Framing the Subaltern: The Reemergence of the 'Other' in Neoliberal Indian Popular Cinema

Anu Thapa, University of Iowa

Abstract

The figure of the subaltern, construed primarily in terms of class difference, went missing from Indian cinema screens following the emergence of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) protagonist in the 1990s. In the neoliberal phase post-2000, the subaltern has resurfaced in Indian cinema narratives, positioned to be delivered by the technological know-how and entrepreneurial spirit of the foreign-returned Indian man. This paper analyzes the reemergence of this disenfranchised 'other' through a close reading of three mainstream Hindi films — *Swades: We, the People* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2004), *Delhi 6* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2009) and *Gori Tere Pyaar Mein* (Punit Malhotra, 2013). All three films place a premium on the entrepreneurial spirit embodied by the cosmopolitan protagonist, which is facilitated by the urban educated heroine. The subaltern is transformed into the collective of 'the people' and subsequently denied enterprise. Within the context of cinematic representations of the subaltern since India's independence, this portrayal of the subaltern as objects of deliverance is emblematic of Indian cinema's neoliberal phase. Engaging with recent scholarships on Hindi cinema's global ambitions, this paper briefly delves into the implications of the subaltern's return to the notion of the 'popular' in Indian popular cinema.

On the sixtieth anniversary of India's independence, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh shared his vision of a 'caring India', in which he reiterated the nation's responsibility towards its disadvantaged groups.[1] He highlighted the *Bharat Nirman* (Build India) project — an investment in rural connectivity — as an 'effort at bridging the urban rural divide', and called for an India 'in which the creativity and enterprise of every citizen can find its free and full expression'.[2] Singh's emphasis on infrastructural development as a means to enterprise echoes Gayatri

---

[1] Manmohan Singh, *PM's Independence Day Speech, 2007*, 15 August 2007, <http://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=551> [accessed 15 August 2016].
[2] Ibidem.

Spivak's notion of 'building infrastructure for [subaltern] agency'.[3] Both propose that the subaltern can come into a collective via infrastructure. Undergirding Singh's speech however, is the neoliberal ideal of self-enterprising citizens that excludes the subaltern by assuming an infrastructural *a priori*. On the other hand, Spivak posits that the subaltern, defined as a 'position without identity', can opt to 'figure' themselves in relation to the state through infrastructure.[4] The flipside, she alerts us, is the possible hypostatization of the subaltern into 'people' which subsequently gets coopted into nationalist agendas.[5] This slippage of the subaltern into the 'popular' is a longstanding issue within the context of Indian popular cinema and the crucial role it plays in configuring ideal subjectivities. Framing its argument with a historical contextualization of subaltern representation in Indian popular cinema, this paper analyzes three films from the 2000s that prominently feature the figure of the subaltern in order to project an ideal subjectivity — *Swades: We, the People* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2004), *Delhi* 6 (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2009), and *Gori Tere Pyaar Mein* (Punit Malhotra, 2013). I posit that the subaltern, who had largely gone missing in the 1990s, returns in today's films in contrast to their cosmopolitan protagonists. These three films reinforce a neoliberal development ethics that places a premium on the entrepreneurial spirit embodied by the protagonist. The subaltern is transformed into the humanist figure of 'the people' for this purpose, and is subsequently denied enterprise. The paper delves briefly into the implications of the subaltern's reemergence in today's neoliberal phase of Indian popular cinema.

The trajectory of subaltern representation in Indian popular cinema can be mapped alongside the evolution of the development logic of post-independence India. During the period of Nehruvian socialism of the 1950s, the subaltern figured prominently in nation-building and modernization. The protagonists of the popular 'socials' during this time were the peasants and the working-class to whom the state extended citizenship by delivering justice. Cinema narratives overwhelmingly focused on freedom from oppression.[6] Raj Kapoor's tramp figure in *Aawara* (Raj Kapoor, 1951) best encapsulated the concerns of this period. During the economic crisis of the 1970s, the 'angry young man' figure, embodied by Amitabh Bachchan in *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra, 1973), captured the nation's imagination. The state's inability to effectively resolve issues such as unemployment, food shortages, and profiteering was countered by the vigilante justice of this 'disaffected, cynical, violent, urban worker/laborer' protagonist.[7]

---

[3] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular', *Postcolonial Studies*, 8.4 (2005), 475–86 (p. 482).
[4] Ibidem.
[5] Ivi, p. 477.
[6] Tejaswini Ganti notes that the phases of Indian cinema, which I use here, are not delineated through an exhaustive survey of the films made during these times but are based upon the most prominent and successful trends. Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 32.
[7] Ibidem.

By the liberalization era of the 1990s, cinema narratives shifted focus from economic hardships to affluence, simultaneously displacing subaltern struggles from the screen. The NRI hero, personified by Shahrukh Khan in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1994), set a trend of an authentic and mobile Indian identity that was tenable anywhere in the world. Through the NRI protagonist, mainstream films furnished consumerist desires and fantasies.

Today's highly corporatized Indian film industry has taken a varied approach towards the 'popular,' staying true to the condition of neoliberalism. David Harvey posits that neoliberalization requires the construction of a 'market-based populist culture, differentiated consumerism, and individual libertarianism'.[8] In other words, the 'popular' in the neoliberal Indian cinema is more fractured than ever before. Mainstream Indian films increasingly depend on star-power, sequels, proven formulas of the 1980s family drama, action films, and historical narratives.[9] Commercially successful portrayals of the subaltern in mainstream films often evoke India's colonial past. An emblematic example of this trend is the 2001 film *Lagaan*, in which a motley group of villagers unite against the taxation imposed by the British Raj in 1893. *Lagaan* brings together India's favorite sport — cricket — and its colonial legacy to disseminate the message that the success of contemporary Indian society is contingent on people coming together irrespective of caste, class, and religion.

Films set in the globalized 2000s, such as *Swades*, *Delhi 6*, and *Gori Tere*, espouse a similar message albeit through the trope of deliverance by a foreign-returned Indian man. These films contrast their cosmopolitan protagonist to the subaltern and the environment in which he encounters them through a set of carefully constructed aural and visual cues. In *Swades*, Mohan's massive RV squeezes into the narrow roads of Charanpur village over a soundtrack with the lyrics, '*ayo re/*he has come'.[10] Mohan is never seen without a bottle of mineral water, and he walks around the village with a DSLR camera dangling from his neck. In *Delhi 6*, following the opening sequence that introduces the viewers to the Black Monkey menace, a voice-over refers to the ongoing monstrosities on earth, and ends with the following lines: 'Earth, my dear earth, I will quell

---

[8] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.
[9] Some of the highest grossing films during 2001–2014 fall somewhere within these categories. For example, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (*Gadar*, Anil Sharma, 2001), *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (*Lagaan*, Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), *Devdas* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (*Mangal Pandey*, Ketan Mehta 2005), *Colour It Yellow* (*Rang De Basanti*, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) are films that rely on historical components including India's colonial past; *The Gardener* (*Baghban*, Ravi Chopra, 2003), *Don* (Farhan Akhtar, 2006), *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007), *Dabangg* (Abhinav Kashyap, 2010), *Agneepath* (Karan Malhotra, 2012) and *Chennai Express* (Rohit Shetty, 2013) rehash or are remakes of the family/action films of the 1980s; The *Dhoom* sequels in 2004 (Sanjay Gadhvi), 2006 (Sanjay Gadhvi) and 2013 (Vijay Krishna Acharya), *Don 2: The Chase Continues* (*Don 2*, Farhan Akhtar, 2011), *Dabangg 2* (Arbaaz Khan, 2012), and the *Krrish* sequels (Rakesh Roshan, 2003, 2006, and 2013) exemplify the sequel phenomenon in mainstream Hindi cinema.
[10] (My translation).

your fire; As Rama, in Dasarath's palace, I will soon appear';[11] this sequence cuts to Roshan and his grandmother at a doctor's office in the US. This verse, which evokes deliverance, facilitates the transition from the Black Monkey to Roshan, wherein the monkey symbolizes the darkness that Roshan (literally meaning light) is positioned to dispel. Roshan is inseparable from his cell phone, constantly mediating his experience of Old Delhi's intensity through its camera lens. He listens to music on his cell phone while jogging in the dusty, crowded, narrow alleys of Chandni Chowk. In *Gori Tere*, Sriram arrives at Jhumli village following a lengthy trip that requires him to constantly switch his mode of transportation — each vehicle smaller than the last, on ever narrowing roads. His journey eventually ends on foot as he crosses a rickety makeshift bridge. This protracted sequence is accompanied by a comical soundtrack that implies Sriram's out-of-place-ness and Jhulmi's remoteness. Visually, Sriram's sunglasses, mobile phone, and bright clothes sets him apart from the villagers' drab outfits.

In all three films, the subaltern serve to establish the humanist outlook of the hero. The rural poor of Charanpur and Jhumli, and Delhi's urban poor, such as the local trash-picker and the area simpleton, occupy the subaltern position in *Swades*, *Gori Tere*, and *Delhi 6*, respectively. In contrast to the undifferentiated subaltern mass in *Gori Tere*, the distinctions made in degrees of subalternity in *Swades* and *Delhi 6* highlight the protagonists' ability to traverse the social structures that segregate. Commendably, the representation of subalternity in *Swades* factors in various structural elements such as caste, gender, and religion. However, these structures are highlighted only through Mohan's interactions with the villagers and ultimately underscore his humanitarian nature. In a turning point in the film, Mohan is left deeply shaken by the abject poverty he witnesses on a trip to collect rent from Haridas, a weaver turned farmer, who has been denied irrigation water for breaking tradition by changing profession. On the journey back to Charanpur, Mohan breaks his dependency on bottled water by buying a cup of unfiltered water at the railway platform from a village boy. This trip heightens his dismay over the caste factionism that he encountered previously at a more surficial level in his conversations with the village headmen. Similarly, in *Delhi 6*, while every other male member in the area lusts after Jalebi, a local trash-collector woman who is considered untouchable, Roshan helps her pick up the load of trash and even invites her into his house. He is also the only person to interject when the corrupt police officer, Ranvijay, slaps the simple-minded Gobar. Roshan is left speechless when a Muslim man's shop is vandalized by his patrons, in the course of a Hindu-Muslim riot exacerbated by accusations about the Black Monkey's religious affiliation.

Compared to the local subaltern who is 'removed from all lines of social mobility',[12] the cosmopolitan protagonist exercises a remarkable social flexibility

---

[11] 'Prithvi meri pyari prithvi, tera taap mitata hoon, Dasrath ke yahan mein banke Rama, ati shighra avadh mein aata hoon.' (My translation).
[12] Spivak, p. 475.

that is directly correlated to his geographical mobility. During the globalization phase of the 1990s, the geographical mobility of the NRI hero was a cause for anxiety, assuaged through the formulaic establishment of the NRI protagonist with Indian values and tradition. In today's neoliberal phase, cosmopolitan mobility emphasizes the hero's knowledge capital, both professional and cultural. It is hardly coincidental that the trope of the NRI hero's return, among the three films in discussion, is most pronounced in *Swades*. Its protagonist Mohan is portrayed by Shahrukh Khan, the ultimate NRI hero of the 1990s. An Ivy League graduate, Mohan manages NASA's Global Precipitation Measurement project designed to prevent the planet from future drought. The term 'global' emphasizes Mohan's lack of affiliation, further highlighted in the film through a voice message notifying him of the approval of his American citizenship application. Similarly, Sriram in *Gori Tere* holds an architecture degree from the US, and has presumably returned to India at the behest of his businessman father — a point that can be gleaned from his introduction over the song, '*Dhat teri ki ghar nahi jaana/*Damn, I don't want to go home'.[13] I call these neoliberal protagonists 'cosmopolitan *Babus*' — a descriptor that I develop in detail elsewhere — to emphasize their continuity with the anglicized Indian man disparagingly referred to as a '*Babu*' during the British Raj.[14] The satirical mimic-man of nineteenth century colonial India is reincarnated in postcolonial times as an ideological hybrid who is 'particularly rich in cultural and educational capital and sufficiently secure economically'.[15]

Insofar as neoliberalism indicates a shift from free market to an economy of knowledge capital, India lies at its forefront. The establishment of an Indian Knowledge Commission in 2005 is a testament to the national push towards the expansion of its knowledge economy. Neoliberal emphasis on knowledge, particularly in Asian context of hypergrowth, per Aihwa Ong, promotes 'educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets'.[16] In other words, such a knowledge economy forms a highly mobile group of subjects as citizenship ideal. The paradox inherent in constituting a group of transnational elites as ideal citizens is resolved by emphasizing contributions to civil society as an articulation of national solidarity. Neoliberal knowledge economy thus raises the stakes of citizenship for the majority while it undercuts the promise of equal rights to all.[17] This idealization of self-governing entrepreneurship inextricably ties together scientific/technological knowledge to agency, relegating the laggards to second-class citizens and further marginalizing the subaltern. Spivak is making a similar claim when she observes that the emergence of 'a self-styled international

---

[13] (My translation).
[14] *Oxford English Dictionary* <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/Entry/14245?redirectedFrom=babu#eid> [accessed 15 August 2016].
[15] Tabish Khair, *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 32.
[16] Aihwa Ong, 'Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology', *Transactions*, 32.1 (2007), 3–6 (p. 8).
[17] Ong, '(Re)Articulations of Citizenship', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 38.4 (2005), 697–99 (p. 698).

civil society of self-selected moral entrepreneurs with no social contract' is connected to the 'transmogrification of the subaltern into the humanist figure of the "people"'[18] — an overt transgression found in the title, *Swades: We, the People.* More egregiously, *Gori Tere* categorizes the villagers as 'laborers', in opposition to Sriram, the architect. Paradoxically, the subaltern who is displaced from this knowledge economy is constantly brought back to justify it.

As the beneficiary of this neoliberal knowledge economy, the cosmopolitan protagonist is armed with a globalized sensitivity and technological knowhow. He thus steps up to develop the systems of connectivity or infrastructures given the state's failure to do so. Infrastructures are harbingers of modernity whose development, as John Peters argues, is 'backed by states or public-private partnerships that alone possess the capital, legal, or political force and megalomania to push them through'.[19] To this list of actors who possess the wherewithal for such an undertaking, I add enterprising citizens participating in civil society within neoliberal economy. For instance, Mohan redirects his training in engineering to develop an electricity generating project while also urging the villagers to educate their kids. Sriram dusts off his architecture degree and builds a bridge in the village of Jhumli, connecting Jhumli to civilization. Roshan brings together people torn apart by religious skirmishes by dressing up as the Black Monkey — an entity believed to function through a motherboard. Despite the fact that the locals have variously attempted a solution, the trope of deliverance in each film plays out through an infrastructural project spearheaded by the protagonist. In *Swades*, the colonial era freedom fighter, who has long been the voice of reason in Charanpur, hands over the baton to Mohan and dies peacefully upon the completion of the electricity project. In Jhumli, a man is said to have lost his life trying to build the bridge that Sriram ultimately builds. The local mad poet walks around Delhi 6 holding up a mirror and reciting a verse which asks people to look and find God's light within oneself.[20] However, it is Roshan who explains the meaning of the verse as he urges people to not be divided over religion.

The films' trope of deliverance latches on to the overarching dichotomy of modernity/tradition in which the subaltern is placed within the realm of tradition. Such a division, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, ignores the varied 'practices of modernity' that are part of the lived subaltern experiences. These alternative practices, he posits, do not exist autonomously from mainstream politics.[21] Rather, the subaltern class is entrenched within the same institutions

---

[18] Spivak, p. 479.

[19] John D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 31.

[20] The verse 'Zarre zarre mein usi ka noor hain, jhaank khud mein woh na tujhse door hain' translates to 'His light alone permeates everywhere, everyone; take a look within yourself, He resides in you.' (My translation).

[21] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 54–55.

of modernity as the middle and upper classes.[22] Consider for instance the sequence where Mohan attempts to explain the process of observing and recording weather fluctuations at NASA. Challenging the complexity of the process, the village headman calls upon a local man who promptly looks up at the sky and predicts no rain for the next two days. The humorous tone of this sequence denies veracity to any observations unaided by technology, and asks the film's audience to identify with Mohan. Instead of acknowledging the dialectical relationship between modernity/tradition, science/modernity is reinstated in irrevocable opposition to religion/tradition thus erasing the possibility of the subaltern as agent.

Considering the modern/tradition dichotomy, it is significant that the female protagonists of these films drive the hero's engagement with the subaltern. In each film, an urban educated woman channels the hero's entrepreneurial prowess towards helping the disenfranchised mass. Sriram travels to Jhumli with the sole purpose of winning back Dia. Her refusal to leave before the bridge is built, forces Sriram to apply himself to the project. Mohan's trip to India is lengthened because his nanny, Kaveri Amma, refuses to leave until Gita is wed; Gita is not inclined to wed until the villagers send their kids to school. In the process of resolving these issues, Mohan gets entrenched into the problems of the village. Roshan's fondness for Bittu keeps him from leaving despite the growing unrest in Delhi 6. These women provide the impetus for the protagonists' sustained relationship with the subaltern. Mohan and Roshan eventually give up their American citizenship in order to be with Gita and Bittu, respectively. Dia urges Sriram that they go to another village in need of electricity following the successful completion of the bridge in Jhumli. Having internalized the best values of the traditional and the modern, the woman's enterprise lies in her ability to integrate the cosmopolitan man within the nation. The enduring trope of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), which implicitly ties the woman with the nation, undergoes a slight modification in neoliberal Indian cinema. The new woman, suitable to partner the cosmopolitan hero, is reimagined as someone who finds agency within hegemonic ideals. Rather than the victimized broken woman, she is an agent of service within the bounds of the nation. This cooptation of the term 'Mother India' is evidenced in *Gori Tere* where Dia's relentless earns her this moniker from the corrupt politician. This reimagined woman is capable of taking over the reins in the absence of the hero — a configuration represented literally in *Swades* when Mohan asks Gita to hold the generator's wheel while he goes off to unclog the dam.

The heteronormative dyad formed by the cosmopolitan *Babu* and the enterprising woman interpellates India's urban-elites. This dyad foregrounds civil society as a necessary mode of political engagement which is depicted in all three films through entrepreneurial pursuits towards the goal of connectivity.

[22] Ivi, p. xx.

Such forms of engagement are presented as readily available to the urbanized elite but projected outside the purview of the subaltern who embodies a provisional humanity.[23] The subaltern is reified as the collective 'people' and ultimately framed in the construction of neo-subjectivities.

The return of the subaltern in neoliberal Hindi cinema reiterates cinema's role in the configuration of ideal subjectivity vis-à-vis the nation. It reveals that the subaltern was not part of Bollywood's global ambitions during the 1990s. Neither is she a part of transactions within the neoliberal economy, such as the recent teaming up between Netflix and Shahrukh Khan's production company, Red Chillies Entertainment. Furthermore, it asks for a recalibration of the relationship between the 'popular' and the 'subaltern' which has mostly been understood in terms of cinema viewership. Several scholars have remarked on the noteworthiness of Hindi-language films capturing the largest share of India's movie-going audience in a country where approximately 300 million of the population are illiterate, and a multitude of languages and regional dialects exist.[24] The 'popular' holds within itself a utopian impulse that seeks to cut against class antagonism. The sequence in *Swades* where the entire village comes together around a cinema screen exemplifies this impulse. Similarly, Dia's moniker for Sriram, Sridevi — a famous Bollywood actress — allows Jhumli denizens to relate to and even make fun of the cosmopolitan protagonist. Often, the 'popular' and 'subaltern' are conflated, particularly in claims that Indian popular cinema is low-brow because the 'poor' demand it.[25] Such teleological reasoning provides one way to contextualize the box-office failures of *Swades* and *Delhi 6* despite their success with middle-class and diaspora audiences. It does not however begin to explain the failure of the *masala* film *Gori Tere*.

Insofar as the 'popular' is a site of commodification and contestation, the subaltern inflects and is inflected by it.[26] Thus, eschewing monolithic notions of 'popular' and the 'subaltern' is of urgent need within the discourse of Indian popular cinema. Recent scholarships highlighting Hindi cinema's pedagogical function take such an approach. Notably, by building on Sumita Chakravarty's notion of 'impersonation', Ajay Gehlawat argues that mainstream Hindi cinema speaks the language of the subaltern not to assure his/her representation but to reconfigure concepts such as representation and identity.[27] Bollywood

[23] Nivedita Menon, 'Introduction', in *Empire and Nation*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 1–22 (p. 12).
[24] The Hindi-language films, 'which make up about 20 percent of the total production, have captured the all-India market'. Manjunath Pendakur, 'India', in *The Asian Film Industry*, ed. by John Lent (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 229–52 (p. 231). Sheila Nayar, 'Invisible Representation: The Oral Contours of a National Popular Cinema', *Film Quarterly*, 57.3 (2004), 13–23.
[25] Ajay Gehlawat notes this tautological reasoning in Sara Dickey's works on the urban-poor audience of Indian popular cinema. Ajay Gehlawat, *Reframing Bollywood: Theories of Popular Hindi Cinema* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), p. 80.
[26] David Lloyd, 'The Subaltern in Motion: Subalternity, the Popular and Irish Working History', *Postcolonial Studies*, 8.4 (2005), 421–37 (p. 422).
[27] For Chakravarty impersonation disavows fixity but encompasses the 'accretion, the piling up of

cinema is a terrain where the subaltern can negotiate and reformulate identity. The subaltern is not removed from the global flows of modernity of which cinema is a crucial component. Rather, as Spivak claims, the subaltern has 'lexicalised' global culture in a fragmentary fashion.[28] In other words, the subaltern has appropriated and reformatted global conventions of modernity. Along with modernity, the nation too has been fractured in the process. As such, the interchange between the 'subaltern' and the 'popular' is not simply linear. Rather, the two are triangulated with the state. In its neoliberal era, Indian cinema has moved overtly beyond representation; it is an infrastructure through which the subaltern partake in representation.

identities, the transgression of social codes and boundaries'. Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947–1987* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 4. Gehlawat, p. 57.
[28] Spivak, p. 483.