like God.'<sup>7</sup>

I know the story. I read it again. I wait for it to end. I wait for the fisherman and his wife to be sent back to their humble beginnings – the vinegar bottle. I wait for another beginning, another going, another coming ... of age.

<sup>5</sup> Ela. R. Bhatt, 'A Plea for Building a Gentler Economy', keynote speech at the special symposium, Kyoto.

<sup>6</sup> Ram Swarup, *The Word as Revelation: Names of God*, India Impex, 1980

<sup>7</sup> 'Fisherman and his Wife', a tale from Grimms' fairy tales.