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Legacies

We may signpost the inception of the Journal of Arts and Ideas in the early 1980s as a beginning for Cultural Studies in India when television and consumerism were both in their infancy. Aligned to the mainstream left and informed by the then western Marxism, this journal’s agenda was to (re)examine Indian modernism(s) and popular culture. The imposition of National Emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975 led to a clampdown on all democratic political institutions and activities and the left demonstrated utter helplessness in combating autocracy because its entire thinking was pegged wholly to electoral politics. The developments during the Emergency, especially the rise and triumph of a ‘utopian’ Gandhian ‘political spirituality’ (Foucault) under Jayprakash Narayan and the crumbling of the ground beneath the left’s feet, proved to be disturbing. More than the ‘cultural turn’ in western Marxism, it was the experience of Emergency that necessitated the resurfacing of ‘popular culture’ into the leftist agenda.

The earlier leftist interventions in culture can be traced back to the early 1940s in the founding of the proverbial Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), when the then Communist Party of India, in keeping with the official ‘People’s War’ line, wanted to build up a resistant national-popular consciousness for fighting Fascism. The thrust was on fashioning a progressive secular Indian modernism by incorporating elements from vernacular modernisms and the folk traditions (Pradhan, 1985). IPTA’s modernism was inspired, partly, by the model of ‘socialist realism’ of the then USSR. The only precedent of the IPTA kind of initiative to transform ‘conduct’ on a pan-Indian scale was the so-called ‘renaissance’ that some...
of the vernacular cultures underwent in the late nineteenth century under
the twin impacts of westernization and nationalism.

The new economy of taste underlying the IPTA agenda also informed
the independent Indian state’s interventions in culture during the 1950s –
the ‘heroic’ phase of Nehruvianism. A range of centralized cultural
institutions were established to act as the institutional nuclei of what Nehru
envisioned as a national cultural consolidation. It was a Nehruvian policy
to institutionalize/governmentalize culture by building various Akademies
in the model of the French Academy, while the National School of Drama
was a clone of the British RADA. What appeared in the 1950s as minor
loopholes in a policy grounded in Nehru’s idiosyncrasies rather than the
requirements of a vast multicultural, multilingual, democratic country,
increasingly became gaping holes as time passed. One the legacies of the
Nehru era is the state’s monopoly on radio and television. For a certain
period, there was a bizarre ban on broadcasting Hindi flimi songs in the
radio and, even now, an archaic policy of ‘censure’ plagues film and tele-
vision (Prasad, 1998: 88–116). In later years, as Nehru’s ‘socialist’ vision
gradually lost its radical edge in the sinews of murky coalitions with reactionary blocs, a straightforward policy of patronage came to the fore. The
declaration of National Emergency by Indira Gandhi was a last-ditch effort
to bolster a hegemony of the autarchic Nehruvian étatist ideology of nation-
state by repressive means (Rajadhyaksha, 1990: 34–52).

Cultural Studies and the National-Popular
It is out of the ashes of a failed hegemony that an engagement with the
discourse of Cultural Studies emerged in the 1980s. The IPTA-Nehruvian
model of rationalist-nationalist realism was indifferent or plainly hostile to
the emergent Indian mass-culture. The progressive middle-class cultural
movements of the 1950s and 1960s dismissed popular culture as bereft of
all rationalist imperatives and thus nurturing a certain infantilism among
the masses (Das Gupta, 1991). This precluded a sustained interrogation of
the popular Hindi film, which successfully marginalized Hollywood in India.
Hindi film, now called Bollywood, not only resisted Hollywood, it even
created a niche for itself in other parts of the developing world (Larkin,
2000: 350–78). Though Bollywood’s ascendance was partly challenged by
the rise of the spectacular film cultures in South India, (Baskaran, 1981),
both share the same diegetic world of ‘the feudal family romance’ (Prasad).
Of course, Bollywood has not functioned within an entirely self-referential
autonomy, it has stylistically integrated aspects of world ‘standard’. But its
importance stems from the fact that, since independence, it has constituted
something like a ‘nation-space’ without the backing of the state
(Chakravarty, 1996: Vasudevan, 2000: 130). By resisting the encroachment
of Hollywood it has, ironically, fulfilled aspects of the role which Indian
avant-garde cinema before and after Satyajit Roy claimed for itself.

Our understanding of one of the important ingredients of Indian
popular culture – Bollywood films – has been shaped largely by the
practitioners of Cultural Studies: and, reciprocally, popular film has remained the mainstay of Cultural Studies in India. The wide-ranging public debate on popular films on topical issues like *Roja* (mid-1990s) or *Fire* (2000) are good examples of the kind of importance that attaches itself to popular film criticism in India today (Bharucha, 1994; Niranjana, 1994; Srinivas, 1994; Vasudevan, 1994). Transcending the narrow confines of Cultural Studies, these exchanges snowballed into truly national, public debates carried out in the venerable *Economic and Political Weekly*, film journals and even newspapers and newsletters.

One of the key questions raised by the ‘new’ film studies was how cinema came to assume an Indian identity. According to Rajadhyaksha and Kapur, Indian popular cinema is characterized by an aesthetic of ‘frontality’ and ‘iconicity’ (Kapur 1993; Rajadhyaksha, 1993). These terms have been used to situate the articulation of the mythic within painting, theatre and cinema through frontal address surfaces. Apart from the look of characters into the camera, ‘frontality’ also designates the way knowledge of the spectator is drawn upon to construct the scene through stylized performance and ritual motifs that arise from a host of Indian traditional performance traditions. Another proposition that comes up again and again in thinking about Indian cinema in particular and visual culture in general is *darshan*, whose usual meaning in Hindu religious iconology is a certain exchange of glances between the divine authority and the beholder-devotee. In a certain reading of *darshan* as an authoritarian form, social status derives from the access individuals have to a central icon of authority. Prasad and Vasudevan have demonstrated how, in popular Indian films, the *darshanic* locates character and is responded to by them within cinematic narration (Prasad, 1998: 52–87; Vasudevan, 2000: 139–47).

While the scholarship on film is almost wholly based on reading films as text and analysis of narrative, works on television tend to emphasize the politics of reception. The works we have on the different phases of the career of television in India are basically ethnographies of reception and formation of audiences. Of these, Rajagopal’s monograph, based on his research on the reception of televised Hindu epics in the early 90s, is the most ambitious, seeking to theorize the epochal nature of the intervention of television on Indian public life (Rajagopal, 2001). He stresses the agency of television in dissolving the erstwhile ‘split-publics’ (e.g. the vernacular and the anglophone) into a homogeneous audience more amenable to mobilizations on *Hindutva* fundamentalist and consumerist lines. However, his ethnography is inadequate to account for the possible reasons for such intense investment in identity at the moment of television. The problem persists in attributing to the Hindu Right a certain design that makes it wait for the opportune moment and finally exploit the ‘images of the commodity market’ to push its agenda. Connecting the telecast of epics to merely the crisis of the Congress party and a certain kind of electoral politics has far-reaching consequences. The most palpable of these is taking television as only a technology of dissemination and not as a cultural form that
orchestrates content and reformulates tradition and subjectivity (Roy, 2005: 1–31).

Meanwhile, the clichéd binary of a corrosive ‘modernity’, as opposed to a reassuring ‘tradition’, shapes much of the art-historical discourse on modern Indian art. The modern artist is always belated, always an aftercomer (Subramanyan, 1987). Thus, the ‘visual cultural’ turn in the works of acclaimed art-historians like Kapur and Sheikh is not just refreshing, it has also proved to be productive in interrogating the ‘folk’ as well as the inheritance of the post-Bengal School modernist artistic projects in India (Kapur, 2001; Sheikh, 1993: 143–54). Guha-Takurata’s absorbing new work on the formation of what she calls the ‘institutions of art’ is a new kind of exercise which exposes not just the historicity of art but also its imbrication with the politics of the day (Guha-Thakurata, 2004). In his work on popular chromolithographs, Pinney proposes that as opposed to disinterested representation – ‘art’ – pictures of Hindu deities have a distinct performative dimension (Pinney, 2004). While interrogating icons as compressed performances ‘giving’ darshan to devotees, Pinney proposes a whole range of concepts centred on his notion of ‘corpothetics’. His finding that mechanical reproduction and the encroachment of western oil-painting conventions into religious iconography made the gods more real to the masses upsets the received ways of thinking. The mediation of modern technology in disseminating popular music has been the subject of important works, too (Manuel, 1993).

Cultural Studies is also challenging the discipline of English Literature in India. For many years, despite a vast institutional base, there was never any serious interrogation of this discipline from the ranks of its practitioners. The initial reception of Gauri Viswanthan’s Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (1989) was lukewarm till the ascendancy of post-colonialism made it impossible to remain impervious to the range of audacious new questions raised in the wake of Said’s, Bhabha’s and Spivak’s works. The need to interrogate the formation of Indian English and, beyond it, the vernacular literary traditions cross-fertilized by English, comes across quite clearly in two pioneering anthologies: Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History (Joshi, 1991) and The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India (Rajan, 1992). The contributors pose uncomfortable questions about the ‘burden of English’, about the insularity of the Indian English Literature establishment, about the politics of pedagogy and the appalling academic atmosphere produced through a culture of mindless cramming. A fallout from these recent developments has been a steady swelling in the ranks of people trained in English Literature professing to ‘do’ Cultural Studies. The growing body of fascinating new works on gender and various facets of Indian literary cultures are telltale signs that the empire is about to strike back (Chowdhury-Sengupta, 1998; Menon, 2001; Sangari and Vaid, 1989).
Of More Than a Certain Tendency in Indian Cultural Studies

There is a powerful if subterranean tendency in Indian academic circles which thinks of India as an object apart from the world, underplaying its entanglements with various elsewheres. Recently, Dhareshwar, a self-styled guru of Cultural Studies, mooted a programme for reinventing it for India. Cultural Studies in the West ‘has failed to generate any significant theoretical insight’ because it studies ‘trivia’ like ‘hairstyle’, ‘Star-trek’, ‘rap’ etc. (Dhareshwar, 1996: 20–3). If it is to get off the ground here in post-colonial India, it must take aim at the heart of ‘our present’. ‘Our present’ is ‘the difference between western theories of ourselves (of which our existing theories of ourselves are but an extension) and our metatheory of western theories (of which their metatheories of our part of the world are but a component)’. Indian Cultural Studies must generate ‘an authentic self-description’ necessitating the construction of a metatheory of western theories of ‘us’. For all his naïveté in opposing ‘their’ theories of us to ‘our’ theories of ourselves – as if ‘we’ and ‘they’ are stable, originary locations, as if identity is an unproblematic self-presence identical to itself, as if identity itself is not simulated in the play of difference and repetition – Dhareshwar articulated with exemplary clarity the epistemology of third-world nativism. One must not underestimate the force of conviction that nativism carries in India.

But Dhareshwar is not alone in condemning Cultural Studies for its preoccupation with the ‘trivial’ things that go into the making of our everyday worldly life: advertisement, fashion, popular music, television etc. Our ‘excessive love of visible, tangible things, in their most plastic form, inspire . . . [us] with a certain dislike of those things that go to make up the intangible kingdom of the metaphysician’ (Baudelaire, 1972: 390–436). Baudelaire’s innovation consisted of conceiving the commodity form itself as the most important articulation of the cultural – a position to which Benjamin later returned. In contradistinction to most accounts of modernity which bemoan the loss of the truth of immediacy and reference and the concomitant rise of the regime of falsity – mediation and representation – Baudelaire offered a strategy of cultural description which celebrates representation as such. The painter of modern life studies surfaces as opposed to depth – the ‘external life of an age’ in things which are transient, fleeting and contingent as opposed to the philosophers who ruminate on the ‘inner meaning’ of things. For example, Adorno & Co. engage in a sort of physiognomic essayistics, a minute ‘decoding’ of the surface phenomena as complex historical ciphers in order to monumentalize the (un)truth of the present. Debord’s distrust of ‘surface’ (‘spectacle’) is clearly in sync with the kind of denunciations of Cultural Studies we have already come across. He affirms the origin by proclaiming its loss.\(^2\)

What interests me in Baudelaire is what he called ‘the moral mechanisms of the world’, meaning his concern with libidinal investments people make on things qua commodities, how humans and things ‘interchange’ properties (in typical Latourian fashion) and how commodities relate to
mimetic capital immanent in manners. Baudelairian manners ‘show[ing] the political side of things’ contrast sharply with the impoverished neo-Foucaultian understanding of manners as mere regimentation because ‘discipline’ and ‘bio-power’ cannot account for affects and phantasms centred on the so-called ‘fetish’ character of commodity.

Manners and mores were once central to politics. These were relegated to the shadowy realm of sensibility after the Kantian epochal ‘disenchantment’ of ethics (Minson, 1989: 190–220). From Kant to the Romantics, we witness a denigration of manners as mere embellishment and the rise of a model of politics based on purely speculative and abstract reason. Exiled from the domain of politics proper, manners now find a refuge in the realm of ‘culture’ as mores are increasingly investigated as ‘culture’. Williams has noted the semantic broadening of the term ‘culture’ at the end of the eighteenth century and en passant he mentions ‘manners and tastes’ as one of its constitutive elements (Williams, 1989: 92). Reacting against Williams’s anthropologization of culture, ‘culture as a way of life’, Bennett demonstrated how this semantic inflation of culture coincided with the emergence of a new field of social management (‘governmentality’) and how ‘culture’ in the sense of ‘conduct of conduct’ became the target of government, both object and instrument of transformation of ways of life of extended populations (Bennett, 1992: 23–37). To the extent that a workable regime of manners is still very much on the agenda, to talk of manners is not to invoke some lurid alterity. But Cultural Studies of the neo-Foucaultian variety whose entire focus is on ‘policy’ (Hunter, 1994; Miller and Yudice, 2003) thinks of government as the only agency capable of moulding conduct systematically. ‘Police’ forecloses the possibility of engaging with the other (i.e. non-state) agencies and institutions (social movements, for example) which are equally capable of moulding conduct (just think of the ‘counter-culture’ movement of the 1960s). The Baudelairian understanding of manners incorporates a whole range of things – affectations, emulation, idiosyncrasies, lifestyles, distinctions, anachronisms – which do not fit into the ‘programmed’ character of ‘conduct’ understood as the work of governmentality.

‘The Nice Thing About Culture Is That Everybody Has It’

Cultural Studies is still an infant discipline in India and it is not very clear which sector of life it should take up for study. Studying ‘conduct’ meant to connect culture with governance would be inappropriate because this genre of studies carries with it certain restrictive assumptions about politics which cannot be justified in India. The lack of institutional dynamism of the Indian economy makes it lag far behind the ‘tiger economies’ of South East Asia in so far as integration with the global market and eradication of mass poverty are concerned. Vernacular popular culture is much more ‘traditional’ here and much less commodified. What has surfaced in the course of interrogation of this ‘traditional’ popular culture qua representation is the dissonant possibility that the very ontology of representation, and
the way it constitutes the experiencing subject or ‘mind’, might be radically
different from the Kantian problematic of representation and the ‘representa-
tional mind’ it posits (Klima, 2002; Pinney, 2004; Wagner, 1986). My
recourse to manners comes out of these aporias.

To demonstrate what is at stake here, I will give an example from
Partha Chatterjee’s *The Politics of the Governed* (Chatterjee, 2004). He
proposes the category of ‘political society’ to designate the recent wide-
spread participation of the mass of disenfranchized, marginal population in
the democratic process in India. *Real* politics in ‘most of the world’ does
not take place in the sanitized domain of ‘civil society’ – the precious flower
of associative endeavours of ‘free’ citizens. They have bartered politics for
good living. Politics worth its name goes on in the dark, nebulous zone where
the dispossessed subalterns negotiate with democratic institutions. It is
through these tentative, hesitant, wily and often violent negotiations that a
*new democratic politics* is emerging in the third-world. This is how, accord-
ing to Chatterjee, newness enters history.

Chatterjee is hard pressed to find ways to *represent* the content of this
new politics. Digressing from his chaste prose, he has to fall back on lurid
reports of bazaar tabloids, carnivalesque narratives of street-brawls,
rumours of imminent revolutions spread by obscure millennial cults etc.
After a point, even these seem inadequate and discourse gives way to candid
photographs of the world of small artisans and shopkeepers of Calcutta –
photographs of filth and squalor, of shanties, of graffiti on Calcutta walls and
so on and so forth. Now what do these photographs depict which analytical
discourse failed to convey? They show, quite plainly, the manners and mores
of the urban Indian poor. Thus, mores alone, it transpires, reveal the *politi-
cal* side of things. Chatterjee thinks of the ethico-political as an essentially
unworldly realm of ratiocination about principles, values, models and ideals.
Yet, note how insidiously manners crept into his ‘model’ the moment he
wanted his reader to get a feel of the ‘real politics’ going on here on the
ground beyond the confines of the official ‘political’ institutions. This embat-
tled ‘zone of occult instability where the people dwell’ (Fanon) cannot be
interrogated as a matter of ‘politics’ spilling over into ‘culture’ as a result of
the so-called ‘aestheticization’ of everyday life (Featherstone, 1993:
265–90). Representation has not simply attained this kind of autonomy in
our part of the world.3 Civil society institutions being confined to a privi-
leged minority, politics is made sense of by the subaltern masses through
an archaic moral economy which derives more from the idiom of sovereignty
than from governmentality. From the point of view of governance, population
is valued not as a source of bio-power, not as citizens or consumers, but
only as numbers, to be manipulated through electoral manoeuvres invoking
‘primordial loyalties’.4 Governance works here by exclusion rather than
through inclusion.

An agenda for Indian Cultural Studies cannot be formulated even at
a bare programmatic level through the neo-Foucaultian study of ‘conduct’.
‘Culture’ cannot be configured here as a discernable level of reality and a
relatively autonomous domain of life shaped by media, advertisement, business and the government. The ‘non-citizenry’ (‘political society’) is formed more by the ‘traditional’ institutions of family and kinship than through the pedagogic-disciplinary-normalizing apparatuses of the state, the church, the school, and the media. Historically, the state as an institution is weak in India and there has never been anything here like the all-pervading Christian church. But that does not mean absence of governance as such; there are other authorities; there were those self-governing institutions which western sociologists lump together under the rubric ‘caste’ — practices, institutions and ideologies underridden by the notion of dharma.

Caste governs through differentiation (rather than homogenizing the social body), by inculcating an ethos of purity and pollution and specifying persons’ ‘conduct’ in its every minutia. Mores and manners (aachara, sanskara, byabahara) are absolutely central to dharma. The lack of salience of the State Form here results in an entity very different from the interiority known in the west as ‘self’.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify the historical semantics of ‘manners’. Through Montesquieu, Mandeville, Smith and Burke, manners in the eighteenth century came to acquire a comparative sociological sense, becoming almost synonymous with culture — the animating spirit of a people, a distinctive way of life. They used manners in their larger argument against the resuscitation of classical civic virtues (Rousseau) since they thought that commercial society of their day required a different set of manners. Whereas the latter thought of civic virtues as innate to man as zoon politicon, the former thought of manners as social, to be developed through cultivation and discipline. Manners soften men into citizens (Pocock, 1995: 37–50). There is nothing in our modern political discourse (and the kind of self-fashioning it entails) which can be connected, however tenuously, with the European ideas of civility, citizenship, virtue etc. In Indian nationalist discourse, the question of comportment in the Öffentlich could not even figure as a problem because, far from being a space of ‘freedom’, the colonial public sphere was an exclusionary device, a veritable dystopia (Chakrabarty, 2000; 214–36). Manners have a different genealogy here.

Indian nationalism, by staking its claim on what Chatterjee called ‘the inside’ (nation-space as an interiority), did initiate a new regime of conduct for the nation-people (Chatterjee, 1993). Later, with Gandhi, manners emerged as central to nationalist self-fashioning. Gandhi did not have a ‘political theory’, he had instead a model of conduct which aimed at a certain dispossession of the self by immersing the body in a regimen of mundane practices, routines and techniques. As Khilnani has noted, by engaging in such anachronistic bodily practices as fasting, silence, reading from scriptures, processional marches, yoga, vegetarianism, abstinence, celibacy, wearing khadi clothes woven by himself, Gandhi infused symbolic meaning into politics and anti-colonial struggle became a ‘spiritual politics’ with which the unlettered Indian masses could readily connect (Khilnani, 1998: 110–15). The kind of political spirituality Gandhi evoked also saw an end
to the erstwhile inside/outside dichotomy. This was done largely through a politics of transparency: denying any specificity or privilege to the public/private distinction. Gandhi’s model of politics as a ‘spiritual exercise’ still animates Indian politics and public culture (Chakrabarty, 2002: 120–34). Even the official rituals and diplomatic protocols of the Indian state (think of the recent commotion over George Bush’s initial refusal to take off his shoes while visiting Gandhi’s mausoleum) had to incorporate Gandhian mores. And, without exception, all the ‘new social movements’ in India today derive from Gandhi’s model of ‘political spirituality’.

To be sure, Gandhi did not invent ‘spiritual practices’ for India. The long-term dynamic of Indian society, ‘Sanskritization’ (Bose, 1975), designates a process of gradual absorption through which outsiders are absorbed in the fold of the jati-structure, by adapting the lifestyle of the caste Hindus in order to become part of the social imaginary organized around varna. Conduct and comportment are central to this mechanism of absorption. This is not to make Gandhi a belated avatar of Sanskritization but just to stress a certain contiguity between his ‘political spirituality’ and the ‘spiritual practices’ of traditional India.

My recourse to ‘manners’ has been necessitated by the need to translate for the western reader what Chakrabarty called the ‘quotidian [corporeal] practices in South Asia’, meaning mundane everyday practices which cannot be tracked to some citizenly comportment or civility (Chakrabarty, 2000: 6). To give an example, it is a universal practice all over India to touch one’s forehead with folded hands (pranama, namaskara) in a gesture of deep regret if one’s foot touches another person’s body. If this is not done properly, the other person is entitled to take offence and feel aggrieved. To be sure, these manners and mores are inextricably linked to the inheritance of an archaic Brahminical-Hindu conduct, formative of the moral valorization of the body on lines of purity and pollution. These customs are inculcated so deeply in Indian bodies that people do these more as reflex actions rather than as conscious acts of ‘staging’ the self (Goffman, 1975).

Towards a Subaltern Cultural Studies

The challenge of taking Cultural Studies to the tropics lies in penetrating a different ensemble of institutions and practices. A description of culture in India today has to account for the ‘folk’ and, as opposed to the ethnological framing of the ‘folk’ in a time before representation, Cultural Studies has to negotiate with the fact of its ‘corruption’ by media. Each cultural region of India has its own ‘traditional’ or ‘folk’ culture(s). Increasingly more commodified and professionalized, these have been hybridized by forces of tourism, consumerism, print-culture, filmi-culture and advertisement, and have even entered into perverse alliances with the global culture industry. Bollywood and the Indian regional film genres draw heavily from the folk (visible in the framing of the ‘song and dance’ sequence which is popular Indian cinema’s hallmark), and share its moral universe, its stereotypes, its tunes,
its motifs. As a matter of fact, popular cinema cannot so much operate here without the extra-cinematic and the pre-cinematic. But more than this symbiotic relationship between ‘folk’ and ‘popular’ which goes back to the very beginning of Indian mass-culture, what enframes both is a certain ‘corpothetics’ – a term coined by Pinney (Pinney, 2004: 194–98) designating a different regime of representation predicated on a corporeal sensorium. The insightful discussions of our film critics of the differentia specificia of popular Indian film and its contiguity with traditional performances make it abundantly clear that cinema was made ‘Indian’ precisely through forging a visual language which draws heavily from the repertoire of everyday corporeal practices and performances.

The empirical point I am trying to make is that folk, vernacular, or ‘traditional’ culture is no longer experienced as part of the ‘sacred’ but is conceived, increasingly, as special kinds of artefacts, performances and representations. These can no longer be investigated as manifestations of indigenous cosmology: the aura of ritual has given way to thinking of these as technologies of enchantment (life is dull!). This enchantment is not predicated on what Marxists call the ‘fetishism’ of commodity, it is rather a matter of commoditization of the fetish. This is the key to the understanding of not just the hybridized folk but the Indian vernacular modern as such. Further, rather than thinking of ‘Indian culture’ as consisting of two mutually exclusive sectors – one ‘organic’ and the other mediatized or ‘simulated’ (Bhattacharya, 2006), it is more productive to look at the whole as one rich hypertext and to invite reflections on its palimpsest nature. Mass-media has made the gods more real, not less.

The connection of manners with Indian politics and public culture needs some elaboration. Indian politics entered a new phase in the 1990s with the unleashing of three historic forces: the rise of the dalits as an electoral force to reckon with, the maturity of consumerism due to the opening up of the economy (Mazzarella, 2003) and the rise of the pro-rich extreme right and finally, as a result of all these, a certain ‘spectacularization’ of politics. Dalits are India’s traditional underclass – low-castes, untouchables and tribals – who continue to remain unenfranchized through cultural and symbolic disempowerment despite universal suffrage (Jaffrelot, 2003). Their political struggle for inclusion and representation is fought mostly over issues relating to demeanour and comportment, implicating a veritable symbolic economy of manners.

But my argument about the centrality of manners is not just a reflection of the hierarchical and stratified nature of Indian society. Manners are crucially implicated in this new age of televised politics when it is increasingly taking on the dimension of spectacular performances in the cinematic-darshanic sense (in India, it is called ‘image politics’ and earlier it used to refer to the intertextuality between film and politics in the ‘backward’ South). The motif of the Toyota-ridden ratha (golden chariot in which mythical Hindu gods travel) of the BJP stalwart (former Vice-PM of India) Advani’s rathayatra which culminated in the destruction of the Babri
mosque in 1992, can act as a kind of mnemonic for this ‘spectacular-performative’ turn. The presence of god-men, actors, yatras, theatricality, images, fasting, vows, family-drama etc., in the arena of electoral mobilizations was the marker of the otherness of Indian politics. These ‘deviant’ features made Indian politics the very anathema of politics understood as the prosaic business of government of ‘population’. Advani’s Toyota-ratha and the ensuing trend of ‘road shows’ by politicians (as opposed to the erstwhile practice of addressing political gatherings) are not mere contingent additions to this repertoire, for they enact a certain levelling down of erstwhile social taxonomies signified by the juxtaposition of the hi-tech _foren_ and the mythical _ratha_ on the same plain of narrativity. The semiotic valences of objects are no longer functions of secular historical memory or social taxonomy (remember Nehru’s avant-gardist metaphor for a Futurist ‘rupture’ through rapid economic development: concrete dams _becoming_ India’s new temples) but determined by the serial logic of spectacular assemblages. It is not a matter of virtuality or ‘spectacle’. It is myth sanctified by technology – a techno-mythologization of the body politic – which demands a Political Cultural Studies.

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Notes

1. The workings of these institutions in recent times has been analysed in the Haksar Committee Report (Haksar, 1990).
3. This is not to say that representation here corresponds to the ‘real’ or the referent but rather to assert the absence of institutionalized reflexivity characteristic of post-industrial society.
4. Of course, ‘primordial’ loyalties are not really primordial; these are constructed and imagined (Chhibber, 1999).

References


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