CHAPTER 7

Crying as Political Spectacle

Mythopolitics, Melodrama, and Media*

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Two scenes, of men crying, have been received in contrary ways in the landscape of contemporary Indian politics and, indeed, media. In the wake of India's catastrophic pandemic, a growing political criticism targeted India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, for his complicity in spreading the virus by agreeing to huge religious congregations for a pilgrimage in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand and overseeing unmasked audiences gathered to see him during mass election rallies in West Bengal. His party trod nervously among constituencies ravaged by disease and death. Their public relations advisory urged the cultivation of empathy in their dealings with bereaved families, clearly something which did not come naturally to a party exercising brute majorities in parliament for whom a bullying and punitive approach to any opposition had become commonplace.[1] While criticism mounted, Modi's silence became deafening. A politician known for his gift for colloquial utterance and using radio and television to address audiences directly and with the appearance by turns of intimacy and authority, Modi was starved of words. Finally, when he came to address the

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nation, he cried. It was not a great performance (Figure 7.1). And, at least in a sector of public opinion, it was openly derided, one of his opponents, Rahul Gandhi, lampooning the effort as crocodile tears.

In another scene, the peasant leader Rakesh Tikait, son of the legendary Mahendra Singh Tikait, who had brought India's capital Delhi to its knees through mass agitation in 1988, found himself reduced to tears. Pitted against Modi's unbending government, police, and lumpen aggression, Tikait, one of a battery of peasant leaders who oversaw the 2021 farmer's agitation against laws that appeared to throw a vulnerable agrarian population on the mercy of a market tailored for big retail capture, suddenly found the movement slipping away and retreating to the countryside. Tears of humiliation cascaded forth in front of a throng of television and cell phone cameras and microphones, with Tikait saying he would commit suicide



Figure 7.1 Screengrab of DD News tweet, 21 May 2021

Source: https://x.com/DDNewslive/status/1395633356394487809?t=xUcuoBGbPnD3tzjy92QlrQ&s=19 (accessed 11 September 2025).

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Figure 7.2 Screengrab from Lallantop's YouTube video 'Farm law के खिलाफ Rakesh tikait ने रोते हुए Ghazipur border पर Media के सामने बड़ी धमकी दे दी'.

rather than give up in the face of government repression (Figure 7.2). If Modi's tears were the butt of jokes, Tikait's, circulating virally through myriad cell phones, proved electrifying. Peasant panchayats, councils, gathered in villages as Tikait's community rallied around him. From then on, the amassing of peasant protestors, even as it varied in density and reach, remained remarkably sustained, developing campaigns against Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (the Indian People's Party, BJP) in alliance with other opponents of its rule. There is more than meets the eye to these stories, and a simple bipolarity dear to our melodramatic hearts should not obscure various layers of power that structure the terms of opposition. These would include a more clinical exploration of peasant politics in Uttar Pradesh and its shifting relationship with Hindutva and Modi.[2]

Melodrama and Mythopolitics

However, I start with this counterpoint partially because it highlights a key trope in the armature of melodrama, one of the analytical frames of this chapter: the welling of tears as the occasion for the expression of feelings which, for various reasons, had been suppressed or did not have the circumstances for their articulation. The most common case is that of the

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disempowered who navigate a world of inequity silently and strategically, but who, through the activities of helpers and their own initiative, find a context in which an empathetic audience to their plight is produced. This happens in arenas ranging from the domestic sphere through to courts of law, representative institutions from parliament to village councils, and the court of public opinion. At this point, tears emerge from a feeling of being overwhelmed by the final arrival of a long-delayed and deferred recognition that is the due of the powerless (Moretti 1983; Neale 1986). They can also emerge when justice seems impossible to actualize, in the face of the brute repression of the powerful. Arguably, with Tikait there is a variation on this. At first glance he is not a figure of the disempowered, hailing as he does from a powerful peasant political dynasty. However, we may reflect that Tikait had never quite 'made it': he failed to win elections and had not lived up to the legacy of his father (Kashyap 2021). So there could be an element of personal frustration in the welling up of tears, as, just when he seemed to have overcome his personal failure as a leader, the threat of state repression looms to squash his aspirations. But the individual connects with the collective; the community makes his distress their own. Tears well up as a result of a sudden reversal in the momentum which has enabled a public airing of injustice. The involuntary welling of tears can prompt a discernment of virtue amidst the dross of a corrupt and manipulable image world.

With Modi, there have been no lack of tears, with his followers as well as his critics, including comedians, documenting each instance (Kumar 2021; Mulk 2021; Ashraf 2021). Among the well-known episodes was the moment he was elected leader of the BJP's parliamentary party in 2014 and thereby the prime minister of India. Another significant case was when he undertook demonetization in 2016, claimed awareness of how this would put the people into economic strife, and yet urged their support so that he would be able to end the problem of unaccounted or black money and forged currency. In general, a key motif in his shedding of tears is the narrating of his own story, of someone who came from modest circumstances, the son of a *chaiwala*, or tea-seller, who was cared for by his mother, avowedly by her washing dishes as a domestic help, and had left everything, given up everything, to serve the nation. Modi becomes overwhelmed by his own story of sacrifice, his seeking of empathy displacing empathy for an Indian people subject to the jeopardy of financial instability and the ravages of the pandemic. This is a populist appeal, where the leader is not part of the forging of a symbolic equivalence theorized by Ernesto Laclau, in which social groups otherwise differentiated by wealth, education, and profession

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(and caste) are brought onto the same plane by a perceived commonality of affective engagement (Laclau 2005). Rather, he channels and directs that equivalence on the claim of superordinate capacity. The populist appeal channels the people against a corrupt elite, with demonetization facilitating a levelling of the elite, compelled now to join queues along with their plebeian others to exchange their cash for new notes.

This is a case of a complex, narcissistic articulation of empathy, in which the leader becomes the key object and vehicle of empathetic engagement. We have another, quite contrary possibility: that performativity invites not validation of its authenticity and truth but of its performativity, inviting at least some of the constituencies he addresses to accept that which is transparently staged.

Martin Jay, in his analysis of the political functions of lying in *The Virtue of Mendacity*, notes a general acknowledgement of the acceptability of lying, partial truths, and controlled disclosure for the stable and effective functioning of government, as something motivated by the imperatives of national security, for example, or even in the belief that it is for the good of the public (Jay 2012). However, the question of complicity between political leader and constituency I draw attention to is rather more specific. A transparency in the lie invites knowing collusion between the politician and his audience, based on the cultivation of a bond whose rationale is based on investments ranging from an identification with the leader and what he represents to a more calculative evaluation of his leadership. Contemporary right-wing politics fashions the big leader image to mould a majoritarian Hindu constituency out of diverse and disparate strata; to offer avenues of advancement to subordinate communities on condition of acquiescing to majoritarianism; to subordinate those who fail to comply or actively resist; and, in the case of the Muslim, to consciously exclude and to target with often murderous intent. As I will suggest, such a bid is also driven by mythopolitical iconicities based on a longer history of power and efficacy.

I refer to the concept of mythopolitics, the way ancient myths, legends, and folk tales come to infuse the discourse of politics in the contemporary and constitutes an affective field to engage the publics in the political as a transformative project. The mythopolitical generates ideas about the relationship between the sacred and earthly existence, formulations about kingship, priestly mediation, social hierarchies, for example, of caste and questions of social marginality and untouchability, and understandings of selfhood and resistance. Mythopolitical forms have a long history and continue to offer resources of an ethical, affective, and strategic disposition. The mythopolitical's conceptual productivity lies in its suggesting a stream

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of practice and meaning-making often pitted against a rationalist and realist mode of communication, one which provides significant resources for popular perception and action, but also for authoritarian drives.

The mythopolitical offers the potential to explore how images work and the political efficacy they acquire. Several writers and scholars have reflected on the distinctive forms of imagination involved. Ashis Nandy, in his article 'History's Forgotten Doubles', addresses societies where history has not come to be the dominant mode of understanding pasts and plotting futures (Nandy 1995). Authors such as Christopher Pinney, working on chromolithographs and photography in India (Pinney 2006), and Kajri Jain, working on calendar art circulated in the bazaar and on the monumental statue, open up a space for mythopolitical reflection (Jain 2007, 2021). Using the concept of corpothetics, Pinney argues an embodied aesthetic, rather than one governed by perspectival construction, defines popular artworks, involving a mobilization of the senses in everyday engagement. He suggests this works against reason and realism's sway in Indian society and cultural life, and that even new techniques cultivated in colonial art colleges were channelled into a popular aesthetic. Not only is the religious image everywhere, but its forms of iconicity expand to include political leaders, with mythic references becoming key resources in projecting the leader's appeal and political resonance in the contemporary. In cinema, the mythopolitical is articulated in the persistence of the mythological film, discussed by Rachel Dwyer (2006); another site for critical reflection on mythopolitics is the phenomenon of an Islamicate cinema analysed by Mukul Kesavan (1994), Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen (2009), Salma Siddique (2022), and other scholars.

Along with the mythopolitical, I draw on the critical apparatus of melodrama studies to analyse the political. Unlike the mythopolitical, melodrama is critically based in modern experience rather than deriving from ruminations of a more archaic provenance. Engaging modern transformation through a moral navigation that seeks to recover ethical points of anchorage, relating to the sacred and to affective social ties, even of a hierarchical sort, melodrama can appear invested in earlier times even as its scenario engages present time and the lineaments of a future. Shot through with a Manichaeism pitting good against evil, the vulnerable against the villainous, it inevitably takes the most vulnerable figure to navigate narratives of an unequal society. As I have outlined, victims cannot demonstrate their innocence and virtue; their expressivity is rendered mute when confronted by overweening power, and silence emerges as a dominant trope of melodramatic form. Vulnerability is given expression ultimately

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through speech in public fora, but in the body of the text, play, or film, it is registered in perceptual, rhythmic, and visceral registers to capture the up and down of desires plagued by frustration, helplessness, and abjection (Brooks 1976; Elsaesser 1972; Gledhill 1987; Vasudevan 2010).

In this chapter, I develop a line of inquiry arising from the eruption of the mythopolitical in the contemporary. I take Modi's present figuration, specifically the way he is presented in Banaras, where he has been a member of parliament for two terms. The mythopolitical here draws attention not only to the way Modi is presented but also to cultural imagery relating to the city of Banaras, its *ghat*s and funeral pyres, and the presence of the Dom caste associated with its death rituals. If the genealogy of the sacred city is one reference point in this exploration, the other is its representation in cinema. Here I draw upon *Rangbhoomi* (2013), an essay film made by avant-garde film maker Kamal Swaroop. Swaroop's *Rangbhoomi* was made to commemorate India's *Raja Harishchandra*, pioneer filmmaker D. G. Phalke's 1913 film, a film that was probably destroyed and thus reshot in 1917, the version we have today. Swaroop brings the canonical film into conversation with the contemporary, investing it with a new sense of liveness and topicality. Phalke's film focuses on two locations that resonate for us today: first, Ayodhya, Harishchandra's kingdom and the mythic birth place of Ram, the ruler known for his exemplary justice and virtue, but now, unfortunately, a key figure in mobilizing a fascist Hindu majoritarianism; second, it features Banaras, the most holy of Hindu sacred sites, which is also resonant in the contemporary for its being the parliamentary constituency of Narendra Modi. The BJP's choice of this electoral seat for Modi was not accidental. It is a significant stage on which Modi has intervened to alter the symbolic functions of the sacred in relationship to a wider politics. One of the key iconicities in both canonical film and Modi's second campaign, of 2019, highlights the figure of the Dom. As I will suggest, Swaroop's use of the 1917 footage constitutes an *archiveological intervention*, mobilizing found material to create a distinctive weave of affect and remembrance for audiences today and in Banaras. As Catherine Russell notes,

> archiveology refers to the reuse, recycling, appropriation, and borrowing of archival material that filmmakers have been doing for decades … The film archive is no longer simply a place where films are preserved and stored but has been transformed, expanded, and rethought as an 'image bank' from which collective memories can be retrieved …' (Russell 2018: 1)

In *Rangbhoomi*, Swaroop traces the city through Phalke's sojourn there and his bid to shift from cinema to theatrical practice. It is also critically

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about seeking to provide a new life and awareness of Phalke's work by screening the films for local audiences and also by tracing the filmic imaginary as it weaves into the key spaces of the city, from the sacred river through to the funeral pyres overseen by the Dom caste. Different figurations of cultural subjectivity emerge by bringing the Phalke oeuvre and the city together, especially the child god Krishna and his defeat of a serpent, and the figure of Harishchandra, the king who gives up the world and experiences untold suffering.

Following on from the film analysis, I consider the building of Modi's power through the way his image undergoes refashioning at key moments in his rule, and how it codifies a shift in the relationship of the religious and political realms, and in particular how it constitutes an intervention in understandings of social order and social mobility. Crucial to this new social and political architecture of rule is the wielding of necropolitics, the subordination of life to death, specifically for the Muslim population, the other through which Hindutva extends itself across disparate social and religious strata to consolidate a national ethnos.

Exploring Truth in the Cinema: The Case of Raja Harishchandra

I bring these two strands, of mythopolitics and melodrama, together in my analysis of *Raja Harishchandra* as a film which is given new life in the contemporary by Swaroop's *Rangbhoomi*. Kathryn Hansen, leading historian of folk and urban ('Parsi') theatre, provides the following version of the story. Harishchandra's virtue was demonstrated by his successful completion of several Rajasuya Yagyas, kingly sacrifices, and he was on the verge of attaining heaven. The king of gods, Indra, affronted by the mortal king's accession to the portals of the godly, asks the sage Viswamitra to test and diminish Harishchandra. Viswamitra took the form of a wild boar ravaging Harischandra's gardens. When the king shot at him, he assumed his real form and demanded compensation (Hansen 1991: 119–121), In the 1932 Marathi film by V. Shantaram, *Ayodhyecha Raja* (King of Ayodhya), there is a similar origin to Harishchandra's travails. We see Indra and other gods in heaven, including the sage Viswamitra, decide that Harischandra has to be tested.

In the Phalke film, Viswamitra himself is the source of the problem, perhaps related to his rivalry with Vashishta, another powerful sage and Harischandra's mentor. Harischandra, hearing the voices of distraught women, releases his arrow into an image of three figures arraigned in front

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Figure 7.3 *Raja Harishchandra* (1917): Harishchandra disrupts Viswamitra's meditation

Source: National Film Archives of India.

of Viswamitra. These are the three powers, or *trigunka*, Viswamitra has brought under his control with the force of his meditation (Figure 7.3). The sage is furious with Harishchandra for breaking the spell and releasing the powers and unleashes a series of demands that result in the family's sale into slavery, their separation from each other, and the son's death (Figure 7.4). In Banaras, the queen, Taramati, and their son, Rohitashva are sold to a lustful prince, and Harishchandra to the Dom Raja, who oversees the burning of bodies at the *ghat*. While the residual film material of the 1913/1917 film does not have the scene relating to the slave market, in V. Shantaram's 1932 *Ayodhyecha Raja*, the slave market is on display, not dissimilar from Roman Empire film scenes which were circulating, including *Ben Hur* and *The Ten Commandments*, 1920s hit films.[3]

The Raja Harishchandra texts, performance-based, print, and cinematic, invite reflection on a cluster of concepts, centred on self and non-self, *dharma*, or law, *artha*, or efficacy, and *satya*, or truth. And they also explore in their media form and narrative engagement the material circumstances of exchange based on the bazaar, and constructions of the social centred on caste hierarchy in the world, devolving into a condition of bare life. Here, I will argue that the necropolitical emerges as a determinant level of the social and of the limits of existence.

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Figure 7.4 *Raja Harishchandra* (1917): Viswamitra expels Harishchandra

Source: National Film Archives of India.

Let me track these sites more carefully. The question of the self has been key to contemporary theoretical explorations of the political in precolonial and colonial practice. As Prathama Banerjee has shown, a number of intellectuals and social reformers embraced the status of renunciation, motivated in particular by a nondualist approach (Advaita Vedanta) which refuses a distinction between self and nonself (Banerjee 2020: ch. 1). The dissolution of certain notions of attachment has been central to producing alternative understandings of the self posed both against the colonial modern and against the Hindu social order. With a genealogy going back to the Buddha and a continuing tradition of holy men, *sadhu*s, and saints, modern instances include Vivekananda (Banerjee 2020) and Gandhi, the lower-caste saint from Kerala Sri Narayanguru (Kumar 2017), and peasant leaders such as Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (Tulika 1986). All of these instances relate to figures who knowingly undertook the work of renunciation critically and consciously. There is a suggestive slippage in our applying the category of renunciation to the case of Harishchandra, a figure based in the epics, rather than a historical figure, and one that represents a quite distinct trajectory of renunciation—for there is no will or consciousness involved in the king's renunciation. After agreeing to carry out whatever the sage demands in compensation, Harishchandra is subject to unending demands, forcing him into a situation of tragic destitution and family ruin. There is the classic melodramatic trope of victimhood, rather

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than a conscious adoption of renunciation, in Harischandra's destiny. It is, however, an exemplary tale, for it facilitates a mapping of the constitutive elements that compose the world.

The world of gods is the decisive level here, mediated, however, by seers, figures of spiritual force who use their powers of meditation to control elements and worlds and are not always in clear consort with the gods who rule from above. The final level of the world exposed by the king's descent is that of the cremation grounds, the world bordering the underworld. It is suggested in some versions that the merchant who purchases Harischandra, to inflict this darkest of fates, is none other than Yamraj, the god of the underworld. Be that as it may, it is the Dom Raja, king of the untouchable caste involved in the act of cremation, to whom Harishchandra is subordinated.

The narrative universe of the film is thus composed of: the transcendent world of the gods; the realm of kingship, of earthly power yet with heavenly aspiration; the market, or bazaar, the space of economic transactions, in this case centred on the buying and selling of bodies; finally, the world of death, overseen by its untouchable ruler. We may note here that Harishchandra is referred to as *satyavadi*, 'truth-speaking', an attribute used in the title of the popular *nautanki* play *Satyavadi Harishchandra*. And yet nowhere is Harischandra particularly distinguished for speaking the truth. He is true to his duty and keeps his word about fulfilling his obligations to the relentless Viswamitra. If he is not called upon to speak the truth, he nevertheless, in his earthly itinerary, experiences the truth of the world, who rules it, what it is composed of, and what those at its most suborned and marginalized levels suffer. It is ultimately about the experience of bare life as it takes place in the market of slavery and at the very untouchable margins of human experience. It is also finally about virtue, based on adherence to one's word and one's duty, specifically in relationship to the realm of the sacred made up of gods and holy men.

The surviving material from the Phalke film is made up of set pieces involving the royal hunt which leads to Harishchandra's antagonizing of Viswamitra, his renunciation of kingship, his descent into servitude to the Dom, and the bringing of his dead son to the cremation ground. Here the fallen king is confronted with the task of executing his wife for a trumped-up charge engineered by the sage Viswamitra. The scene is replayed in a different register in V. Shantaram's 1932 film, *Ayodhyecha Raja* (Figures 7.5 and 7.6).

Melodramatic gesture emerges, primarily a theatrical look outwards or a sigh inwards, presented in single-shot setups. This is much more fulsomely

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Figure 7.5 *Raja Harishchandra* (1917): Dom Raja hands Harishchandra the sword to execute his wife

Source: National Film Archives of India.



Figure 7.6 *Ayodhyecha Raja* (1932): Dom Raja orders Harishchandra to execute Taramati

Source: National Film Archives of India.

done in the 1932 sound film *Ayodhyecha Raja*, which also deploys sorrowful song sequences and elaborately staged sequences involving camera movement and cutting. At the climax of the film, divine intervention brings a halt to the dark fate unfolding at the cremation grounds and the

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restoration to life of the dead son: Shiva appears in *Raja Harischandra* (Figure 7.7), while in *Ayodhyecha Raja*, there is a stellar cast, including the sages Viswamitra and Vashista, Naradmuni, and Shiva gracing the occasion (Figure 7.8).



Figure 7.7 *Raja Harishchandra* (1917): Shiva intervenes to save Harishchandra's family

Source: National Film Archives of India.



Figure 7.8 Divine intervention in *Ayodhyecha Raja* (dir. V. Shantaram, 1932): Viswamitra, Vashishta, Naradmuni, Shiva, Harishchandra, Rohitshava, and Taramati

Source: National Film Archives of India.

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While *Raja Harishchandra* did not show all the scenes, the film's reception context involved the circulation of *Satyavadi Harishchandra* in print culture and folk theatre and audience familiarity with the overall story. The film was part of a media ecology that immersed audiences in multiple sites of engagement. Elaborately staged scenes of melodramatic suffering were remembered well after, as in the queen Taramati's crying over her dead son's body.

The circulation, repeated iterations, and durability of *nautanki* performance and print forms provide the intermedia context for Phalke's film. While *nautanki* was a north Indian form, and Phalke made his film in Maharashtra in western India, there was considerable investment by Phalke, the plays, and the film on a common focus in the north. This was Ayodhya, where Harischandra is the king. This is a location at once real and mythical, being the avowed birthplace of the Hindu king Ram. Other key passages invoking the north of India take place in the sacred city of Banaras, where Harishchandra's family is sold and where he comes into the service of the Dom overseers of the cremation grounds. The mythic and the real come together here, with an important cremation ground of the city named the Harischandra Ghat (pier).

Raja Harishchandra Finds Its Profilmic Scene: Kamal Swaroop's *Rangbhoomi*

Banaras is the focus of Kamal Swaroop's 2013 essay film about Phalke, and his period away from Pune and filmmaking. In 1920, the Phalke family shifted to Banaras, where Phalke wrote a play, *Rangbhoomi*. Swaroop undertakes a work of urban, theatrical, and film archaeology all at once. At one level his itinerary is motivated by Phalke's own experiment with theatre. Swaroop tracks down specific theatrical sites, as in his hunt for the *nach ghar*, or house of dance, where the play was performed (Figure 7.9a), and has himself photographed in a mirror in a ruined section of one of the theatres (Figure 7.9b); he also has himself captured reading in front of a painted theatrical backdrop (Figure 7.9c). Here the filmmaker takes the position of an interlocutor for Phalke's experiments with theatre, and, through the mirror shot in the ruins and against the painted backdrop, a peculiarly imaginary one, fabricating spaces in which he cohabits with the material traces of the past.

The crew track down the places and neighbourhoods Phalke lived in during his stay, interviewing several figures who appear to be local intelligentsia, with himself and his young filmmaking crew also participating in discussions

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Figure 7.9a–c *Rangbhoomi* (2013): Swaroop finds the *nach ghar*, reads from a script inside the remnants of a ruined theatre, and recites from the play against painted backdrop

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD release, Films Division, 2013, screengrab.

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about film, theatre, and art. Along with these interweaving tracks, Swaroop undertakes a work of rehousing the city and its river, the sacred Ganges, in cinema—or is cinema as a vehicle of mythopolitics being rehoused in the sites Phalke's films referred to but could not access? Thus, there is a citation of the trick shot featuring Krishna killing the fearsome Serpent King in the film *Kaliya Mardaan* (The Killing of the Serpent Kaliya) (dir. D. G. Phalke,1917) superimposed over the Ganges in the present day (Figure 7.10). It is as if these scenes, shot in or near Pune in the 1910s, are now being granted their appropriate if delayed profilmic scene, one which makes Banaras and the Ganges part of a playful, cinematically constructed sacred imaginary. Swaroop inserts his own trick film scene, rendering the river in a reverse, upside-down perspective, the underwater on top of the frame, the film crew on the boat underneath, as in an uncorrected camera obscura shot (Figure 7.11). We may recall here, in a somewhat displaced way, Catherine Russel's evocation of archiveology in the work of Thom Andersen in *Los Angeles Plays It Again* (2003). Andersen uses footage of Los Angeles films to infuse the contemporary city with its own imaginary cinematic historicity, built forms captured in the present inflected by their articulation through fictive scenes from the film archive of the city (Russell 2018: 78–90).

Among the spaces Swaroop captures in the contemporary is the Harishchandra Ghat, one of the sites where Doms oversee the burning

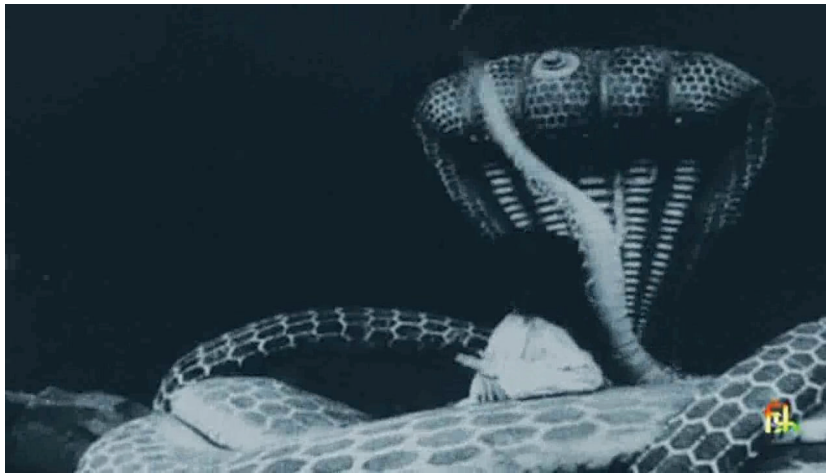


Figure 7.10 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): *Kaliya Mardan*

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

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Figure 7.11 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): inverted river shot

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.



Figure 7.12 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): at the cremation ground

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

of the dead (Figure 7.12). With the major cremation site named after Harishchandra, myth comes together with the city within which it unfolds. The film crew arrive at the *ghat* and talk with some of the Doms working at the site who note that when Harishchandra and his family ascended to

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heaven, so too did the Dom Raja. When the crew seek out the presiding male of the Dom family, a young female member of the family claims that he is not at home. However, journalists had interviewed heads of the Dom community on several occasions. There was a heightened focus on the figure of the Dom Raja, the overseer of the burning *ghat*s, in 2019. Modi's entourage, in seeking his re-election as a member of parliament in Banaras, and thus in all likelihood the prime ministership of the country, sought out the Dom Raja to be one of the proposers of his candidacy.

Scholarship on Banaras indicates the complexity of the Dom Raja's position in the city. Jonathan Parry's field research captured the power exercised by the Doms, and the way payments, including a tax for the burning of the body, were indispensable both to their symbolic power and to their financial needs. While formally the Doms were in charge of the Harishchandra and Markandikeya *ghat*s, their rights were contested, especially by communities who sought to bring their own priests and pyre-burners. Other allied businesses, especially related to the wood trade, while traditionally assigned to particular communities, would also be subject to contest. The coming of the electric crematorium was another cause for concern for the communities employed in this profession, even if chronic power problems ensured that wood-based cremation could never be supplanted. Nevertheless, there was active use of politics, Jonathan Parry indicates, in trying to slow down the effectiveness of this infrastructural transformation (Parry 1982). We should clarify that in the early 1980s, when Parry was undertaking his field research, the Dom Raja was in fact a well-off, even wealthy person. Contemporary accounts, especially after the induction of Jagdish Chowdhury, Dom Raja, into the 2019 proposal of Modi's candidature, do not indicate any such pronounced economic power. In Chowdhury's own account, there had been no marked change in his family's social and professional profile after he proposed Modi's candidacy (Dom Raja interview, Varanasi https://www.inkhabar.com).

However, what emerges from Parry's research is that the Doms, and the Dom Raja, are crucial figures in the symbolic economy of the city and of Hinduism as death ritual. If we open out the category of necropolitics as adumbrated by Achille Mbembe, such a phenomenon signals a new vector of the political framing of death. Mbembe argues for the distinction of necropolitics from biopolitics by asserting that if the latter relates to the political control over life and death, the former comprises the 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2016: 92). Framing this through the lens of death ritual, necropolitics also has implications about who is allowed to die in a ritually appropriate way congruent with community beliefs and

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practices. This also involves concerns for decorum, sanitation, and, we must not forget, recognition of a death in terms of the bureaucratic protocols of governments.[4]

In *Raja Harishcandra*, when Taramati is unable to pay the Dom's tax to enable the proper cremation of her dead son, Rohitshava, the incident highlights nothing less than a tragic deprivation; if life has been pushed to the margins of existence, here it is reduced to bare life. To adapt Agamben (1998), Rohitshava can be killed but is denied a death in the ritually sanctioned way, one which facilitates, socially and cosmologically, the attainment of *moksha*, or freedom, from rebirth so critical to certain traditions of Hindu belief. The management of death here crucially turns on the fulfilment of the rights of the Dom, the tax on death that he and he alone wields. It is here that a certain structure of governance of life and death comes across as distributed rather than centred on one authority. What is remarkable is the acknowledgement and formal incorporation of this in the move of Narendra Modi to bring the Dom Raja, and, indeed, death as a critical determinant of life, into visibility and political proximity.

Elemental Media: Fire and River, Cinema and City

In counterpoint to the logistics of death ritual within the symbolic architecture of necropolitics, *Rangbhoomi*'s suggestive ending opens up a more expansive reflection on the terms of existence, indeed, of political existence. As I have noted, the film traces a particular moment in Phalke's biography, which invites reflection on aesthetic forms and practices, literary, theatrical, and cinematic. There is another biography in play, that of the cinema and its destiny. Thus, Swaroop screens Phalke's oeuvre for local audiences and brings the studio-constructed cinematic Banaras of *Raja Harischandra* to Banaras. In this way, he provides the filmic with its desired profilmic scene, including the rendering of communities and spaces which govern the realm of death, and the burning *ghat*, which now bears the legendary king's name, the Harischandra Ghat.

As the film comes to a conclusion, Swaroop builds on the upside-down compositions of river and boat into a full-fledged elemental composition, which interweaves cinema, theatre, sacred city, and river. In the wake of his screening of films for the local audience (Figure 7.13), Swaroop cuts to an intertitle from *Raja Harischandra* as the screen is riven with fire (Figure 7.14). It is as if the screen peels away, to be followed by an image of the aged Phalke and then onto the movement of a boat on the river.

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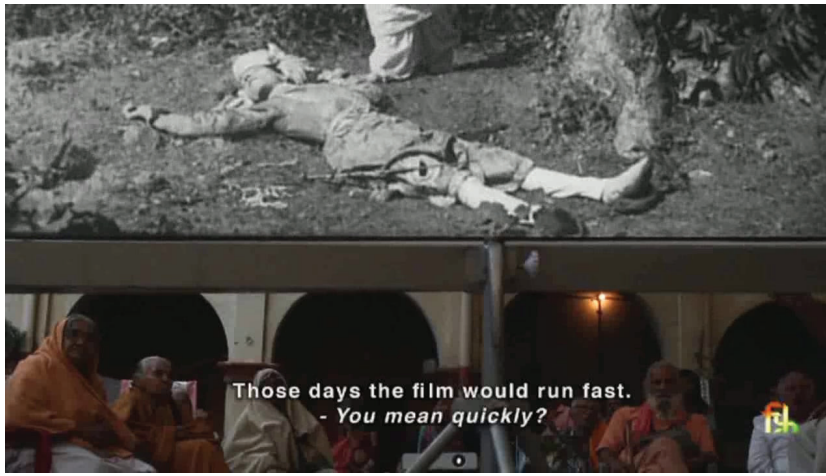


Figure 7.13 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): screening *Raja Harischandra* in Banaras

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

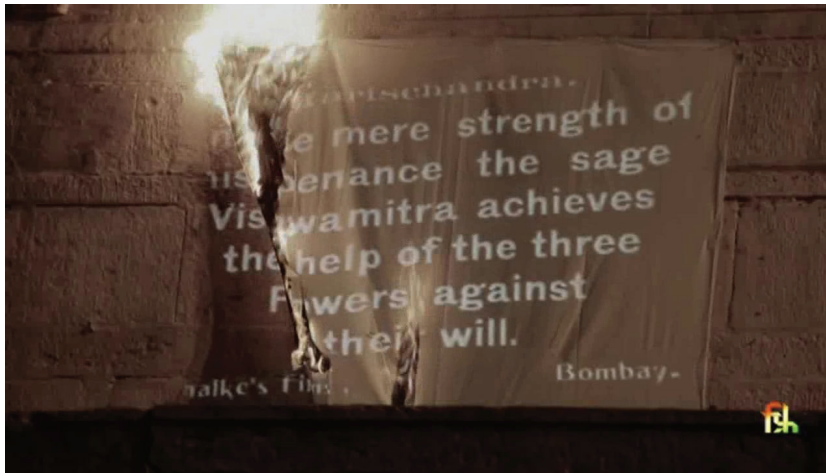


Figure 7.14 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): *Raja Harischandra* intertitle—screen burns

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

Here Swaroop effects something like a split-screen. What appears to be an iPad or mobile phone screen is at screen left, reflecting the passing cityscape from the vantage point of the boat's movement along the river (Figure 7.15). On this screen unfolds a fading in and out of print and poster

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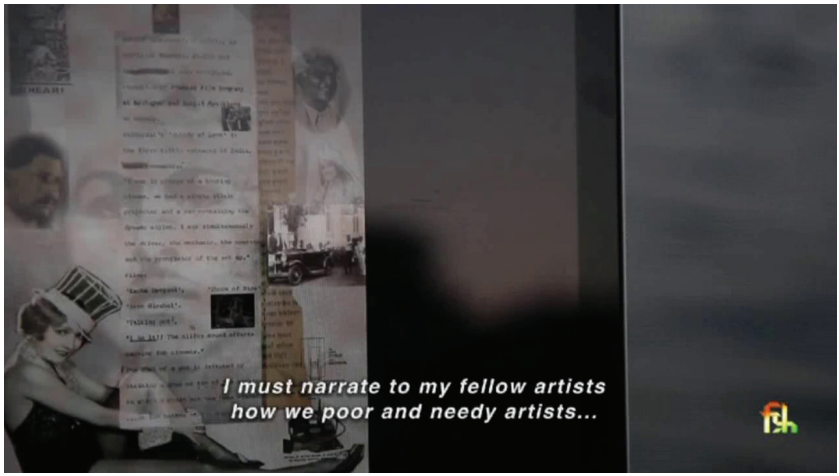


Figure 7.15 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): film scrapbook fades in and out of digital screen as water eddies alongside

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

images, at times evoking a scrapbook assembling advertisements, articles, logos, photographs, and images of equipment, mostly datable to the era of the 1930s. Most of this relates to the cinema, with significant exceptions, which I will come to shortly. The digital screen is the site for the emergence and fading of images, a space of collective cinematic memory, unfolding adjacent to the ripple of the river, bringing the two media into suggestive juxtaposition, an inter-flow, as it were, of memory and being (Figures 7.16–7.17). Over these images, Swaroop reads in voice-over from Phalke's writings on subjects such as the unethical functioning of the film business and his reflections on who he is in relation to the country, his family, and his profession. Life is narrated at the intersection of screen memories and elemental flow.

The voice-over concludes with a sustained reflection on a discourse of visibility and concealment centred on the curtain. In this discourse, the curtain creates duality and deceit, hiding actions from public scrutiny, but it is also a necessity in theatrical practice. To remove the curtain without reason would be absurd. Positioning himself as a Hindu nationalist, Phalke noted that to arbitrarily destroy the curtain was akin to the Mughals breaking coir curtains and removing the Brahmin hair tuft to assert themselves and convert the other. There is a further distinction, between the theatrical curtain and the cinema screen, in which the latter is not understood to be

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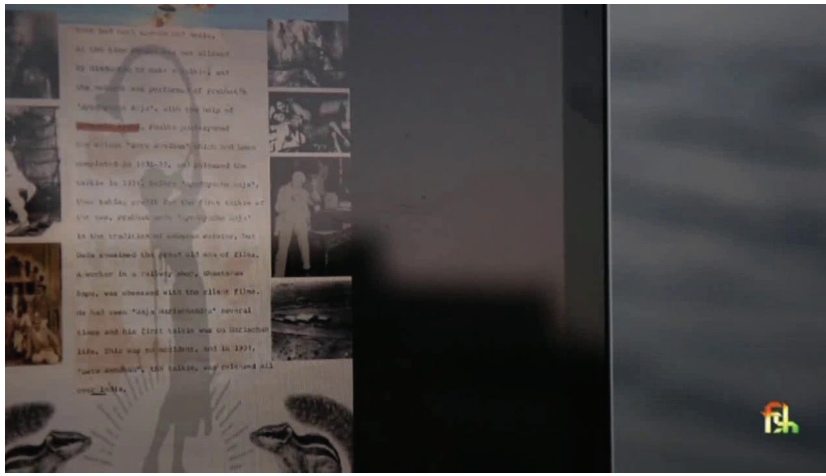


Figure 7.16 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): film scrapbook featuring Prabhat logo

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

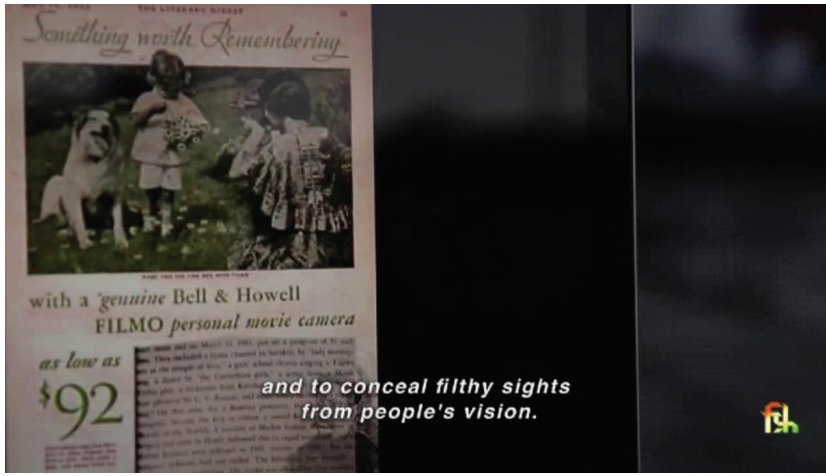


Figure 7.17 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): film scrapbook, amateur film advertising

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

a screen but 'a substratum which holds my visual illusion. Should a water surface be considered a curtain because it reflects? We see our reflection in the mirror, can we therefore call it a curtain or a screen …' There is something suggestive here, placing the cinema as part of a milieu which

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facilitates bodily perception, not separate from it, and also as part of an ecology of equivalent reflective surfaces, including water. We are reminded of new ways of framing the cinema, and of spectatorial dispositions, within an assemblage that places the screen within an ecology of natural elements and atmospheres—water, earth, air, energy forms—as well as built forms and fluid surfaces (Peters 2015; Buckley, Campe, and Casetti, 2019; for the South Asian context, Ghosh 2021).

The ethical engagement expressed in Swaroop's readings of Phalke's prose is observable in the images that surface on the screen. Here, punctuating extracts from cinema scrapbooks, a political ethics emerges, in images of Gandhi's famous Dandi Salt March of 1930 (Figure 7.18) and another invoking Gandhi's injunction to disobey (Figure 7.19).

Most striking of all is the featuring of a chromolithograph that shows Bhagat Singh's head being offered to Mother India alongside his death certificate executed by the colonial government, testifying to the way the popular corpothetic envelops the documentary drive (Figure 7.20). This focus on the political reminds us of the political charge of Phalke's work. Thus, if *Rangbhoomi* is a story about a particular moment in D. G. Phalke's life, it is also a story about a possible afterlife of D. G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*, especially in the way the film opens up the space of the city through the imprint of cinema. In turn, I suggest it invites us to

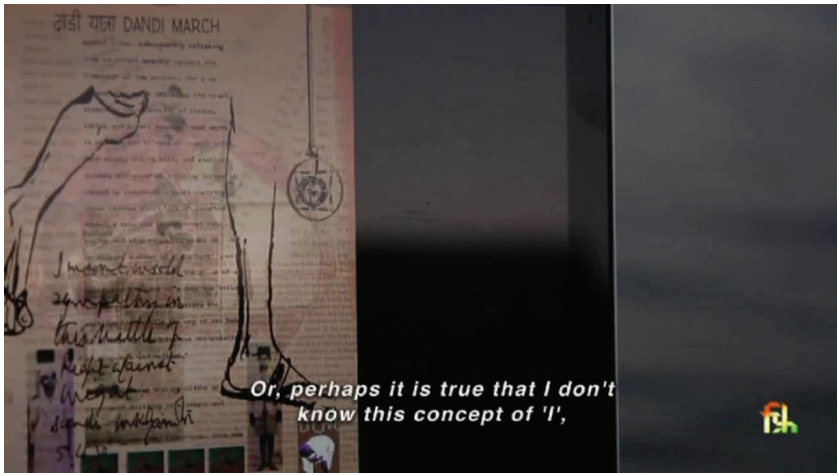


Figure 7.18 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): scrapbook—Dandi March

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

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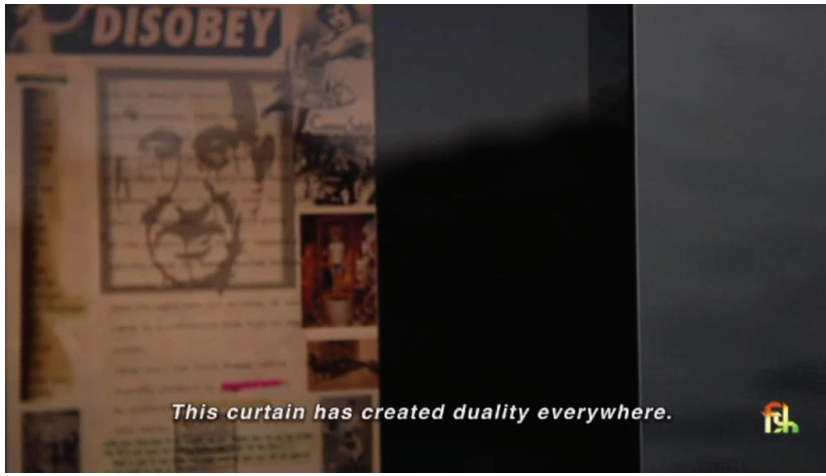


Figure 7.19 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): disobey!

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

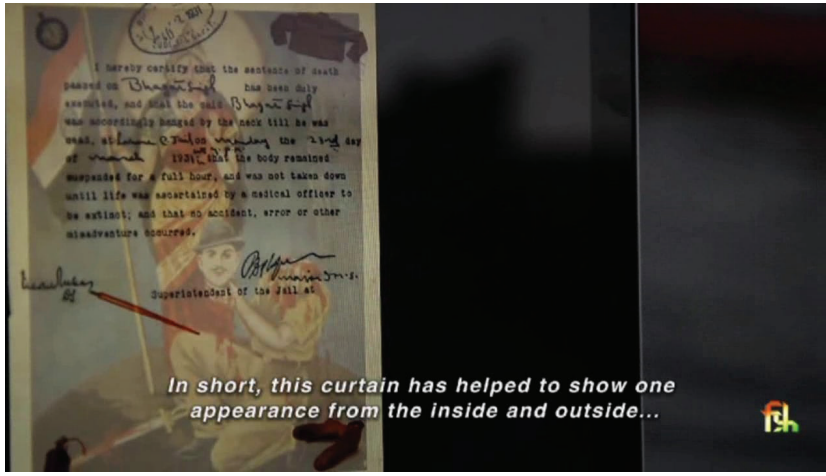


Figure 7.20 *Rangbhoomi* (2013): Bhagat Singh's death certificate inscribed in a chromolithograph of the revolutionary's head being offered to Mother India

Source: *Rangbhoomi* (2013), DVD, Films Division, screengrab.

reflect on the cinematic genealogy through a political lens. Even though *Rangbhoomi* does not take up the film's content and meaning directly, in its traversing the cremation *ghat*s it throws us back to the earlier film and its powerful exposition of the social as riven with inequality, and the screen

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memory it evokes through a cinematic scrapbook weaves in the political drives of Gandhian civil disobedience and revolutionary martyrdom, a different configuration of renunciation than that of a fallen king buffeted by the gods.

Modi and New Political Configurations

There is a substantial shift in the mythopolitical in the emergence of Narendra Modi. This is in the decisive displacement of the renouncer figure as a significant political force. Or rather, Modi displaces the functions of renunciation by incorporating it into his self-presentation as a figure without attachment. He has no demonstrable relationship with his wife, and no children, but it is this very lack of personal family that he leverages to claim that he works for the larger good, rather than individual interest, or the interest of his caste. Thus, while Modi asserts his disadvantaged lower-caste status, the son of a *chaiwala*, or tea-seller, he does not foreground his ascriptive status, that of Modi Ghanchi, and its eligibility to the claims and entitlements of reservation. In fact, the rights of this caste group in educational institutions and for government jobs came into being relatively recently, in 2000 (Yadav 2024). Rather, Modi asserts the image of the self-made man who regularly invokes his mother's sacrifices as crucial to his life. He hardly comes across as an ascetic, however. As Joyojeet Pal has noted, from early on he made a sustained bid to associate himself with digital technologies and to cultivate the image of a technocrat (Pal 2020). Also, perhaps the will to power, and the stridency with which this is pursued, does not sit well with the notion of the renouncer. Many critics have noticed a shifting iconicity to the Modi image.[5] While keeping to *kurta*s and *khadi* or silk waistcoats, his hairstyle in particular has undergone change. At first, the modern statesman travelling widely and building ties and forging agreements across the world was presented with a careful coiffure radiating control and statesmanlike reserve. On the eve of his second term, Modi undertook a marked shift in appearance, letting his beard and hair grow, and picturing himself in remote hills, in a state of meditation and lofty equipoise.

If we place this shifting image in relation to the mythopolitics of *Raja Harishchandra*, we will observe that Modi appears to have presented himself as entering a zone of transcendence. An earlier mythopolitics of the sort *Raja Harischandra* represents separated out the godly, the priestly, and the kingly. Even if this did not correspond to any ruling dispensation of the time, questions of caste hierarchy, positioning the Brahmin in a superior position to the king, normally, though not inevitably of Kshatriya or warrior

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caste, were crucial to the symbolic and political order. In asserting his low-caste status, especially against the family which dominated the earlier ruling formation, the Nehru-Gandhis, Modi undercuts the hierarchy, announces his own admission into a zone of transcendance, and seeks out avowedly Hindu histories and iconicities allegedly ignored by secular historians. Critically, he draws upon and reorders the sacred coordinates of Banaras for his work of biopolitics and, as I have suggested, its new dimension, the necropolitical. In the process, he combines the forms of sage and king, generating the iconicity of the sage king, or *rajarshi*, leaving the management of everyday administration to his ministers. As political scientists have pointed out, if an earlier Hindutva was largely based on upper-caste and merchant leadership, the new Hindutva centred on Modi expands the social basis of the party, and in his lower-caste assertion, the possibility of social advancement. However, such advancement must rigorously observe conformity to Hindutva politics, rather than emerge through subaltern dissent and assertion (Jaffrelot 2021; Pai and Kumar 2023).

Mythopolitics, rendered through a constellation of narratives, cosmologies, delineations of ritual power, sacred space, and the space of death and pollution, is here substantially redeployed through the figure of Narendra Modi. A focus on the leader is supplemented through a number of media strategies, including the use of entertainment cinema to retail fake narratives to propagate anti-Muslim and anti-secular ideas (Roy, 2024). So-called documentary films have been used to similar ends.[6] Perhaps most important is the encouragement given by the ruling party to dispersed local acts involving the deprivation of Muslims of their right to pray, their right to livelihood, and the visitation of death on Muslims by lynch mobs. Here, as Achille Mbembe notes, 'Necropolitical power proceeds by a sort of inversion between life and death, as if life was merely death's medium' (Mbembe 2016). This is a dispersed and distributed field, in which cell-phone video capture and circulation is an integral element, a capillary ecology of mediatized violence, driven by an invitation to undertake sensational acts that will violently demonstrate devotion to the Hindu nation (Mukherjee 2020; Arun 2022).

A Melodrama of Dark Nationhood

Keeping this new symbolic architecture as background, let us now come back to the figure of the crying politician, and the question of empathy, focusing now only on Modi and the hermeneutics of suspicion which surround the spectacle of his crying. At the outset I suggested that for

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Modi the question of empathy is perhaps self-directed, his address to his audiences inviting them to see him as a figure of sacrifice, someone who has given up his all to serve the nation. However, ultimately, empathy is a secondary aspect of his engagement with audiences. His power derives from his capacity to develop an auratic address, using his voice and colloquial dexterity on radio and through promotional advertising on FM channels. And there is the phenomenon of his image displayed on elevated billboards viewable from the roads and placed in such a way as to convey an all-seeing eye whose gaze one cannot escape. Along with print advertising, outdoor publicity is a key medium for him to communicate his welfare schemes, to be dispensed to so-called *labharthi*s, or beneficiaries, reducing the population to recipients of his welfare rather than citizens (Aiyar 2023; Mishra and Palshikar 2022). The promise of welfare and of social mobility is, as I have noted, predicated on political quiescence and conformity that critically turns on the systematic production of the other played out at various levels. Of particular significance was the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which gave religious minorities, except Muslims, from neighbouring states the right to seek citizenship in India, effectively reducing Indian Muslims to a second-class citizenship.

Key to the overall architecture then is fear. And it is fear rendered as an intricately orchestrated spectacle, a bid to create an engulfing and totalizing environment for the repression of the citizen as a figure of critical intelligence, opinion, and action. The spectacle of political repression is undertaken on an almost daily basis, as state institutions such as national intelligence and investigation agencies, agencies to monitor tax returns, financial flows, and 'disproportionate assets' are weaponized to target opponents. The law is another instrument, with the state using the law of sedition, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Amendment Act, and others to harass and incarcerate opponents and dissidents more generally, along with huge defamation suits by industrial magnates to muffle critics. Control over media is a crucial component of this power. Modi's alliance with big capital results in the buying of big media, newspapers and television, and the BJP has the most elaborate information technology cell, observable in a proliferation of followers, a regular troll army, on social media (Chaturvedi 2017). What is important here is not only control over media but the production of media as a dense relaying of hostile and engulfing materiality. Chargesheets run into thousands of pages and include media of various types, from closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage to computer hard disks, call data records, and oral testimony (Goel 2021). The sheer volume of material is designed to overwhelm even if it does not stand up

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as evidence—perhaps because it does not stand up as evidence. Television news is quick to pick up and sensationalize so-called anti-national activities, using an across-the-board bellicose rhetoric on behalf of the state, and more particularly Modi. The sensational form of the contemporary television news programme is produced through its hectoring anchors overseeing a clutch of different viewpoints to communicate a semblance of debate. The ticker-tape pulsation of bold type face running along the bottom of the screen continuously highlights avowedly treasonous conduct. The periodic, repetitive assemblage deploying television, personalized screens, newspaper, social media, and YouTube bids to assail and overwhelm.

Arguably, melodrama is very much in play here, the regime of fear seeking to render publics mute, unable to speak or express themselves. The peculiarity of the situation is that the very apparatus of domination lays claim to a melodramatic lineage. The mythopolitical of Hindutva also has its own melodramatic frame, reliant on a story of Muslim conquest and domination, of pillage and rape of a Hindu country. There is melodrama as parallax here, the 'apparent displacement of an object because of a change in the observer's point of view'. Here, the object is the body of the suffering victim, and as Linda Williams argued in her *Playing the Race Card* (2001), melodrama is implicated in a longer history of who lays claim to victimhood and to what ends. A gendered imbalance across the gulf of race is marked: if Black men are the victims of white violence in anti-racist discourse, it is always white women whom marauding Black men threaten, not white men. The syndrome is echoed in contemporary India, in the threat Hindutva claims Muslim men pose to Hindu women. The gendered differentiation is also an index of power, of men being key protagonists, rather than victims, in supremacist narratives.

There are, of course, male Hindu victims. However, even as Hindutva declares itself the vehicle to right historic wrongs, it draws upon the suffering of Hindu victims to channel hatred, rather than compassion and care. High stakes continue to ride on our hope that melodrama can see through the manoeuvres of necropolitical power and modulate feeling towards more humane and ethical dispositions.

Notes

1. Caught on the back foot over its conspicuous absence during the second wave of the pandemic and a groundswell of public fear and resentment, the BJP leadership has asked its leaders to be visibly more 'empathetic and sympathetic' (Mathew 2021)

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2. This chapter was originally written in June 2021, well before the repeal of the agrarian laws, the ending of peasant agitation, and the return to power of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh.
3. Early cinema in India, whether in films positioned as mythologicals, founded on Hindu myths, or in so-called oriental films, including ones of Islamicate provenance, both those produced locally and in popular imports, such as *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), took the bazaar as a site of all sorts of goods and transactions, including the possibility of magical goods, and also as a space for the dispensing of alms. The longer history of the bazaar speaks to a different order of economy, goods circulating on the basis of promissory forms, credit, and reputation, and historians of the colonial economy have argued that this parallel economy offered different networks that could be sourced in cultural, economic, and political practice, including the national movement against colonialism (Jain 2007, 2021; Birla 2009; Ray 1988)
4. Biopolitics/necropolitics. The distinction between biopolitics and necropolitics has been dramatized in the dark years of Modi's prime ministership. Apart from threat of violent death, necropolitics functions 'as the political making of spaces and subjectivities in an *in-between* life and death' (Pele 2020). Key issues in such a necropolitical form are the depletion of life and livelihood and the negation of social and political rights. Major interventions included demonetization, requiring the return of all money to banks, avowedly to control black money, but which was seen in practice to be a way to recapitalize banks and also to steal a political march on parties reliant on cash-based resources. This was a phenomenon which has always been underestimated in terms of political affect: as a populist form, it appeared to pull rich and poor into the same queues to deposit and exchange money, and thereby into a zone of equivalence. The spill over into necropolitics relates to the starving of small- and medium-sized industries that work on the basis of cash payments, undermining mass livelihoods. This was further exacerbated with the pandemic, when Modi abruptly enforced lockdown, rendering millions of migrant labour without wages, food, or shelter, leading to the dark epic of a mass exodus, numbering over 10 million, on foot to the villages, and to many deaths (Nath 2020). These catastrophic acts of misgovernance not only were wilfully precipitated in the case of demonetization and the lockdown but also exhibited incompetence and complacency in other instances. Thus, large crowds of pilgrims and mass election rallies led to a spiralling infection and death count in April and May 2021, in which the prime minister himself was directly involved (*The Wire* 2021). Alongside these threats to life and livelihood, we must note a species of symbolic political erasure and

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death. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 was avowedly formulated to help religious minorities from neighbouring countries take refuge in India and acquire Indian citizenship. Muslims were not mentioned in this Act, thus threatening their citizenship status. Combined with a proposed National Citizen Register requiring all citizens to furnish proof of birth and parentage in India, the Act threatened the expulsion of what right-wing politicians have framed as an illicit migrant population coming into India from Bangladesh and Myanmar, again of Muslim identity. In terms of media form, this is a regime of exclusion based on identity documents, many of which are difficult to retrieve for a significantly illiterate population. Detention centres to house those who could not prove their identity have been instituted in a number of places, including India's Assam, where the local paranoia about outsiders skewing the state's demography and draining its resources has been particularly pronounced. Yet in a whole host of notorious cases, people with long and established histories in the state were found wanting in terms of identity documents and interned in detention centres (Azad and Parveez 2021; Zaman 2023).

5. https://mythopolitics.mf.no/research/.

> Project MYTHOPOL seeks to understand the role of hegemonic Hindu storyworlds in the contemporary political field. The sub-projects in MYTHOPOL analyse the political significance of Hindu myths and mythic narratives—those from ancient and medieval texts as well as modern mythologies around charismatic leaders—to Hindu nationalism and the grassroots level movements to deconstruct these story worlds. The main objective of this project is to produce a cogent theory of how mythological narratives underpin identity in the political field in the contemporary world.

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6. *Delhi Riots: A Tale of Burn and Blame* (Kamalesh Mishra, dir., 2021) is one such case, flagrantly playing up anti-Muslim narratives in its so-called documentation of the north-east Delhi riots of January 2020 whose aim was to end the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (The Newslaundry 2021)

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