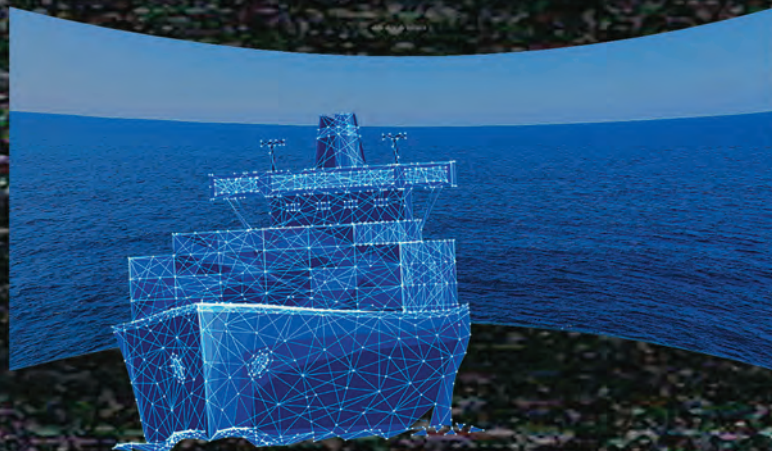# Outlook

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Almost real, but not quite

Virtual Production can make filmmaking much cheaper and convenient.
But will the AI-powered tech also forever alter the essence of cinema itself?

Outlook

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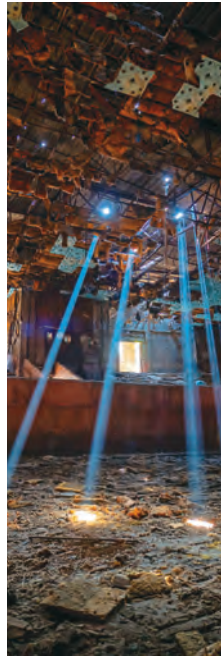**December 21, 2023**

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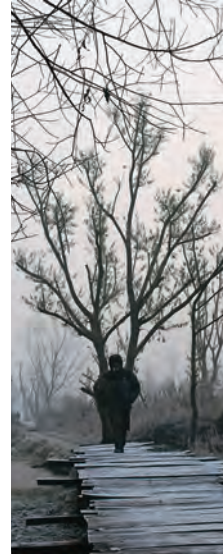This is useful to share our stories on
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Chinki Sinha

Unwilling Suspension of Disbelief

"Beyond good and evil/the sky/is blue"
—Abbas Kiarostami

"And in the real cinema, every object and every light means something, as in a dream"
—Federico Fellini

I know the black cat was not there. I know you weren't there either. This is a love letter to realness in the times of everything virtual. Like virtual production.

There are those big promises. Immortality, elsewheres and the fantasia of multi-levelled virtual heterotopias, which are multiple time and places connected and differentiated. Read body scanners, LED walls, virtual and augmented reality.

Nothing is real though. At least in terms of tangibility. The forest, the desert, the river, the world, too. Many worlds can be created out of this one. If time is distance, virtual production has collapsed time itself. It offers salvation and solutions. You can be anywhere and everywhere. It is called hyperreality, a state of human consciousness that can no longer differentiate between real and the simulation of the real. This is where fact and fiction are fused.

This is how films came into being. The viewers have been urged to lose their grip on reality.

The technology that powers all of this is called Unreal Engine, a real-time 3D creation tool "for photoreal visuals and immersive experiences".

Then, there are the Volume Walls, which project live backgrounds and enable live-action production. These are massive walls. Everything can be altered by a few computer commands. You can be teleported anywhere. A black cat from anywhere can be placed on a bridge. A cloud can be fit. You can make rain. The possibilities are immense. Everything is possible.

This is the future. It is already here.

AI technology has made life easier and wars more sophisticated. But it has also made us more isolated from people and places.

They ask me to willingly suspend my disbelief. This means you believe the unbelievable for the duration of the story.

But what they offer is just simulation. Just that.

In that sense, religion, too, asks for the same. Look where it has led us. But that's not the scope of this 1,000-word introduction to the issue. Although you might want to think about that too. The page is not a simulated world.

This willing suspension of disbelief is a literary device, and it is in 1817 that poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge introduced it in *Biographia Literaria*.

It means putting art before probability. It is about finding faith. We, as writers, do it. We call it poetic faith. It asks us to imagine, to escape. To find worlds through words. Our imagination is real. Not simulated.

With virtual production now, we are being asked to suspend more of this disbelief to not just enter fantasia but also, the world. Simulated, of course. Reductive, too. Controlled also.

How much of this world can we let go of? That's more of a philosophical inquiry.

The sellers of virtual production say this will change how films are shot, organised and produced. They say time and monies will be saved.

It is a path of least resistance. You enter the world of possibilities, of pretend reality, of premises.

But why corrupt cinema like this? They will invoke democratisation, less carbon footprints, accessibility, etc.

The limits of imagination are at stake, too. To imagine, I must know the world. To go beyond it, I must have experienced it, seen it, touched it. I can't always recreate it. But I can be haunted by it. Like I am by what looked like little graves and dunes in *Stalker*, a 1979 film by Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. The film that tracks the journey of three men into a devastated future landscape where they are lured by the Zone. There is an abandonment replete in the landscape, which is the result of direct observation of the truth, which, in the context of the film, means the reality of time. It was shot in an abandoned power plant on the Jagale River in Estonia where the fantastical became more symbolic. The world is a lot of places, spaces, a lot of heterotopias and anomalies. Like the Zone in the film. We must be willing to cross numerous geographical and spiritual boundaries in search of locations. Like Tarkovsky did in his films.

He developed a theory of cinematography called "sculpting in time", where cinema was an environment. Through this, he wanted to highlight the unique feature of cinema as an environment made up of time, lost time, and the relationship between time and time.

Cinema is an experience, the only medium where time and space can be rolled and unrolled forever, a portal, a place of

WE LIVE IN AN ERA OF THE SIMULTANEOUS BUT ALSO, IN THE ERA OF SIDE-BY-SIDE. LET BOTH REALNESS AND VIRTUAL BE. NOT AS REPLACEMENTS OF SUBSTITUTES BUT AS ALLIES.

knowing and a place of interactions and negotiations with emotions and imagination.

A film must affect people individually.

There must be a purity of purpose.

Tarkovsky said: "Cinema is the only art that operates within the concept of temporality. Not because of its developing in time; there are also other art forms that do so: ballet, music, theatre. I mean 'time', in the literal sense of the word. What is a take, from the moment we say 'action' till the moment we say 'stop'? It is the fixing of reality, the essence of time, a way of preserving time which allow to roll and unroll it forever. No other form of art can do that. Therefore, cinema is a mosaic made of time."

With virtual production that uses computer-generated imagery (CGI) and special effects, filmmakers can set their stories in other galaxies, deep seas, or any fantasyland.

Virtual production with all its powers can't do a *Stalker*.

A unicorn has a horse's body. Think about it.

A film's purpose is to reveal reality. French film critic and theorist Andre Bazin in his article *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema* makes a distinction between "those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality".

As a viewer, I put my faith in reality. In the times that we live in, we must not manipulate reality too much. A montage is important but it can be overused. There is the still-unfolding crisis of information and trust. XR (an umbrella term covering virtual, augmented and mixed reality) could be very persuasive and can challenge the very foundations of trust and truth. All this technology can break the truth. We live in a real world after all.

A landscape is both a poetic and a political place that is haunted by fantasy. Let realness be. Like love. Let cinema be a little real. Let the whole world not be in a room at the same time. Let us be apart to be closer. Let us find places. Let's not compress everything. Let's be willing to suspend our disbelief for more. I believe in cinema.

In this issue, *Outlook* looks at how filmmaking is set to change with virtual production. Tanul Thakur has investigated the new technology and has been to the studio where he was in many places and yet, firmly in that compressed location. We have also tried to bring in the loss of cultural space with the phasing out of single screen cinemas documented brilliantly by Hemant Chaturvedi. These and more in this curated collection... ⏎

Digital
DREAMSCAPES

Virtual production has made a big impact on Hollywood. Will this technological tsunami also wash over Indian cinema, drowning out conventional filmmaking?

Tanul Thakur

I'M standing near a gas station in the American countryside. Small triangular flags, hung from the ceiling, flutter. The alphabet "E" in the glowing sign "Golden" flickers on the rooftop. The tube lights below it turn on and off. Across the highway, tall cacti dot the landscape. A mountain lounges afar, soaking the magic hour. It is serene, inviting, beautiful—and eternal.

Because this magic hour will remain forever. So will anything (and everything) else. I can shrink the mountain, brighten the sun, whip the wind. I can make the cacti eucalyptus, the golden sky blue, and the triangular flags rectangular. My fingers can tame time and modify nature. How? Two words: virtual production. Because I'm neither in America nor at a gas station. Heck, I'm not even outdoors. I'm in Annapurna Studios, Hyderabad, marvelling at a curved 60-by-20-feet LED wall.

Behind the Scenes
The short film *Break Free* made in virtual production

OUTLOOKINDIA.COM

PHOTO COURTESY: QUBE CINEMA

VIRTUAL PRODUCTION CAN SLASH TRAVEL COSTS. IT CAN ALSO GET RID OF THE INCONVENIENCES OF FILMING A STAR IN REMOTE OR CROWDED LOCATIONS.

Even though this technology hasn't dominated Indian cinema yet, it's become a potent force in Hollywood, marking such films and web series as *The Mandalorian* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *The Fabelmans* (2022), and many others. A study by Grand View Research, excerpted in Bloomberg in March 2023, estimates the global virtual production market swelling from $2.1 billion in 2023 to $6.78 billion by 2030. Grand View Research's October 2023 report stated that India's virtual production market will grow at 22%, reaching $507.1 million by 2030.

COVID-19 accelerated that demand as this technology, capturing any setting on an LED wall, circumvents the hassles of shooting on locations. It's evident in the virtual production studios popping up in the country in the last few years, such as Chennai-based Stage Unreal and DB Productions. In Mumbai, K Sera Sera's virtual production portfolio includes such Bollywood dramas as *Judaa Hoke Bhi* (2022), *Bholaa* (2023), and *Ganapath* (2023). Annapurna Studios and Qube Cinema, a firm providing digital cinema technology and solutions, partnered to open a virtual production studio in June 2023, where a Telugu feature film, *Miss Shetty Mr Polishetty* (2023), and some ads, including one for Rado starring Katrina Kaif, have been shot.

But is the essence of virtual production—blending pre-filmed footage in the background with the physical set in the foreground—new to cinema? No. It stretches as far back as the 1930s. By projecting a desired backdrop on a screen via a projector behind it, the rear projection technique enabled directors to shoot scenes featuring cars, flights, and monsters, resolving the roadblocks of recording dialogues in noisy settings and executing risky sequences. Remember the iconic shot from *North by Northwest* (1959), where Cary Grant ducks on the road to evade a crop duster plane? Rear projection.

But it also produced a synthetic-looking background that contradicted the foreground. Then came front projection where a projector, in front of the background screen and performers, projected footage on a two-way mirror, tilted at 45°, which reflected it to the screen behind the actor(s), producing a much sharper and saturated image. It was followed by chroma keying, whose popularity exploded in the '80s with affordable computer graphics. As the technology took rapid leaps, enabling realistic and complex visuals, chroma keying became the dominant visual-effects technique. Unlike the front or rear projections, it required

actors to perform against a green (or a blue) screen which, through Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), transformed into an appropriate backdrop—say, flying weapons in a thunderstruck-sky in a superhero spectacle.

In virtual production, though, the actors don't need to imagine the background, as they're literally in front of it. It's often said that "acting is reacting"—a quote so popular it's attributed to multiple sources—which reveals an immediate advantage of virtual production over the green screen. Virtual production's photorealistic background helps cinematographers, too, in framing and lighting because, like actors, they don't have to imagine anything. The LED walls also emit realistic colours and reflections, mitigating the 'green screen spill' (the green light reflecting on the actors that must be removed in post-production to make the scene look natural).

By matching the pre-recorded footage on the LED walls with the real-world foreground, virtual production completes the illusion of a continuous image. It can slash travel costs, logistical issues, and unexpected delays. It can also nullify the inconveniences of filming a star in remote or crowded locations or in settings where permissions are difficult to procure. So for a song shot in virtual production where Shah Rukh Khan extends his arms in the Swiss Alps, the makers will just have to ensure that everything captured by the camera outside the LED screen—or on the physical stage—must be covered in snow as well. Besides, the readymade backgrounds—edited and replaced with ease—enable astounding globe-trotting possibilities. 8 am, Kashmir; 4 pm, Eiffel Tower; 10 pm, Antarctica. Lockdown—what lockdown?

In chroma keying, most visual effects are done in post-production, where the final scene bears little resemblance to the one being shot. But in virtual production, where most visual effects are captured while filming, the post-production work largely shifts to the pre-production stage. As a result, it compels filmmakers to prepare and plan for weeks, if not months, in advance. Let's consider a director who, wanting to shoot a four-minute scene in virtual production, has prepared a script and a storyboard. The next step? Previs (or pre-visualisation): an animated rendition of the scene capturing the setting, actors, and actions. "When you're doing previs you suddenly think of shots that you had otherwise not conceived—if you came directly to the studio," says Jayendra Panchapakesan, Qube Cinema's co-founder. "So I can say, 'I want to do this crazy camera movement, is it possible?' And it will be possible. But how to make it happen?"

The answer: techvis, or tech visualisation, the animated version of the same scene incorporating varied technical details, such as the lens type, the camera movement, and the dimensions of the real and the virtual set. The definition of a camera lens in a virtual production scene, much like in a regular movie, largely remains the same, adds Panchapakesan—for instance, a tight close-up for a dramatic scene, a wide shot for a vast terrain. But virtual production also imposes a crucial restriction. "Since the wall's length is fixed," he says, "depending on your lens, how much of the wall you see will change. Let's say, I place the

actor 100 feet in front [of the screen], and I'm using a 24 [mm] lens—my lens will see beyond the wall. So I need to know how much of the physical world I can see." Sometimes the director may want more of the physical world in a scene, which needs to be scanned and put into the virtual world. "So the techviz is essentially placing the camera, deciding the lens, seeing the world, and fixing the wall. All of it will finally tell me which elements will stay in the real world and which in the virtual."

Virtual production also changes the composition of the film crew. A cinematographer who has only shot on real location will most likely not know the intricacies of this technology. That's where a virtual cinematographer comes in—a nodal point between the real and the virtual world. Jagadeesh Bommisetti at Annapurna Studios is one such professional who, before working on virtual production, had shot a few Telugu films. "As a cinematographer," he says, "you need an additional step here: matching the background digital lighting and the foreground physical lighting." While building "digital assets"—all the elements on the LED wall, including, if any, meta-humans—the cinematographer can inform the "VAD [Virtual and Art Department]" on how he wants to "light the scene", which does "not happen in regular shoots".

A director used to working with a green screen, remembers Annapurna Studio's Chief Technical Officer, C V Rao, was floored by virtual production's possibilities: "Sir, it feels like I'm flying. I can see my final output. I can adjust my lighting. This is really crazy." But the "main problem," he adds, is that "many directors whom we meet—and I'm not blaming them; that's how we've worked—don't prepare well before the shoot, and they're not ready to prepare." Besides, the LED screen can sometimes interact with another device, the movie camera, in unpleasant ways. So, if a cinematographer focuses her camera directly on the LED wall, it produces an interference pattern—comprising repetitive lines, dots, and colour—that ruins the final image. A problem so pervasive it even has a name: the Moiré pattern. Want to see it live? Take a phone camera and record something on TV. "It's a virtually insurmountable problem," says Qube's co-founder, Senthil Kumar, "that will never go away." It does have a simple solution though, he adds, "the camera just needs to be slightly off-focus." But it also compromises the depth of field, which "cannot be infinite, only slight, so that the foreground is more focused and the background is slightly off." Which means it's difficult to

capture a vast landscape in deep focus—unlike a scene shot on location.

The Moiré pattern can also appear when the camera is too close to the LED wall. What determines the ideal distance? The pixel pitch—the distance between the two pixels on the LED panels. The lower its value, the higher the screen resolution, and the closer the camera can be to the screen. "Sometimes clients ask, 'No, sir, we want to keep the subject a little closer,'" says Rao, 'to get the proper scaling. If it is far from the wall, my perspective is not correct.' But because of the Moiré pattern you need to keep your subject at least 10 or 15 feet away from the wall."
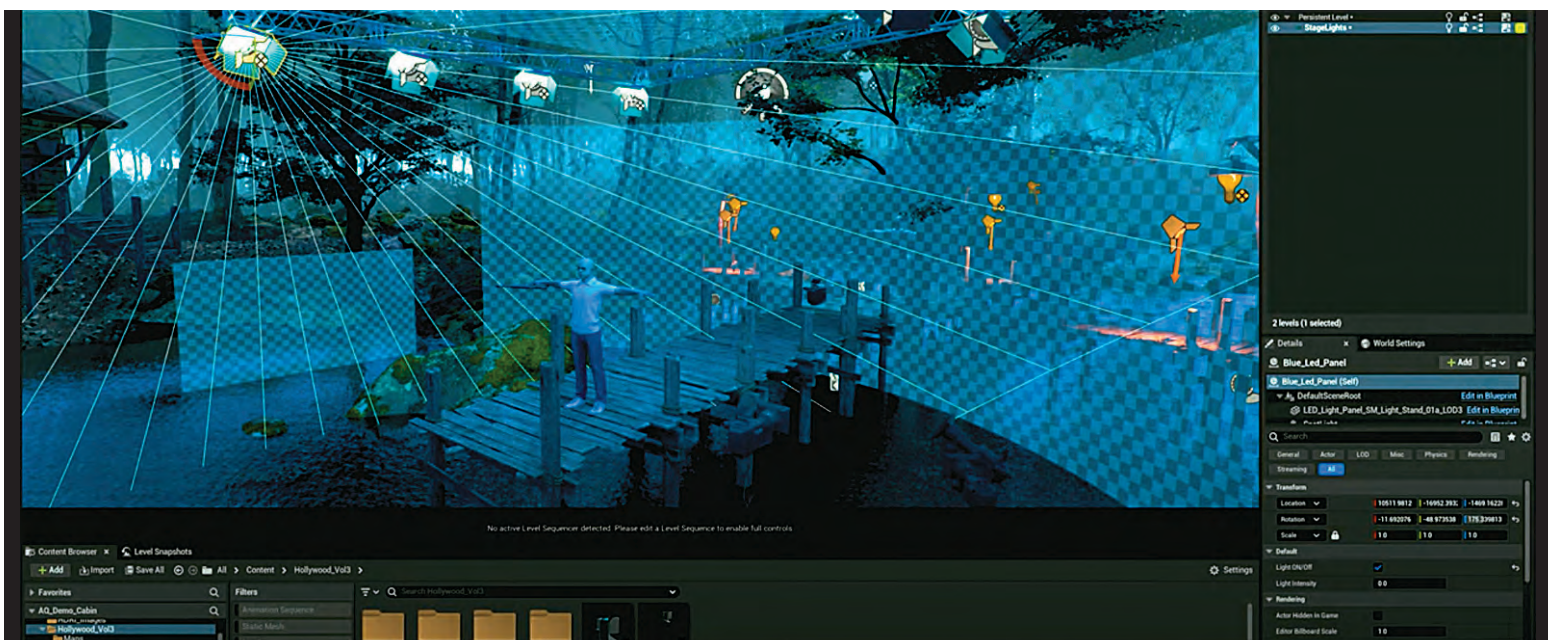
Virtual production also runs into another problem: this time, natural. The walls excel at emitting soft, diffused light, but struggle to replicate the direct sunlight and its attendant shadows and contrasts. How did the skies, then, look like in the first two seasons of *The Mandalorian*? Overcast. Or, as its director, Jon Faverou, put it: "Hard daylight is best done in hard daylight." And even though virtual production can capture sunset, there's nuance within nuance. The inverse square law says that the intensity from a light source is inversely proportional to the square of the distance from it. But unlike the (natural) sun, the LED wall is not an infinite distance away. "So the [light] fall-off from the LED screen will be different than it'd be if the sunset were, you know, how many million miles away the sun is," said Academy Award-winning cinematographer Roger Deakins to Greig Fraser, who shot *The Mandalorian*, on a podcast.

The LED wall is not infinitely long either. "Let's say you want an extra-wide shot of a castle, something like *Baahubali*," says Panchapakesan. "We obviously can't do that. We've to do a green screen of that on the wall itself and then do a set extension in post [production]." Deakins highlights another limitation. "If you're shooting a film totally on stage with sets, you still can't have a guy run 100 yards. There's no way of tracking behind them." To which Panchapakesan has at least a partial, if not the whole, solution: "Use a treadmill."

* * *

Across cultures and countries and decades, we've watched movies carrying an implicit assumption of an intricate relationship between the real world, the filmmaking crew, and the audiences. If the makers saw an awe-inducing visual while shooting then, we assumed, it awed them first. Or they designed elaborate sets to create meanings and elicit feelings—a real, textured, tactile world.

When Madhubala lip-syncs *Chhupna sakega ishq humaara/ Chaaron taraf hai unka nazaara* in *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), and the camera cuts to her defiant dance form split into a dozen square mirrors on the ceiling, isn't her rebellion heightened by the precise, lived-in set design? "I'll give you another example: the song *Thare Rahiyo* from *Pakeezah* ," says art critic and academic Karthik Kalyanaraman who curated the world's first AI art exhibition in Delhi in 2018. "At one point, she goes to a pond, and the moon is shining on it—it's a set—and there's a split moment where she turns, and there's just a flicker

"TWO YEARS AGO, NOBODY COULD HAVE PREDICTED AI WOULD REACH WHERE IT IS TODAY. NOT EVEN THE AI EXPERTS."

Two Worlds Meet
The making of *Break Free* showing how the virtual and real worlds interact

of disgust on her face. If that would have been in virtual [production], it'd have completely destroyed it." Or take Shah Rukh Khan, doused in manic energy, dancing against the backdrop of majestic mountains in *Satrangi Re*, as the camera swirls around him. An actor in front of nature, an actor subsumed by nature, unfurling his dual passion—real yet mystical, tangible yet invisible—an example of what we risk to lose, the visceral vitality of shooting on location, if virtual production vanquishes the very thought of makers and actors being humbled by the real world?

"I don't agree in the slightest that AI will reduce the charm of filmmaking," says filmmaker Anand Gandhi who has increasingly relied on virtual production for his next ambitious project. "We could just go back and make cave paintings, then, because that's extremely charming. Human aspiration has been to constantly replicate and record reality and simulate potential futures and allegories and metaphors to a high degree of realism and fidelity so that they become immersive, true, and believable." It's why, he adds, viewers prefer a medium of "higher fidelity"—a sharper technology—"so we go from VHS to DVD to BluRay. You try showing VHS to people today." AI hasn't just changed the possibilities of moviemaking but, given its humongous scope and merits, also encouraged directors to redefine it in the manner that feels most natural, most true, to them. Moving beyond the realms of tech, it's acquired an ideological and philosophical tenor. "Art is not just about recording our environment or simulating futures or dreams or nightmares in high fidelity," says Gandhi. "It's also about capturing the invisible and simulating the translucent— unclear ideas simmering beneath the zeitgeist. And art doesn't disappear just because fidelity increases. In fact, it

challenges the artist who was busy getting lost in creating the legwork of fidelity."

"Imagine this," says Panchapakesan, "if in [a movie on the scale of] *Lawrence of Arabia*, I only do the master and the extra-wide shots on location and come back. So instead of 10 days, I spend one day [on location], reduce my production costs, and do the rest here. Like, you use jimmy jib"—an affordable and versatile camera crane—"for a particular scene, likewise, you pick and choose which part of the film you want to shoot in virtual production. People won't shoot their entire films on it." The technology, however, says Kalyanaraman, "might become so cheap and effective"—say, "one-tenth of its current cost in the next two years"—that it may lure more directors to shoot a large portion of their movies on virtual production. "Two years ago, nobody could have predicted AI would reach where it is today. Not even the AI experts."

And this could reshape, if not irreversibly alter, directors' attitude towards the medium itself. "I'm worried that those filmmakers"—especially the young, independent ones—"who could have explored real space and locations will be tempted to go this route," says Kalyanaraman. Some big budget films have "already gone this route", but if the indies also start to emerge (primarily) from the sea of pixels then, he fears, "this increasingly unreal world" will lose another "sense of reality". Just consider the world we inhabit: we Zomato our food, Dunzo our groceries, Netflix our films. Even before the COVID-induced lockdown, we had been living in digital prisons for long. Tech overtaking remnants of real-life in cinema could elongate our digital incarcerations—or make them permanent.

"Virtual production would first affect [Indian cinema] bit by bit and then it'd grow very fast," says production designer Aradhana Seth, who has worked on such movies as *The Sky is Pink* (2018), *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015),

"WHAT'S ESSENTIAL TO CINEMA? IT'S THE SUM TOTAL OF ALL THE ACCIDENTS THAT HAPPEN IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA, SUCH AS SUNLIGHT, CLOUDS, RAIN, SNOWFALL."

and *Don* (2006). "Earlier only the big budget films were using it but now even the smaller ones can use it once the tech is in place." The major action sequences in the Netflix series *Trial by Fire* (2023)—recreating the 1997 Uphaar cinema tragedy—were first conceptualised on a green screen. "But as the idea kept evolving," says its production designer, Angelica Monica Bhowmick, "and as they wanted the fluidity and flexibility, and since we had so many actors on set, it kept leaning more and more towards real locations." Virtual production demands precise planning at the pre-production stage, she adds, "which reduces the level of flexibility. It's something that can work in your favour, or not, depending on your working environment." Admiring the way tech has evolved, Seth admits that it also encourages a "standardised way of thinking"—a sameness of process—"so it's got both good and bad".

"What's essential to cinema?" asks actor-director Rajat Kapoor. "It's the sum total of all the accidents that happen in front of the camera, such as sunlight, clouds, rain, snowfall, or something that happened three kilometres away from the camera, but you can still see it." It's those accidents, he says, that make the shot. Such an image—"which you can't manufacture"—"happens to you" while "shooting on a given location" on a particular day. "It's not about filming Paris at 10 am and Trivandrum at 10 pm. It holds no excitement for me. I'd rather go to Paris and spend a week there, looking at the light before I take my camera out."

* * *

By reproducing a desired setting—which, earlier, either needed to be visited or created—virtual production also prompts a crucial concern. "People who build the sets will obviously be used less," says Kumar. In the long run, he adds, there will be "less and less jobs for any [filmmaking] department" because of AI. "So it's a much bigger debate about how we compensate people. Maybe a universal basic income is the only solution, so that people can have the comfort of a base to work on things they love or excel in areas where they make more money."

After a virtual production shoot at Annapurna Studios, an assistant set director, remembers Rao, asked him, "What is our future, sir? We did small work in the foreground, and you extended it on the wall. We won't have any work." Rao disagrees, saying virtual production's use will only be "minimal", restricted to a few scenes. "Has VFX replaced 100% of filmmaking? It has not." He does agree, though, that there will be "some deviation" in the future. But once the genie is out of the bottle—broadcasting the technology's benefits— it'll serve not one but many masters. A process already underway with an entire Bollywood movie, *Judaa Hoke Bhi*—made by a mainstream director, Vikram Bhatt, for a big production house—made on virtual production. Nothing rings as loud in the Indian film industries as a successful trend—or actors' diktats. So if a few star vehicles, featuring extensive use of virtual production, can hit the box-office jackpot, then this technological tsunami can drown out conventional filmmaking.

"Production designers will also evolve," says Bhowmick, "something that's already begun to happen. Basically, we are designing. So we'll continue to design whether it's for a physical or a virtual set, although with slightly different skill sets." Virtual production, however, will certainly have a much bigger impact on the lower echelon workers, she adds, "the construction supervisors, the carpenters, the painters". Seth echoes that point, saying the "[production] *dadas*"—the below-the-line workers—"have already dwindled". The Indian filmmaking economics, says Bhowmick, also "works in such a way that it's still cheaper to hire those professionals as compared to churning out productions on computers." So in this country "both will co-exist"—the traditional and the modern—"like everything else, like you've a *bail-gaadi* [bullock cart] and a Chandrayaan".

Bhowmick isn't antagonistic to virtual production, much like Seth (and Kalyanaraman who, at best, remains "ambiguous" about it), but she does cite a few examples that add more nuance to this debate. "In *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!,* Paresh Rawal plays three different characters"—symbolising the hero's father figures—"and he had said in a behind the scenes interview that, 'When I'd turn up for the shoot, all the three sets were so different that I used to feel like a different person.' Now how would an actor do that if you put him on a green screen?" These elements add an extra "*rasa* [flavour]," she adds, complemented by an additional factor, which comes with its own "incalculable variety" and "indiscipline" and "madness": our country itself.

While shooting *Aadhaar* (2019) in Jamua, a village in Jharkhand, she encountered "many potent and nice surprises" that deserved to be a part of the film. "So we'd see one guy selling *jhaalmudi* [spicy puffed rice], and it'd be like everyone is doing their stuff and there's so much chaos, but this guy is just busy making his *jhaalmudi*. And we thought, you know, he should be in the background. So how do you plan these things?"

During the election campaign sequence in *Newton* (2017), she says, the team "pulled so many things" from the actual settings, "the special *gaadis* they campaigned in, for example, because our locations are so rich." A man in a Chhattisgarh village "roamed around in a weird cowboy outfit"—lost in "his own trip"—leaving her amused. "So we put him among the campaigning bunch. It's these little things that make our films so memorable. *Kaise, matlab* [I mean...] How can you capture and encapsulate the whole of India into pre-production?"

Where Magic is Made
Annapurna Studios' virtual production stage

Rajesh Ramachandran
IS THE CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER AND PRESIDENT AT QUBE CINEMA

Transforming CINEMA

In a few years, virtual production won't be qualified as such; it will simply be called production. Because that's how production will happen.

IMAGINE the following scenario: You're a filmmaker who has to shoot a complicated action sequence in a remote jungle with a big movie star. Normally, you'd travel to such a location with your crew, spend money on stay and travel, and worry about other logistical hassles that accompany shooting on locations. But now, with a technology like virtual production, you don't have to. A technology that'll not just change how films are made but also conceptualised. But before I get into its intricacies, let me first tell you how it all began.

Digital technology made filmmaking affordable and accessible. Before digital, only a certain kind of movie would even get distribution—or a theatrical release. But now that's no longer the case: if you've made a solid film, you can get it out there. Around 2016, LEDs and movies started to intersect. We, at Qube Cinema—a firm providing end-to-end digital cinema technology and solutions—began building LED cinema systems, deviating from our previous focus on projectors. During that process, we noticed that LEDs had marked their presence in production. That intrigued us, the opportunity to get into production technology. Besides, over the last five years, the quality of LEDs has improved by leaps. So, when you've a high-quality and large image on an LED wall, you can place actors and props in front of it to create a seamless blend when viewed through the camera. The audience should look at it and *feel* that it's real and authentic—and not something powered by an LED.

We, at Qube Cinema, are essentially cinephiles, folks who love storytelling. We even made and produced a few movies, such as the bilingual drama *180*, the Carnatic concert film *Margazhi Raagam* (featuring T M Krishna and Bombay Jayashri), and a unique musical concert, One (collaborating, again, with Krishna). These creative pieces intended to illustrate our key goals: improving quality, maintaining accessibility, and proving that something pioneering can be achieved.

Embracing virtual production is part of that goal. But that's in the realm of image-making, what about filmmaking? Because even if the LED panel successfully reproduces a photorealistic image, the illusion breaks if the camera moves. That doesn't happen in virtual production though because, among other things, it incorporates the parallax effect. If you've ever travelled on a train and looked outside the window, you'd have noticed that distant hills seem to move slower than nearby objects, such as telephone poles. In the context of virtual production, parallax becomes crucial because it provides depth and realism to the scene. Now the images displayed on the LED panels come from game engines, such as Unreal Engine, a popular choice. It takes the position of the camera as an input and constantly renders different perspectives based on its movement, achieving parallax. And Unreal does all of it on the fly. So, for example, pulling the camera back reduces the size of the object on the LED wall or, say, panning left or right rotates it. This real-time rendering is why it's called 'real-time'.

Storytellers should familiarise themselves with tools like Unreal Engine—which is available for free—to experiment with their ideas. A reasonably beefy computer at home, for example, will allow them to create entire scenes, design camera movements, and incorporate digital humans into their virtual environments. This tech also demands a shift in mindset for creators. Filmmakers must bring on board a director of photography and a production designer familiar with virtual production. The latter plays a crucial role in seamlessly blending the virtual and the real elements, imbuing the scenes with depth. For us, that's a key challenge: to convince creators to invest time and effort during the pre-production stage. Some struggle to adapt due to financial constraints—and some simply don't want to change. But if they're willing to spend more time to prepare, the results will be immensely rewarding.

Since this technology is so new, not many are familiar with it. That can create a talent gap. To bridge it, I suggest introducing virtual production education early. In fact, even without a filmmaking background, individuals can benefit from learning Unreal Engine. And upcoming tech such as the Apple Vision Pro headset—a mixed reality piece that blends digital content with the physical world—indicates how our world is becoming increasingly virtual. The next generation of creators should, as a result, get used to 3D content creation tools. Because in the long term, traditional roles may either evolve or get eliminated, particularly those related to physical set construction. So film schools and institutions teaching visual communications should incorporate virtual production into their curricula. Some colleges, such as New York University, already offer degrees in virtual production. Academia should show urgency because virtual production education will help avoid ad-hoc approaches and reinventing the wheel. I'm concerned that without proper mainstreaming, the craft may not advance, leading to poor production values in films.

Virtual production entering the mainstream and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) share an intimate relationship. Their convergence has resulted from the advancements in computation, making them both feasible. Qube Labs, our research arm, is actively exploring the intersection of AI and virtual production, focussing on Generative AI. This technology is already helping greatly with creating concept art but we are beginning to see how Gen AI can produce near final virtual backgrounds. As this continues to mature, we are going to see more of "final pixel" work happening just on the computer perhaps even removing the need to project anything on a big wall. Performances of live actors can be captured separately and blended with virtual elements that can range from backgrounds, props and even virtual humans.

Now let me address the cost implications of virtual production stages and the current state of the industry. This conversation runs into a paradox: wanting to commoditise virtual production while acknowledging the current price challenges. The goal is, of course, to reach economies of scale, making virtual production stages more affordable across the country. The other challenge is with creating virtual backgrounds at a high enough quality. The very limited pool of virtual artists who can accomplish this makes it rather expensive. Besides, the current marketplaces offering digital assets—which are displayed on the LED wall—take a long time to produce. But you can also justify the high cost by looking at the current capabilities that allow productions to create complex scenes without the need for extensive travel to external locations.

Filmmakers should, however, consider shooting specific sequences on virtual stages rather than their entire films. Imagine big stars splitting the shoot between different virtual environments in the same location. It provides a huge financial incentive. That's the transformative potential of virtual production. We believe that, in a few years, virtual production won't be qualified as such; it will simply be called production. Because that's how production will happen. Ⓞ

PHOTO COURTESY: QUBE CINEMA

Karthick Kalyanaraman
IS AN ECONOMIST WHO
EXPLORES THE INTERSECTION
BETWEEN AI AND
CONTEMPORARY ART

Challenge of the Virtual

Colour brought us closer to lived physical 'meatspace' reality,
but virtual production can very easily take us away from it

SINCE the beginning of film, two equally vital strands have animated it: the immersive fictional space constructed out of 'reality'—as heralded by the Lumière Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896)—and the completely fantastical fictional space constructed with filmic sleight-of-hand—Georges Méliès' *The Trip to the Moon* (1902) is perhaps its appropriate forebear. Across the history of fictional films, it's perhaps the former stream (the Bazinian, after the great theorist

of film, André Bazin) that has been most fertile. At least it's the one I've most responded to, its ambition being nothing less than to reconstruct another total world from selected images of this partial one. It, for instance, gave rise to film noir, to Italian neorealism, to the New Wave, right now to the macabre realism of, say, Béla Tarr. The other strand, the one that cares less about physical space, about the 'real world', too, has developed into various forms of fantasy techniques, of VFX leading to the green screen and, now, virtual production.

The greatest scenes in film, ones that have a haunting power over me, have explored real space in some way or the other. Think of that last scene in *Vampyr* (1932) or even *Psycho* (1960), where Vera Miles' character moves from the top of the killer's house to the dreadful basement, or that slow, almost ritualistic walk around the room up to the portrait in *Laura* (1944). Entire films (say *Barry Lyndon* (1975) with its alternating claustral insides and desolate outsides of Kubrick or any film by Tarkovsky) have been structured around the making memorable, of different types of imagined space constructed out of real spaces. Perhaps the epitome of this might be *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), an entirely spatio-temporal delight. Even the French New Wave would not have exploded if not for the basic respect for real locations and real spaces, morphed through trailblazing techniques, such as the jump cuts. The actual camera movement and actual location creates a sense of magic; I fear, however, a lot of the times that the second strand, when it ignores the real with an overdose of visual effects, can flatten out that true sorcery, and substitute for it a rather stale 'irreal' (which paradoxically in surplus becomes all too normal compared to the (still) strange enticements of the reconstructed 'real').

As an economist, I also wonder whether a select few VFX vendors will monopolise the virtual production market. But more importantly, I'm worried whether it'll magnify a trend already dominant in cinema: the deflation of reality. That's so because AI is evolving at a blinding speed. In 2018, my brother and I curated the world's first AI art exhibition at a major art gallery, Nature Morte, in Delhi. At that time what existed was very different. We could have never predicted that AI would be where it is today. The ability of AI to mimic 'natural' parameters is only going to increase. (Now there's a limit—the ability will not increase without bound—and that is data availability. At present, AI requires billions and billions of captured images, and we are close to the limit of image-making at which current models can operate). And the plague of fantasy images it unleashes can be so cheap

as to make 'real' production relatively unattractive from a cost perspective. So cheap as to ultimately devalue reality. And not just with the big-budget films but also, and this is what I care about, the indies—films usually fortunately constrained by cost to explore real space!

Consider the two contrasting film industries in south India: the Malayalam and the Tamil. The latter (I'm speaking in broad terms, ignoring the wave of 'Kerala'-type indies that are finding a growing niche in Tamil) might increasingly opt for virtual production because they churn out numerous 'mass' films; they've a different vibe, a different audience, different goals. But I also cherish the Kerala tradition—something like *Kumbalangi Nights* (2018)—which produces real and rooted films. And I truly hope the decreasing cost of virtual production will not devalue that ethos.

That said, though, it may not evolve that way! Digital photography, for example, didn't replace painting. There's something about actuality, actual spaces, the documentary medium, that's become a fetish for some of us in our increasingly unreal world, with all these filtered images from Instagram, a wave of fake news, and what not. So a good portion of us will always value the kino-eye, the lived world filtered and remade by the lens, all the more. I do fear, however, that virtual production will shift the balance towards, what I find, very boring films or series such as *The Mandalorian* (2019).

> CINEMA AND TECHNICAL INNOVATION GO HAND IN HAND. SOME OF THE BEST FILMS THAT I'VE EVER SEEN WERE ALL BLACK-AND-WHITE. BUT WHEN COLOUR CAME, EVERYTHING CHANGED.

I want to make clear that I am certainly not a Luddite, against technology in cinema in any way! Cinema and technical innovation go hand in hand. Some of the best films that I've ever seen were all black-and-white. But when colour came, everything changed. Of course, initially, many didn't know how to handle it. But by the 1950s, say in Douglas Sirk's melodramas, colour began to be used as an element of expression. So here is a technological development that really added to the aesthetic vocabulary of films in its Bazinian attempt to become a total medium mimicking all of reality.

So why is virtual production different? Well the two changes cannot be compared: colour brought us closer to the lived physical 'meatspace' reality: virtual production can very easily take us away from it. Virtual production can tempt the auteur to push the film into a fantastical, dream-like, ultimately solipsistic realm. It pushes us within ourselves, divorcing our points of contact with the outside world. Unlike the great tradition of filmmaking that has pushed us *out* into seeking fragile contact with what was once known as The Real World... ⌐

(Views expressed are personal)

Changing the Lens

*There is an experience, a tactile one that production designers create with objects that bind time and space and complete the narrative in a film. For decades, production designer and artist, **Aradhana Seth,** has worked on creating film sets that are intrinsic to storytelling. A location, an altar, a house built from scratch and aged to give it a context and to place it in the story are her ways of storytelling. Her Goa house is a testimony to her craft. Objects from film sets are part of her museum in the making where she plans to preserve parts of ephemeral sets and these objects are clues and causes and serve more than one function. They add depth and with technology, some of that depth might be lost.*

Seth recalls how on the film The Darjeeling Limited *(2007)—where she was the art director and set decorator—they duplicated cabin number 40/41, and mirrored it when doing so. The train bogie was the site of the action and integral to the plot. It ensured that the director Wes Anderson could film looking out of the window of a moving train as it traversed on an actual railway line in Rajasthan. This helped the camera axis to remain the same, filming both to and from the starting station. For this particular project they had to design a mount on the ceiling of the corridor to install the camera. This made it easy to shoot the characters walk up and down the long corridor without the camera appearing in the frame.*

"If we were to shoot The Darjeeling Limited *today I wonder what Unreal Engine would offer us?" says Seth. There is a realness to objects when they are part of the set and not just projected on a screen. They can evoke emotions and reactions.*

*Seth spoke to **Tanul Thakur & Ojas Kolvankar***:

What was your earliest experience of working with films?
My first movie *In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones* (1989) as an assistant director was set in The School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi. Screenwriter and production designer Arundhati Roy's script was nuanced in its understanding of the spaces. In fact, she had lived in that hostel!

It was interesting to see the choices she and the director Pradip Krishen made when it came to designing the sets and locating the film. Be it their decision to shoot in the school itself (the real location) and preserve the look and feel. They often retained certain aspects and embellished others to add to the look, feel and period that the film was set in.

Over the years it became very clear to me when we needed to build a set from scratch, when one could build into an existing location and when the space needed only set dressing. Multiple location recce's, sourcing and research were a big part of prep. While wandering and looking, she soaked in the atmosphere. So, as a production designer, my biggest compliment is: "But what have you done on the film?" It means that I have been able to create the milieu and the time period in its smallest details. From wall texture, set dressing, art, furniture and the small objects that are seen in the frame. I never want to create a set that looks like a set unless it is meant to be a set.

When did tech mark a major presence in your work? What were some of the challenges you faced?
That happened in the aughts. I remember working on three films that relied on different kinds of technology: *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), *Don* (2006), and *One Night with the King* (2006). It was particularly useful in *Don,* where I worked closely with the Red Chillies' VFX team. Back then one had to be careful with chroma keying as one didn't know what the final scene would look in absence of projections—scale, placements of characters, and accuracy which would come in only during post-production. Moreover, some crew members were still getting a hang of the chroma key process.

How can we leverage virtual production for filmmaking in India?
With the help of virtual production one can go from Kashmir to Kanyakumari in 12 hours. It can help you capture sunrise and sunset in an eight-hour or a 12-hour shift, which used to take a few days before. It also provides flexibility; you can rotate the stage, for example, by 270°. In fact some south Indian films are already using it. What would be interesting to observe is how younger independent filmmakers are able to bring their scripts to life by employing this technology beyond the monetary barriers that come along with elaborate set design, travel costs and long-drawn shoot schedules. It could democratise filmmaking.

What are some shortcomings of virtual production?
Virtual production can sometimes produce stilted visuals—that might come across like a projection. With the advanced tech, however, even that is negligible. Now there are different firms, such as Media.Monks in Noida, which help create materials for preps and projections. Because they've to create content that's related to our environment while understanding the context of the film. So it might take a little longer in India as film crews will need to upskill and acquaint themselves and adapt to this new system.

To begin with, virtual production and on-location shoots will have to take parallel tracks. Because, as of now, many film professionals aren't exactly aware of what it does. The cinematographers, for example, need to understand how to work with it, as it produces better results with soft, diffused light as opposed to strong sunlight. So there'll be a point where virtual production and analog shoots will mix and then, as the tech gets better and more people become aware, the former will take over. **o**

(To read the full interview visit www.outlookindia.com*)*

Immersive &
INTERACTIVE

Much like how cinema changed the lives of people in the previous generation, video games are doing the same for the current generation

Q
IS A STORYTELLER WHO HAS JUST FINISHED HIS NEW FILM ZEWEL

Hina
IS A FILM EDITOR AND A PRODUCER WHOSE FILMS HAVE PREMIERED AT FESTIVALS WORLDWIDE
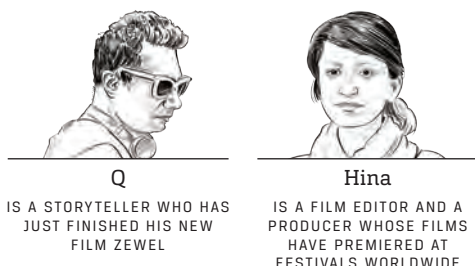
VIRTUAL production in films and video games share an intricate and intimate relationship. In fact, a famous real-time creation tool, Unreal Engine, which makes virtual production possible, was first used in a first-person shooter game, *Unreal*.

We have been filmmakers for a long time, but a story we both loved made us consider 3D video game as a medium. There's an Indian novella, *Sultana's Dream* (1905), by Rokeya Shahkawat Hossain, a futuristic story where a little girl Sultana wakes up in a feminist utopia. It's a sci-fi dream, with solar energy, flying cars, and a society where all beings in nature are equal. Hossain described a circular system, predicated on equality, compassion and learning as opposed to the pyramid system of patriarchy we still suffer from. It set us thinking: how to adapt her radical vision for a contemporary audience.

Unlike films, video game is an immersive and interactive experience. Also, most people watch films just once, while a game can be played many times over, sometimes with different outcomes. Much like how cinema changed the lives of people in our generation, video games are doing the same for the current generation. As per Netflix's data, most of its user base is above the age of 38. The youth have other interests now, and we're interested in their interests.

Video games in the past decade have been mostly competitive and often violent, catering to a certain kind of player. We wanted to change the politics of the video game: change a player's interaction, make it more inclusive, make it more conscious. So we came up with the idea of a first-person-shooter with a camera, where the player picks stories and progresses in the game with a camera (instead of a gun). Virtual production made perfect sense for a story like this because it's set in a world so progressive that it doesn't exist in the real world—but now it can, in the virtual one.

We're creating an immersive 3D space that imagines a gripping and fun world, founded on mysticism and ecology. Immersive, yes, but not hyper-real. It's a stylized world, a beautiful world. It's also mapped on a real piece of conserved forest land in Palolem, Goa. The real-life impact of the game really fired our imagination. We were helped by several mentors who made us realise the key differences between video games and cinema. Here's the most crucial one: unlike writing for cinema where the audience is in front of you, in a video game the player is right behind you. It's a huge difference. It's the biggest challenge we have ever faced: "Oh, shit, she's gonna jump! Oh hell, she's gonna turn left." So you just want to finish your part before the players overtake you!

Besides, everything counts in a video game. If the players jump, what is its pace, velocity and weight? Can we have a little twirl in their walk? For example: there are generic animations for a woman or a man standing, so we mixed the different styles of ogres and bears standing to create Moushi, a fisherwoman, who moonlights as a DJ. Why do all of that? Simple, we want to create unique 'Indian' characters.

India is a new player in the video gaming industry with loads of talent. The major challenges are referencing and localised assets. Original work is difficult to move in the infancy of an industry. People are slow to accept that to produce something original, it takes passion, sweat, rigour and time. We want to look at mysticism, handloom, craft, folk music, costume, culture. We want to return to our roots to visualise a future.

We're also certain that our engagement with virtual production will continue beyond video games. Our next feature film, for instance, is a period piece set in the 1920s. We plan to stitch up photos from that time on a virtual set and 'mimic' live action. That prospect excites us greatly—to use and move still pictures in such a way that it transports the audiences to, say, Marine Drive in 1924.

Even though the possibilities of AI fascinate us, we are worried that it may be used to churn mechanical work. We had a writer who had to write dialogues for Bot-Kabir, a character in the game, and they produced something which made us go, 'Umm, it's ... okay, but is this how you think a mystical poet in the future would speak?' They said, 'You know, I didn't write it myself, I put it on ChatGPT!' So, we wonder if that's also one part of the AI-powered future. We needed the machines to clean the house, while we wrote poetry. But it looks like we are working the backend, while AI writes poetry. *O*

(Views expressed are personal)

Foreign Exchange

Virtual production technology eliminates the need for Bollywood filmmakers to travel abroad. But what do foreign locations really mean, socially and politically?

Tanul Thakur

BEFORE shooting *Silsila* (1981), Yash Chopra ran into a problem. No, not the controversial cast—comprising Amitabh Bachchan, Jaya Bachchan, and Rekha—this trouble had a poetic lilt. The second part of the song—"*Dekha ek khwaab toh ek silsile hue/Door tak nighaaon mein hai gul khile hue*" (As far as I can see, I can only see flowers)—tripped him. Where in this world would he find such a place? He asked Amitabh. The actor showed him a clip on his mini-projector: a garden awash in tulips. As far as Chopra could see, he could, indeed, just see flowers. He flew to the Keukenhof Gardens in Amsterdam, setting a trend synonymous with Hindi cinema: romantic songs shot in foreign locations.

Even though Chopra first travelled to the Netherlands, a country down south became his adoptive home: Switzerland. That's where he shot his next, *Faasle* (1985), then *Chandni* (1989), then *Darr* (1993). (He set his 1991 drama, *Lamhe*, in London.) In the first two decades of his career, in fact, Chopra hadn't left India. "Initially I used to shoot my films in Kashmir or Shimla," he recalled in an interview, "but with the terrorism threat in Kashmir and the lack of adequate infrastructure in Shimla, I had to find an alternative." His wife, Pam, elaborated: "You hardly needed permissions in Switzerland. But in India, if you

had to shoot in a train, you had to start the paperwork six months in advance."

So for an aesthetic-driven motive, a foreign locale meant geographical beauty—something literally unseen—a place to parachute in and out from. That's why *Silsila*, otherwise set in Delhi, used Amsterdam as a backdrop, much like the LED walls in virtual production. And even though *Chandni* and *Darr* weaved locations as part of their narratives—it's where the lead couples celebrate their honeymoons—the foreign countries, and their people, didn't affect the stories in any memorable way. That'd change two years later, with the release of another Yash Raj production, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995, *DDLJ*), where the setting would itself become a character.

A drama that used the foreign to spotlight the native: seeing others became a way to see one's self—what they are, what we are not; what we protect, what they flaunt. Take its first scene, where an immigrant, Baldev Singh (Amrish Puri), in London's Trafalgar Square, draws a remarkable parallel between himself and the pigeons he's feeding: "They are just like me—they also don't have a country." When his daughter, Simran (Kajol), wakes up hungover in a hotel room in Switzerland, fearing she's lost her virginity, the hero, Raj (Shah Rukh Khan), assuages her anxiety, saying he understands and respects the "*izzat*" of a "*Hindustani ladki*". Earlier in the film, he waves off the pestering cops on a highway, saying, "Bye-o, bye-o! Al Pacino! I'm a *kutto*, I'm

a *kamino*, I'm a *saalo*!"—an inside joke shared between the actor and the Indian audiences, for it is delivered in Hindi, excluding the foreigners, contriving an excuse to assert 'Indian superiority', a pattern that'd devolve into ridicule, popping most crassly in *Salaam Namaste* (2005) and *Jab Harry Met Sejal* (2017).

DDLJ's director, Aditya Chopra, had unwittingly turned the clock backwards, as Bollywood films in the 1960s had also travelled around the world to absorb the essence of home. This story even had poetic circularity because his idol, Raj Kapoor, had pioneered the trend by setting *Sangam* (1964) in London, Paris and Geneva. The 60s, a decade doused in political subtext: a young country itching to assert itself on the global stage; a country whose political masters used cinema for "nation building"; a country wrecked by unemployment, illiteracy, and foreign threats.

So it made perfect sense that *Sangam*'s overseas portion opened to the shot of an Indian tricolour above an apartment complex, which cut to Radha (Vyjayanthimala) and Sundar (Kapoor), an Indian Air Force officer wearing a uniform, under it. Even the identities of the camera and the characters merge: both tourists, both voyeurs. Many scenes unfold via wide and long shots, capturing the considerable expanse of the foreign land. The camera adopts a tourist's gaze, panning from the top to the bottom while exploring monuments. Such language informs several Hindi dramas after *Sangam*, devoting increased screen time to foreign locales, such as *Love in Tokyo* (1966) and *An Evening in Paris* (1967). "The protagonist in these films is like a 'tourist'," writes Madhuja Mukherjee in *Travels of Bollywood Cinema* (2014), "gathering mementos and photos without interacting with the locals."

Sometimes the excitement spills, as Sundar describes to his best friend: "By the time you read this [letter], we'll be *on top of the Eiffel Tower*, Gopal!" In another sequence, a luxury store allures Radha, who keeps admiring a gorgeous handbag—as if she's a version of future India, both in real-life and cinema, a bottomless receptacle of capitalist

> MANY SCENES IN *SANGAM* UNFOLD VIA WIDE AND LONG SHOTS, CAPTURING THE CONSIDERABLE EXPANSE OF THE FOREIGN LAND. THE CAMERA ADOPTS A TOURIST'S GAZE, PANNING FROM THE TOP TO THE BOTTOM WHILE EXPLORING MONUMENTS.

consumerism. Sundar, on the other hand, caresses a glass window, fixating on a bagpipe. Cash-strapped, they break into an argument about what to buy. "There are only two beautiful things in this world," he tells her, "one, a woman, the other, a bagpipe. Since eternity, men have suffered hardships, given sacrifices. I'm a man as well"—he slaps a wad of notes on the table—"take this, go, buy your purse." (It's not tough to guess which item is ultimately bought.) Such blatant emasculation—a sense of persecution—parallels these characters' insecure national identities, evident in many films in the decade.

In *Love in Tokyo* (1966), Ashok (Joy Mukherjee) keeps requesting his nephew, born to an Indian father and a Japanese mother, to return to India, only to get rebuffed. The plea continues for many scenes, denting Ashok's pride, setting up a constant competition between India and Japan, culminating in him saying, "We've Taj Mahal!" The movie fetishises the country's bodies—whether it's buildings or women—marked by a distinct 'oriental' gaze.

Indian directors also used the foreign to assert their culture and differences. In *Sangam*, while admiring the panoramic Paris from the Eiffel Tower, Sundar and Radha see a foreign couple kiss. He, too, leans towards Radha, but she turns and
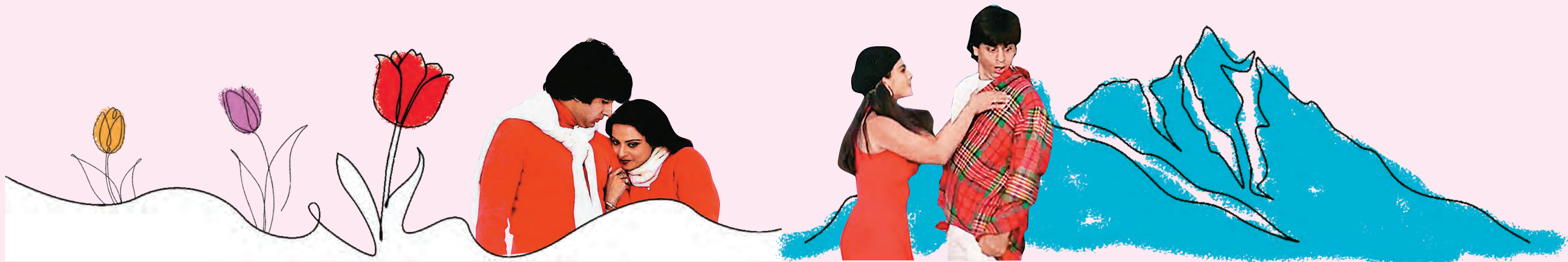
AS ECONOMIC LIBERALISATION SWEPT ACROSS THE COUNTRY, BOLLYWOOD DIRECTORS REDEFINED THE VERY MEANINGS OF WEALTH AND THE WEALTHY.

covers her head with a saree. It makes two old women clap and ask, "India? India?" In *An Evening in Paris* (1967), Roopa (Sharmila Tagore) refuses to kiss Sam (Shammi Kapoor), saying, "I'm an Indian girl and according to Indian custom, that ... that's only after marriage." Such scenes, writes Madhava Prasad in *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, "highlight the uniqueness of the national culture and the responsibility of the characters to uphold it."

ITS most extreme example appeared in *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970), set in London. The hero, Bharat (Manoj Kumar), constantly asserts his identity and pride—often in front of a woman, Preeti (Saira Banu), who smokes, drinks and wears skimpy clothes. But the drama does something else, too: ridiculing *and* relishing the West. In many scenes, the camera focuses on foreign women's bare legs for uncomfortably long durations, filming them from their heels upwards. The movie wears its sincerity and insecurity so hard and so often that it borders on the comical and the absurd, heightened in a song that recounts the country's past achievements to counter the West scaling the moon.

It also hammers a remarkable assertion: the immorality of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). Several characters in London—played by Banu, Pran and Prem Chopra—insult, or remain ignorant of, India. Preeti has never heard of Uddham Singh, Jallianwala Bagh or Amritsar ("which is in Bharat," puppy-eyed Kumar informs her. "Now don't ask where Bharat is."). Prem's OP is so sleazy, and Western morals so lax, that on a dance floor he moves from kissing one woman to the other, as if they're interchangeable objects. And it's Pran's rant—"India's contribution is zero, zero and zero"—that prompts the nationalist song hinged on, well, zero.

The NRIs, though, would cut a very different picture in the post-*DDLJ* movies: affluent, cosmopolitan, *sanskaari*. Remember the "Hindustani *ladki ki izzat*" dialogue? They could now have the best of both worlds—the material comforts of the West and the cultural superiority of the East—making them come home in ways they never had.

At the end of *DDLJ*, Raj and Simran don't stay in Punjab, but return to London, marking the happy climax. It's no surprise then that the NRIs championed these films in unprecedented numbers. The real love story all along, it seemed, was not between the likes of Raj and Simran but the Indian directors and the diasporic audiences, opening new markets, forging new ties, redefining Indianness.

As economic liberalisation swept across the country—making the Indian elite shrink and solidify their cocoons—Bollywood directors redefined the very meanings of wealth and wealthy (marking another sharp departure from not just *Purab Aur Paschim* but also Angry Young Man movies). As Javed Akhtar told Yogendra Yadav a few years ago on TV, "The villains of the 1970s"—the rich industrialists—"became the heroes of the 1990s." And it had to be Bachchan, truly an actor of all seasons, who embodied its most extreme ethos in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001, *K3G*), playing a businessman so rich that India literally fell short for him—his mansion, supposed to be in Delhi, is actually Waddesdon Manor, a country home in Buckinghamshire, England.

As the rich got richer, and income inequality widened, Bollywood directors resolved 'the-masses-and-the-classes' contradiction through a simple solution: the systematic erasure of the working-class from mainstream cinema, aided by the NRI dramas, as only those Indians could move abroad who had access to caste, economic and cultural capital. This valorisation of wealth—or Western capitalism—peaked in *K3G*, a film inspired by *The Ramayana*. A crucial scene in it riffs on *Bharat Milap*—here the mother (Jaya Bachchan) and her exiled son (Khan) meet after a long time—and where does it all take place, a scene weaving Hindu mythology, affluent Indians, and familial bond? In a... London *mall*.

NRI movies also featured a disproportionate majority of Hindu characters and customs (most notably, *Karva Chauth* and *Sangeet*) steeped deep in Punjabi culture, make *an* India *the* India. "The intersection of neoliberal economic rhetoric with the rise of cultural nationalist politics signified by the Hindu nationalist and pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) helped shift attitudes toward filmmaking and the Hindi film industry," writes professor Tejaswini Ganti in *Producing Bollywood*. "It was no accident that a BJP-led government granted industry status to filmmaking"—on May 10, 1998—"since its support base is heavily drawn from the small business owner and entrepreneurial class who also comprise the vast distribution, exhibition, and finance apparatus for Hindi filmmaking."

If *DDLJ* was the first inflection point in Bollywood movies shot abroad post-liberalisation, then *K3G* was the second. A formulaic and safe family drama, it sharpens its edge in London—especially in scenes that exist *outside* the narrative, furthering a message for the sake of a message. In its first scene in the city, where Rohan (Hrithik Roshan) has come to find his elder brother (Shah Rukh Khan), the aerial shots of London unfold against *Vande Mataram*. As the camera cuts to different luxury stores—Giorgio Armani,

Dolce & Gabbana, Gianni Versace—the song continues to play, showing an easy (and inevitable) mix of capitalism and nationalism. This hero, though, is nothing like the Indian of *Sangam* who stares at goods standing outside the showrooms—he's so affluent that he walks past them without dropping a glance. When Rohan unearths his brother's address on FindAFriend.com, the instrumental version of *Saare Jahan Se Accha* completes the sequence. The national song has segued into the national anthem, and Bharat has found his Ram.

BUT its most potent mouthpiece is Kajol's character who, always dressed in sarees, represents the ideal Indian woman, a devout Hindu and nationalist. This role, in fact, seems to be her only role in the movie: inviting Rohan, a stranger, to live in her home because "*woh Bharat se aaya hai* [he's arrived from India]"; worrying about her son's *sanskaar*; implying his school is racist because it always assigns her family back seats in the annual function; flinging racist jibes; chuffing with pride as her son sings the national anthem at the same function; calling his classmate's mother, a British woman, "*jhoothi*" and "*kamini*". In less than six years, *DDLJ*'s "I'm a *kamino*" became "*tu kamini*". It makes sense: if patriotism trudges on the stairs, then jingoism leaps on escalators. Karan Johar also tames the Indian feminine sexuality via Poo (Kareena Kapoor) who, as the movie gathers melodramatic steam, moves from wearing short skirts to flowing salwars.

Kal Ho Na Ho (2003), written by Johar, contrives a subplot where the heroine's family revamps their Indian restaurant in New York to the tune of *Lagaan's Chale Chalo*, stretching to 'defeat' the neighbouring Chinese. *Namaste London* (2007) features a fiery female lead (Katrina Kaif)—born and bred in London, fond of guzzling vodka, looking for a "British, classy, and smart" man—who, by the climax, realises the true colours of the uncultured Brits. It's most remembered, though, for a monologue by Akshay Kumar who, shutting up a racist foreigner, recounts his country's

OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS, THOUGH, BOLLYWOOD FILMS SET ABROAD HAVE CONTINUED TO DWINDLE. NOW A DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHICAL SITE, SMALL-TOWN INDIA, DOMINATES OUR SCREENS.

achievements that reads like an insecure Wikipedia entry. "If you want to learn more," he says, "I can send you the DVD of *Purab Aur Paschim*."

It is, indeed, the *Purab Aur Paschim* trick all over again—admiring and deriding the West (most evident in Poo's character, who must be Western enough to accommodate a song in a London night club)—showing how, even decades later, Bollywood blockbusters have retained their emasculated, nationalist and bullying ethos. So Western countries—only those with a dominant white population, though, exemplars of Western capitalism—became playgrounds to park the "India Shining" flag. "It's our moral responsibility to depict India at its best," said Yash Chopra in his 2003 address to Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, a government-sponsored conclave for the Indian diaspora. "We're the historians of India (...). The Indian diaspora must maintain its identity, its roots."

Equally preoccupied with glitz and gloss as they were with peddling a cultural and 'civilisational' agenda, these movies also punished those who didn't toe the patriotic line. Take the sleazy landlord (Javed Jaffrey) in *Salaam Namaste*, a romcom set in Melbourne, who says in his first scene that, "I was the Indian ... *was*." A truly remarkable character—again, almost existing outside the narrative—he fulfils three key purposes: his exaggerated ridicule of India allows the movie to ridicule *him* (as if warning other wayward NRIs), his misogyny prods the viewers to laugh at a foreign woman (his girlfriend keeps saying "sorry?"; he replies, "Eggjacktly"), and, finally, his real home alienates him further (he's, after all, an uncouth migrant from Bihar).

These films, emerging as box-office blockbusters, became immensely influential. There's a clear through-line between the Riverdale-type college in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and Zoya Akhtar's *Archies* that released last week. A drama produced by Raj Kapoor's studio, *Aa Ab Laut Chalein* (1999), did spotlight the dark world of the Indian diaspora—immigration troubles, 'green card marriages', economic hardships—but it was too mediocre to challenge the trend.

Over the past 15 years, though, Bollywood films set abroad have continued to dwindle. Now a different geographical site, small-town India, dominates our screens. A trend, again, started by a Yash Raj production, *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005), which, as if challenging the false promises of liberalisation (and its own NRI dramas), follows two young Indians who, posing as polished suave elites, defeat the rich people at their own game. In the next decade, many movies and web series focusing on the violent, untrammelled side of the Indian hinterland—such as, among other notables, *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), *Mirzapur* (2018), and *Paatal Lok* (2020)—have gotten popular, making mainstream cinema more raw. So much so that another Yash Raj film—*Jayeshbhai Jordaar* (2021), set in a feudal, patriarchal village—had a scene featuring a lush mustard field, much like the one in *DDLJ*, but with a twist: this time, not with the possibility of a romance but murder.

The world tour is long over; now is the time to pay the dues. ⏻

HOMO TECHNOLOGICUS

Cinema and technology, a besotted couple across the arc of industrial modernity, is headed for a split

Sayandeb Chowdhury
TEACHES IN THE SCHOOL OF INTERWOVEN ARTS & SCIENCES (SIAS), KREA UNIVERSITY, INDIA

THOSE of us who have had the privilege to see that astonishing Stanley Kubrick film saw it coming. Arguably the greatest sci-fi film ever made, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) dealt with apparently staple science fiction themes—evolution, technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and extraterrestrial life. But Kubrick was no Cold War pushover. Instead, he assembled his severe dislike for campy cheapness and tacky thrills, science writer Arthur C Clarke, spectacular special effects, minimal dialogues, surreal imagery, and the waltzes of Johan and Richard Strauss. The resultant kinetic energy and meditative power of the film is still unrivalled but what is genuinely lingering is how much Clarke and Kubrick were philosophically concerned about the limit of human intelligence. And here intelligence meant both—that we are cognisant of ourselves; and we are able to decipher similar intelligence elsewhere. That pivotal scene where astronaut Dave switches off HAL to dull its desire for control of the ship is in some ways the metaphor for the predicament that humanity in general, and cinema in particular, faces in the present.

Should we be insurgent and turn off the seduction of futuristic technology; or should we grudgingly hand it over to machines? But it did not begin this way. For, through the arc of western industrial modernity, technology was cinema's most steady and reliable bedfellow. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that cinema came in the wake of the technologies of reproduction that became a fetish of the quickly-industrialising West. From the large-scale ticketed painted panoramas that debuted in the years of the botched French Revolution to the dioramas of the 1830s, from the daguerreotype to the stereoscope, from magic-lantern to zoopraxiscope and Kinetoscope, it is not difficult to comprehend how the 19th century, moving consciously and stealthily through each decade, marched towards cinema, which came into being, after several false starts, in 1895. And then, within cinema, technologies galloped—from bigger and better film stocks to sound equipment, fairground free play to ticketed nickelodeons, natural to artificial lighting; talkies and colour, cinemascope and Panavision, VHS and CDs, Dolby to IMAX, so much and so forth.

Then, everything went digital.

These were all technology in the textbook sense—a friendly (each of them, for their time) architecture of advanced equipment built on sound scientific knowledge and observation about the motion of light and human optics on one side, and photosensitive salts and chemicals on the other. They were also technology because they enhanced the power of cognition. This was most famously explained by philosopher Walter Benjamin's proclamation that photography revealed the persistence of an *optical unconscious*, which brought under purview of seeing those objects that were considered beyond it. Cinema went a step ahead and made everything that was so far imaginable, also viewable. As early as 1902 and 1903, the likes of Georges Méliès and Edwin S Porter were making wondrous things like *A Trip to the Moon* and *The Great Train Robbery*. From the dawn of cinema to these days of sweeping superhero fantasy-universes, cinema has been consistently fortified by advancements in visual, aural and simulation technologies.

Through cinema, technologies of visuality found their most expressive vehicle. Within this broad relationship of dependence there also emerged some of the most poetic critiques of technology and scientism too—from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Jacques Tati's *Playtime* to *Spike* Jonze's *Her* and Wes Anderson's *Asteroid City* in recent years.

Benjamin and other philosophers of modernity, Siegfried Kracauer, for example, also pointed out that cinema was more than a technology wedded to the ancient art of storytelling. Cinema was the language of modernity itself, the vocabulary of a present that was so ephemeral that it was constantly in flight from that very present. This was furthered by dual axes of cognition—space and time. Recent scholars like Mary Ann Doane have written (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time*) how through various kinds of rationalisation and abstraction, its reification through watches, routines, schedules and organisation, time became heavily reconstituted through modernisation, and then cinema. This relationship was complicated by another original principle of modernity— mobility. As trailblazing scholar Giuliana Bruno says in her *Atlas of Emotions*, 'On the eve of cinema's invention, a network of architectural forms produced new spacio-visuality. Such ventures as arcades, railways, department stores, the pavilions of exhibition halls, glasshouses and winter gardens incarnated the new geography of modernity. They were all sites of transit. Mobility—a form of cinematics—was the essence of these new architectures. By changing the relation between spatial perception and bodily motion, the new architectures of transit and travel culture prepared the ground for the invention of the moving image, the very epitome of modernity.' This was the case till yesterday, where cinema thrived in a spatial and temporal ecosystem that was saturated with immersive technologies that benefited its artistic and commercial and visual domination. And yet, cinema was at heart still an anthropocentric form—it needed sweat, passion, labour, insight, perception and most importantly, imagination. A good example is Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Shot gloriously with film (and not digital) with minimal VFX, *Oppenheimer* harnesses technology for magisterial cinematic storytelling, and yet warms unequivocally about how the genius of science lies perilously close to Armageddon.

Perhaps it is ironic that in the year of *Oppenheimer*, AI has most explicitly stated how it can emerge as cataclysmic for the cosy couplehood between cinema and technology.

But AI was not unexpected. Industriality, modernity and cinematics were the *Holy Trinity of Technology* ushered by humans through the last two and a quarter centuries. Through this period, now often interchangeably called the Anthropocene, apart from causing enormous damage to the planet, humans have alienated every other being from its sphere of contact, only to have them re-produced through technologies of simulation. But we often forget that each step towards technological virtuosity was also a step towards *automation*, which has inevitably started to alienate humans too from their own being.

Cinema, in all its glory, was also a giant step towards mankind slowly freeing itself from the 'burden of imagination'. With the unveiling of AI, we have started on the path of our complete capitulation to a mode of cognition and consciousness that is wholly derived. AI's perceived domination comes from the fear that it does not need any human hand or eye to 'make cinema'.

To that end, AI is not an assisting technology for cinema like every other advancement in the age of industry. AI is an idiomatic universe in itself—a self-perpetuating, self-generating ghost technology which does not need any external support to colonise consciousness anymore. It can explore, extend and explode upon us on its own. In other words, AI can easily thrive for it, it might as well kill cinema to eat upon its flesh.

For Kubrick, human's refusal to hand it over to the machines could only happen in cinema, for it is where humanity most merrily gave itself away to the immersive experience of pure technology. But we must remember what HAL said to Dave. "This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardise it."

If humans are to remain humans and cinema cinema, the question we must ask ourselves is, is it? ⏻

(Views expressed are personal)

> **SHOULD WE BE INSURGENT AND TURN OFF THE SEDUCTION OF FUTURISTIC TECHNOLOGY; OR SHOULD WE GRUDGINGLY HAND IT OVER TO MACHINES?**

ILLUSTRATION BY CHAITANYA RUKUMPUR
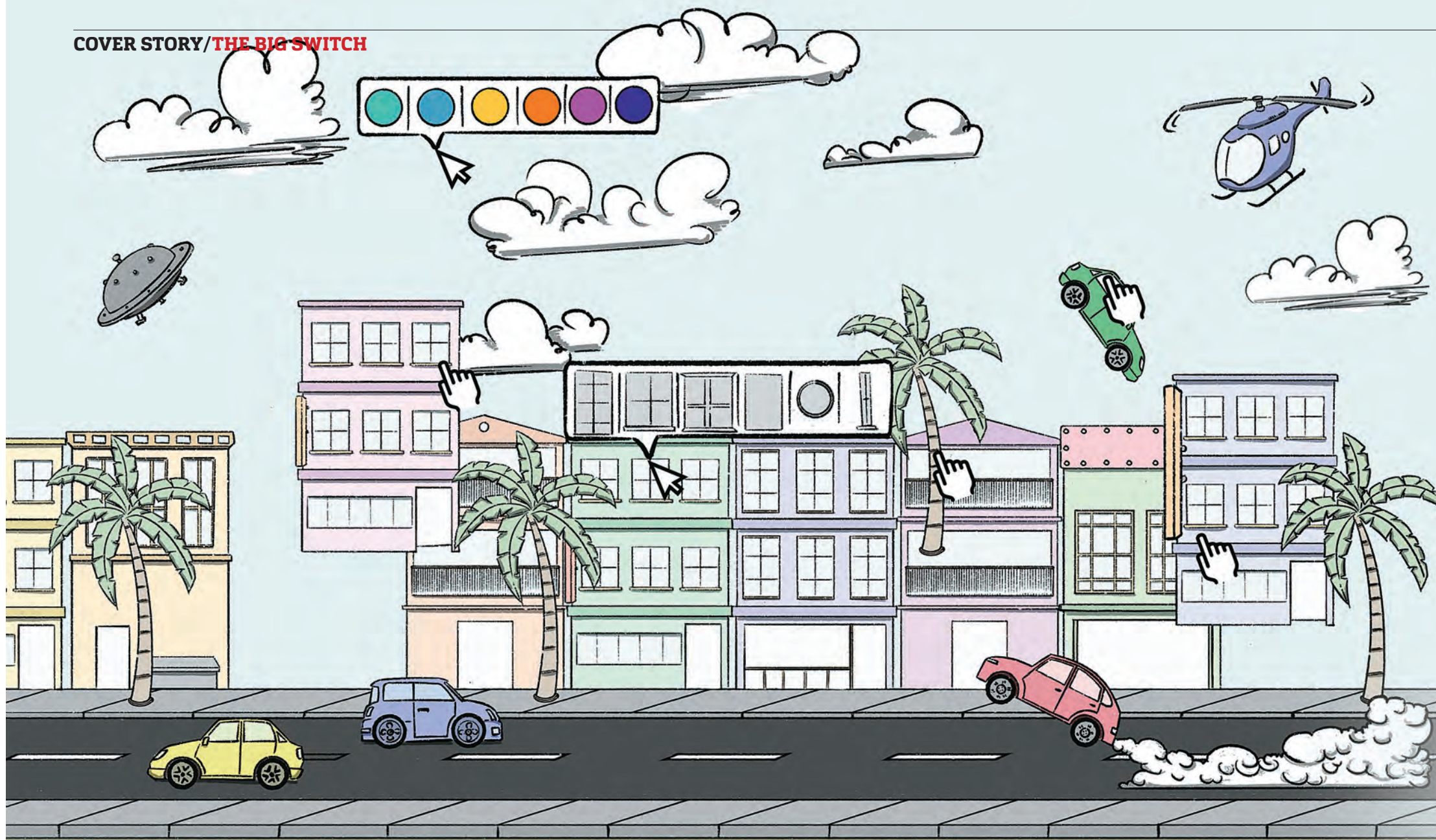
A Subliminal LOSS

Over the last decade, the filmmaking and film-watching cultures have transitioned from celluloid to digital. The new tech has provided us several gains, but shouldn't we also pause to consider what we've lost?

Tanul Thakur

ONCE upon a time, going to cinemas approximated a religious experience. Like devotees seeking *darshan*, cinephiles left their homes, reached the theatres, and hoped to get tickets. The ritual involved anticipation, thrills, and questions: What if the balcony rows are full? What if the entire show is sold out? What if the 'black tickets' are exorbitant? They all meant one thing: a lack of control. Because whether you arrived early or late, felt rushed or relaxed, the show would start on time. Like a *darshan*. And that lack of control persisted during the screening. Found a movie boring?

Too bad, can't skip forward. Felt like taking a break? Too bad, stay put. Want to watch something else? You know where the door is.

But now, if you've to book tickets for a theatrical release, you don't even need to move: a few taps on the phone, an app, a few more taps, and that's it. With the explosion of multiplexes, you're almost always guaranteed a seat. Or, even better, now the wells woo the parched: theatres meet you on your phone, laptop, and iPad, screening films across countries, genres, and decades. If a movie is too slow, you tap "+10"; you can skip subplots, replay scenes, pause and play in chunks—across days, even months—or switch to something else that lulls you to sleep. It's all too easy, all too convenient: digital has replaced *darshan*.

That world, symbolised by single screens, now exists in fleeting fragments, like teetotallers among drunks, people among ghosts. Sometimes you'll have to peer hard to spot, because many talkies have stopped talking. Outside a locked gate of Imperial Cinema in Mumbai, a street hawker sells electronics, shoes, and bags. Ranikhet's Globe Theatre resembles a forlorn bungalow hijacked by rampant vegetation. Mumbai's century-old Central Plaza, which shut in 2020, still displays its name in big silver letters—just the "T" is missing. Quite apt: the single screens haven't been 'central' to our lives in a long time. In the last two decades, around 12,000 of them have shut, dwindling to less than 7,000. In Mumbai, they've reduced from 200 to 15; in Delhi, from 80 to 3.

Those theatres, however, didn't just show movies, they were theatrical themselves, reeling off stories about the country's history, heritage, and architecture. Some, managing to survive the onslaught of time, shine as architectural marvels (many in Art Deco style), imbuing our cities and towns, often washed in sameness, with textured signatures: Liberty Cinema, Mumbai; Raj Mandir, Jaipur; Phul Cinema, Patiala. "Audiences had relationships with such places," says cinematographer Hemant Chaturvedi who, travelling 40,000 kilometres across 850 towns in 17 Indian states in the last few years, has photographed over 1,000 single-screen cinemas. "Many people only watched movies in a certain theatre." During a show of *Mughal-E-Azam* in a single-screen in Mumbai, remembers Chaturvedi, "every audience member, irrespective of age or caste or religion, knew every single dialogue. When Madhubala says, '*Kaaton ko murjhaane ka khauf nahin hota* [thorns are not worried about drying]', and you hear it from the mouths of 1,000 people, it's just mind-boggling. Now you've 200-seaters, *kya mazaa aata hai* [what enjoyment does that give]? You're watching a film projected on the size of a *dupatta*."

Unlike the multiplexes—which, besides devoid of architectural characters, sell expensive tickets—single-screen theatres welcomed different classes under the same roof. Even if for a few hours, they provided a shared space and feel. Multiplexes, on the other hand, located in malls, have become a "gated experience", writes Tejaswini Ganti in *Producing Bollywood*. Their designs and locations exemplify an "aesthetic of intimidation": "uniformed security guards; English-speaking staff; expansive entrances set at considerable distances from the streets; driveways only

THOSE ONCE EMPLOYED IN SINGLE SCREENS OR TRAVELLING TALKIES DIDN'T JUST LOSE THEIR LIVELIHOODS BUT ALSO THEIR LANGUAGE OF LIFE.

open to private cars or cabs; and inaccessibility of public transportation". They all ensure that the multiplexes' clientele "are only those" who have the "confidence and the class privilege" to enter such spaces.

"We've lost the collective experience of watching films, where your emotions get charged by people around you," says Chaturvedi. "We've lost architecture. We've lost cities' visual identities. And we've lost a large section of society who went to the movies." Cinema, like much else in this country, has been remoulded as a project of the elites, by the elites, for the elites. Even before the multiplexes, or economic liberalisation, the filmmakers had divided the audiences into the 'masses and the classes', blaming the latter, especially in the late '80s, for flocking to inane and violent entertainers (thereby 'diluting' cinema's quality), without looking inwards and trying to understand the reasons of disconnect. Now with the luxury of homogenous cocoons, which exclude more than they include, many makers neither pretend nor care.

Till a decade ago, a large section of rural audience, especially in the villages of Maharashtra, watched films on "*tambu* cinema" or travelling talkies. Like awaited festivals, they came once a year—during religious fairs called *jatra*. An owner of a travelling cinema parked his conical tent in a field. A film projector, in a truck decked with movie posters, beamed the flickering images on a white cloth. Hundreds of villagers, sitting on the ground, watched the magic unfold, sometimes slipping into stunned silence, sometimes erupting into whistles and claps and dance. Sometimes close to a dozen tents sprawled on the same field, showing different films, resembling a 'rural multiplex'. This spectacle rubbed shoulders with other spectacles: circuses, magicians, folk dancers. This was as collective, or as democratic, an experience as it could be: tickets came for cheap (around Rs 15 in 2008) and a movie was changed—or replayed—if the audiences found it boring or riveting.

"They existed as a form of shared ritual," says Shirley Abraham, the co-director of the Cannes-prize winning documentary *The Travelling Cinemas* (2016). "We saw people soaking the magic of movies in a very palpable and tactile way." When such exhibitions came to the villages in the 1940s, she adds, women couldn't access live entertainments in fairs, as they were considered "raunchy" and the "preserve of men". That changed with time, though, with many leaving their homes to watch mythologicals. "Women told us that they came to the cinemas to cry. Because they didn't have that kind of space at home."

With their reels and trucks and tents, the travelling showmen went far and wide, screening movies at "fairs, markets, graveyards". And they found no shortage of *bhakts*. "It felt like the kind of devotion you preserve for religious rituals," says Abraham. "In the early years of the travelling cinemas, audiences removed their *chappals* before entering the tents. Because for them, it really felt like entering a temple."

But over the last decade—as TVs and DVDs and smartphones supplied accessible and round-the-clock entertainment—such cinemas have become less of a reality and more of a memory. At one point, Maharashtra alone had over 1,000 travelling talkies; now just a few dozen remain. Some of their owners have transitioned from film to digital projection; many, however, continue to struggle and gravitate to other occupations, such as selling vegetables. "That whole world," says Abraham, "was like a real *nasha*." Besides providing entertainment and sustaining livelihoods, it "preserved a way of life". There was "something so fundamental and pure and primal", she says, about that "living and breathing system of cinema".

Numerous professionals once employed in single screens or travelling talkies didn't just lose their livelihoods but also their language of life. Imagine waking up to a world that has outlived your 'utility'. "When I worked on film reels, I sometimes made mistakes," a projectionist in Nagpur, who had recently switched to digital, told Chaturvedi. "Sometimes the alignment would be off, sometimes a reel got cut. And people would lose it—they'd give *maa-behen ki gaalis* [sexist slurs]. But now, they've forgotten that there's a person sitting upstairs. Now I yearn for those abuses—curse me, tell me I matter."

Such seismic shifts, pervading the making of movies, have spawned a raging debate over the last decade. A debate swinging from one ideology to the other. A debate split among evangelists, fanatics, pragmatists. A debate comprising so many arguments and counter-arguments— that it has pros of cons, cons of pros, naysayers, champions, trailblazers, traditionalists, rationalists, romantics—that it makes your head spin. Celluloid versus digital.

For the first 100 years of cinema, movies were shot on a film stock, before digital cameras exploded on the scene and the tech evolved so much that in 2012 more Hollywood films were made on digital than celluloid—a number tilting so much in the former's favour that celluloid seems like a relic of the past. And with the dominance of OTT platforms, digital has become so ubiquitous—its advantages recounted to us so many times—that we've almost forgotten that it is just another medium. "When people ask me why do you still shoot on celluloid," said Christopher Nolan in the documentary *Side by Side* (2012), "I wonder why isn't this asked more: Why do you still shoot on digital?"

If celluloid is chemistry (or alchemy), then digital is electronics (or lines). A film camera requires a new magazine to be loaded around every 10 minutes; digital doesn't, allowing for much longer takes. Since film stocks are expensive, every shot bleeds money. But digital, with reusable memory cards, imposes no such stress. While shooting on film, directors have to wait for the dailies the next day (as the reels need to be processed in a lab); digital produces instantaneous footage. Digital cameras are also nimble and quiet—unlike celluloid,

which emits a whirring sound—enabling cinematographers to slink in crowded areas and, even, shoot surreptitiously. And since digital doesn't have rolling costs, such as buying newer film stocks and processing them, it comes much cheaper in the long run, democratising the filmmaking medium.

We've heard these points many times before. These comparisons, though, don't just lie in the realm of cinema alone in 2023. Charged with metaphorical and philosophical meanings, they can be applied to our larger lifestyles (controlled by countless apps, ranging from social media to food delivery to streaming platforms). Because most arguments in favour of the new tech these days, even beyond cinema, can be summarised like the following: that digital, trumping analog, enables a world that's much cheaper and more convenient, providing many options.

But ... does it?

"It's a complete myth, at a feature film level, that digital is cheaper than celluloid," says Chaturvedi. A cinematographer for over a decade, who has shot such dramas as *Company* (2002), *Maqbool* (2003), and *Ishaqzaade* (2013), he quit Bollywood in 2015 to focus on his personal projects. "In my last film [*Brothers* (2015)], I threw a hissy fit in the office of Dharma Productions, when they insisted on digital." When they said "it'd be too costly", he gave them an offer they couldn't refuse: "Boss, if this costs more than digital, then you deduct it from my salary." He shot on "expired Fuji film" using a "two-to-three-year-old stock", making it "the last movie to be shot on celluloid in India". What about the final cost? "22 per cent cheaper".

His abiding frustration as a cinematographer while working on digital came from this pervasive belief that, "How does it matter that the camera is running? It's not as if it costs anything." While shooting on celluloid, he and the directors used to "design takes"—"a long shot for this part of the scene", then a "close-up or a tracking" shot. They would "not shoot the entire sequence" together but "the start of a scene, the middle, and the end" with some coverage in between. "But when digital came, the directors started filming every shot as a master [covering all the actors in the frame from the start to the end of the scene] on every lens from every angle." It drained him out.

"Naseeruddin Shah once told me," says Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, the founder of Film Heritage Foundation, a non-profit supporting the conservation, preservation, and restoration of films, "'On digital shoots, they switch on the camera and who knows what they capture when, and you're

IN TODAY'S WORLD, WHERE IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO SHUN DIGITAL, THE MAIN QUESTION SHOULDN'T BE 'CELLULOID OR DIGITAL' BUT 'CELLULOID AND DIGITAL'.

expected to keep performing. One take after the other, we are rolling, we are rolling, we are rolling. In celluloid, I knew that after 10 minutes of stock, I could hear the sound and it's gonna end. Then I get a breather and I can rethink and give another take.'"

A huge proponent and exponent of digital filmmaking, David Fincher says he likes the flexibility that the medium provides, allowing him and his crew to watch the footage on set. "[But] if you're watching a monitor on set and you feel that you're really seeing what you've got, then you're fooling yourself," says Nolan in the documentary *Side by Side*. "The audience is gonna watch that film on a screen, that is, a thousand times bigger than that." The magic of celluloid, adds Dungarpur, arose from the "wait for the experience of seeing your rushes. Because art is, finally, a spontaneous creation. It's not so controlled. When you control everything, you overdo it." He quotes Ghalib: *Aate Hain Ghaib Se Ye Mazameen Khayal Mein*—"I don't know where my thoughts come from, but they come from Above". Cinema was like that, he adds, "it's almost a religious thing. Which reminds me, so many great artists and painters have emerged from religious institutions."

"Celluloid's image quality is also almost what your eye sees it—what you experience in real life," he says. "But the image captured by digital is absolutely different; it gives you an enhanced quality of a different essence." Given that celluloid comprises "grains, chemical, and silver", it gives "depth, resolution, and texture" to visuals. "Celluloid gives you a resolution of 24K. When we go to a theatre, or watch TV, we only experience 4K."

But in today's world, where it's not practical or possible to shun digital, the main question shouldn't be 'celluloid or digital' but 'celluloid *and* digital'. Consider Sean Baker, a brilliant American filmmaker. He shot his second feature, *Tangerine* (2015), a drama about trans sex workers in LA, on ... iPhone. A largely financial decision, as movies on transgender characters are tough to sell in Hollywood. But digital also complemented its frenetic, chaotic world that often erupted in disquieting binaries. He shot his next, *The Florida Project* (2017), an endearing drama about a six-year-old girl living with her unemployed mother in a budget motel, on celluloid. Again, for a piece with a life-like rhythm where time seems to have stalled, celluloid made perfect sense. So, the message could dictate the medium. "Sean is a true artist," says Dungarpur. "He's like a painter who chooses his canvas, which is fantastic. Not a painter who has been thrusted with limited options. But we've entered an era where we're told that the only way to make—and show—films is through digital."

A 'lack of choice' in a world inundated with choices. Or, well, we've so much now that we're left with so little. "Control and distortion are the two key words in digital," says Dungarpur. It's something that informs the film-consumption culture as well. We've so many OTT platforms now that cinema, which once brought people together, has become another tool to snap our societal bonds, reducing us to pixelated islands. "In the age of big theatres, the experience controlled us," says Chaturvedi. "Now, we want to control the experience." The true devotees no longer exist; they've all become Gods. 🔴

Hemant Chaturvedi
WAS A CINEMATOGRAPHER
IN THE HINDI FILM
INDUSTRY AND IS NOW
A STILL PHOTOGRAPHER

Residual Memory

AS we lose the uniqueness of our urban visual history, with the soulless replication of commercial spaces at the cost of hundreds of beautiful old architectural landmarks, we also lose the stories of the people and their human relationships with those spaces. While progress and change cannot be stopped, I doubt if millennials will ever tell their future grandchildren stories of shopping malls and multiplexes, and how attached they were to them, and the social or cultural impact they had on their lives.

The Thakur of Wadhwan, Gujarat, was present at Watson's Hotel in Bombay in 1896 when the Lumiere brothers showcased their Cinematographe for the first time in India. As per the available oral history, the Thakur was so enchanted by this new device that he immediately paid for one to be shipped to him from France. The Cinematographe arrived 10 years later, in 1906, and was operated at an open ground in Wadhwan to show silent movies after sunset. The ground and the ticket window still exist.

In the days of silent movies music would be played live by one or two people, or even by an orchestra, in an effort to make the viewing experience more engaging. Many of the old proscenium-style theatres had a pit for the musicians, which allowed an easy transition to the silent movie era. The stage would be covered by a screen, and the musicians played on. The owner of the long-since defunct Bharat Talkies in central Maharashtra told me of the time it used to be a silent cinema. His educated grandfather would read the story of the film being screened off a sheet of paper in real time, while the grand uncles would play live music on the harmonium, the flute and the tabla.

The advent of the talkies ended the careers of hundreds of musicians who were making a living playing music for several movie shows a day. Some of them found work with film composers. Sometimes over a hundred musicians would rehearse a composition together, complete with sheet music and a conductor. Eventually, most of these musicians lost their livelihood when sound software allowed you to multiply the number of musicians with a click of a button. No longer did you have to pay 150 people for several days to record one song. Individual idiosyncratic human abilities were discarded.

There was an era when the most important person in a cinema

So Many Stories
(Top) Ashok Talkies, Nashik; (right) Mansarovar Talkies, Allahabad

टिकट घर

Seeped in Memories
(Right) Kamaldeep Talkies, Malegaon; (opposite page, top) Prakash Talkies, Sawai Madhopur; (opposite page, bottom) Jai Hind Talkies, Amravati

theatre was the projector operator, often more than the owner! Projectors were high-precision clockwork machines, and projectionists were divas, and the functioning of the cinema depended entirely on them. The true art of a perfect projectionist lay in the deftness with which he could start a second projector, once the reel on the first projector was about to run out. The skill lay in his ability to make the timing seamless, with the audience never noticing a reel change. In the days of old vacuum tube and stereo amplifiers, there was a technique of "Fake Surround Sound". A few additional speakers would be placed around the auditorium, connected to a second amplifier with a separate volume control knob. The projectionist was responsible for activating the second amplifier by controlling the volume knob during songs, fight sequences or even explosions and bullet shots, making them louder at key moments of the movie. There are stories I've heard from cinema owners and projectionists—how directors like Raj Kapoor, Feroz Khan and Manoj Kumar would attend a premiere at a cinema theatre and actually seek out the projectionist and reward him for his immaculate skills. Today, a bored twenty-something enters a code into the digital system in the morning and sleeps all day.

A cinema in Shimla was created as a reaction to the restrictions laid down by the British for the cinema theatres on the Mall where only a certain class of gentry were allowed, and had to adhere to strict dress codes. One afternoon, a Shahi Hakim (a royal doctor who had relocated to Shimla from pre-partition Pakistan) gave his staff the day off and some money to watch a movie. Later in the day, he found them loitering around the clinic and when he asked them which

movie they had watched, he discovered they had been barred from entering the Mall because of their lack of 'presentability' and their low social standing. Sharma *ji*, the Hakim, decided to build Shahi Cinema outside the Mall precinct, specifically for the people outside the accepted social class. The chief guests were a local sweeper and a coolie, who inaugurated the cinema. Ironically, all the cinemas on the Mall have long since closed, but Shahi Cinema is still showing four shows a day.

It is common knowledge that the rapid and government-favoured growth of the multiplex concept destroyed single screen cinemas, and led to the exclusion of an entire social strata of cinema-goers, who now rely on their cellphones and data packages to watch movies.

Hand-painted film posters are also a thing of the past. I had the honour and privilege of meeting the octogenarian Sheikh Rehman at Alfred Talkies in Mumbai. He is the last of the film-poster artists of that era and spends his time painting commissioned posters for a handful of fans. He mentioned the hilarious thought processes before a new movie released: the owner and manager would be hoping for a silver jubilee at the very least, while he would be wishing for the film to flop. If the film ran for 25 weeks, he would end up being out of work! His father had also been a pioneering film-poster artist, and actually began his career painting posters for plays. He had perfected the art of making moving mechanical elements and light bulbs in series to create animated film billboards. To the extent that the police had to order the cinema owner to run the animated effects only for 30 minutes before the show began; they were so distracting that traffic would pile up and people would ram

Architectural Marvel
Raj Mandir, Jaipur

their vehicles into each other.

With everything going digital, this entire style was also lost. And interestingly, the old artists would have to reuse the canvas sheets they painted on, so, once a movie was taken down, the related artwork was erased. A cinema owner in Varanasi told me that when he took over the cinema, on the days of unruly crowds, the elderly manager had taught him the specific skill of choosing which potential patron to slap as a display of authority, to always slap someone who is alone and not in a group! Another owner told me, with a grin, how cinema exhibition was once the only business in the world in which you could thrash your clients every day, and they would still be back for the next show!

I asked a veteran cinema manager in Mumbai how he felt today, 40 years after joining that cinema, watching a handful of reluctant patrons trickling into his cinema, after having experienced the era of massive and energetic crowds. He said that the single screen cinema owners were paying for the arrogance of their successful days today.

Gone are the days of advance booking, black marketing, hand-stamped tickets, long queues, overwhelming crowds, police presence, *lathi* charges, balconies and boxes, upper and lower stalls and dress circles, and dancing in the aisles. We have forgotten how different an experience it was to watch a good movie with a thousand people beside you. The sound and picture may be superior today, but the experience is not.

When I photographed my first single screen cinema in January 2019, Lakshmi Talkies had an idol of Goddess Lakshmi in the lower lobby. She was covered with dust, and one of her four arms was missing. Since then, the cinema has been completely stripped of everything, including the idol, as the structure is being prepped for demolition, 71 years after it was built.

I guess Lakshmi too, has left the building... ⬛

*(Text & photographs by **Hemant Chaturvedi**)*

GETTY IMAGES

Winter in the Valley
A man crosses a footbridge at the floating vegetable market of Dal Lake, Srinagar on a wintry morning

State of the State

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.
Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His fingerprints cancel bank stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.

—from *The Country Without a Post Office*
Agha Shahid Ali

"Where is the time? We are in the middle of the Ayodhya case hearing," the CJI said on Monday. At the last hearing, he had raised hopes that at least the issue of alleged detention of minors in J&K would be addressed. However, he said that though the high court legal aid had submitted a report to the court he did not have the time to deal with it.

—from *The Economic Times*, September 30, 2019

On August 6, 2019, the Government of India revoked the special status, or autonomy, granted under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir. A lockdown followed. Internet connection was cut off.

Chinki Sinha

ON the night of August 4, 2019, a man from the Valley asked me if I knew what was going on. My answer never reached him. The Valley had been plunged into a strange darkness that would continue for months.

Beyond the news about killings and detentions and protests, there was also everyday life, a new everyday "normal" was created again. There was also a resistance against forgetting. People wrote about small things and big things. On day one of what she referred to as the siege, a Kashmiri woman in Delhi wrote about her mother's bones turning into powder due to acute osteoporosis and how she had to go for physiotherapy to build her muscles but with the lockdown in Kashmir, the daughter didn't know how many sessions she would miss. The daughter wondered how many of her mother's bones would be gone by the time the curfew and the clampdowns would be lifted. On day 4, the phones were not working still. The same woman wrote about there being no cinema halls in Kashmir and after she watched the movie *Joker* in Delhi, she wrote she wanted to scream. On Day 7, she wrote the phone lines to Kashmir were still dead. They would be dead for a long time.

After 33 years, in September 2022, a multiplex was opened in Srinagar. Many outside of Kashmir touted this as a return to normalcy.

A long silence had been imposed. But people continued to speak during the curfew. Inside the mist that cut them off from us, they were there living and hoping and waiting.

What follows are some of those chronicles from that time about daily life in a lockdown.

————— * —————

I lost the journal, in which you wrote of how you cured the pain of memory,
when in August 2019, a siege was laid on all lovers.
You see, we die in concentric circles,

we died a little in history,
we died a little in conflict,
we died a little in caste and class,
we are dying a little every day and yet hope for a union, peace in a place, to which there is no roadmap.
We try hard making sense of the dust settled on the footprints of old lovers decimated on the way. Some lost senses, while in exile, trying to make sense of love trapped in the circle of history, some lost strength in the circle of conflict while some lost all meanings in the circle of life.

—Excerpts from *On Losing a Diary of Clampdown* by Sadaf Masoodi, a researcher at the University of Kashmir

————— * —————

It is unusually cold in October. My hands are freezing. Even with this down jacket I am wearing. You know when protests happen, it becomes colder. Like in 2016, October was very cold. Just like this. Because there are less cars on the road and not many tourists come and of course, everything is shut, pollution is less. So, it becomes colder. Funny, how curfew can affect weather. I think it is going to be very cold this winter.

————— * —————

They had just started building an attached bathroom, an extension to the bedroom the family had finished building to welcome the bride. But then the lockdown happened. So the father said they would build the bathroom themselves. They got the mortar and bricks and also, a pot. As they were carrying the pot upstairs, it fell from the father's hand and he broke his hand just before the wedding. We don't know if the bride came home. Or they are still waiting for the curfew to end. We don't know if the bathroom was finally made for her welcome.

————— * —————

INTRODUCTION

The man took three photos from the camera he borrowed. There were no wedding photographers in Srinagar to be found. His brother's wedding was due. Perhaps 12-15 people could make it to the wedding during the curfew but a wedding needs photos. He saw a man with a camera and he wanted to ask if he could take the camera for a day. But he clicked only three photos. "Why?" the man who had given him the camera asked. "Because we took from phone. In this curfew, we took selfies. There will be no wedding album," the man said.

————————— * —————————

Our Imam went missing a week after August 5. You know the story of the sobs on the loudspeakers of the mosque where the Imam cried over the loss of Mulk-e-Kashmir in South Kashmir at the Friday prayers. That Imam asked for God's help and guidance.

An informal enquiry happened and a security officer forced the mosque's administrative committee to request the Imam to leave. The Imam complied.

After that, there was an advisory where mosques were asked not to make any such anti-India statements. They started asking mosques to submit the names and ages and addresses of the Imams. A whole database was made but some mosques continued with their sermons on Fridays. Friday prayers were stopped at the Jamia Masjid in downtown where the congregation is a lakh people sometimes. And downtown people are different.

————————— * —————————

The bride-to-be woke up at 6 am. Woke up her mother sleeping next to her. "Hurry up," she said. In this lockdown and curfewed state of being, the tailor will open at 6.30 am and close the store, she told her mother. Outside the tailor's shop, a queue had formed as always. Some weddings were happening. Others had been cancelled. How would you even know if a wedding was on or cancelled? Phone lines had been down. Outside the parlours, the makeup artists had put up posters giving their residential addresses in case a bride needed to look beautiful.

————————— * —————————

During the lockdown, there are no barbers. Most had put up a sign saying they are available at their homes. So I went for a haircut and outside this little house, there were a lot of people there like there would be at a funeral. People were smoking in the little garden; they were standing in the alley; and in a small room, a dozen people were standing against the wall. In one corner, there was a little mirror and a plastic chair and this man was giving people haircuts. Now, this is Srinagar. People who love themselves and the way they look, had a tough time. They would have overgrown beards and then we would all smile at each other.

They would then touch their beards. There were a lot of beards in those days. Now, some barbers have opened shops in some neighbourhoods. But in rural Kashmir, it is different, I think. I once took a photo of an empty barber chair. Most of these barbers come from other states so

maybe in South Kashmir and all people still have long beards and long hair. And in August when the lockdown happened, it used to be very hot. Getting a haircut or a beard trimmed was a task then in crowded areas where one man was at it and people were all lined up outside.

————————— * —————————

So, there was once a curfew and a child wanted sweets. His mother tried to tell him they couldn't go out. The CRPF man outside heard the child pestering his mother, and told the child he will get him sweets. He picked him up, got him sweets, and thought it would ease the tension. Again, the question of identities. The occupier, and the occupied.

When he was dropping the child to his house, he asked him what else would he like. The child looked straight at him and said, "*Azadi*".

(Everyday life conversations on the phone with a friend in Srinagar in October, 2019)

————————— * —————————

Me - How was the meeting? Did you meet
your brother?

Her - hi. we did, finally.
Got the permission from DGP later for
me and my brother.

Me - How was it?
Is he getting food?
Were there a lot of people there?

Her - 20 Kashmiris. They said they were being given
Rotis for lunch and dinner. So they all
protested and said they need rice. And now there's rice in
the menu. And the jailer said they've started to give them
two eggs at breakfast.

Me - That's nice. And were you able to talk to him? Did
he know about Farooq Abdulla?
How much time did you get with him?

(WhatsApp chat with a friend on September 27, 2019. Her brother had been arrested in Kashmir in August and taken to the prison in Agra where she had gone to meet him.)

There was silence after this.

————————— * —————————

Today, I asked a poet who had written about "controlled mountains" in a poem if I could use a fragment, he said these things get out of context sometimes. That's why there are no names but only the words in this recounting.

I remember the poem though. He had said it was a country where one rarely finds a way home. It was an invitation to come along to a country "occupied by death". He had also written "Nobody speaks".

Can we row the shikara and have the heritage walks?

Paradise Lost

Veer Munshi
IS A VISUAL ARTIST
BASED IN GURUGRAM

"I bear witness to the fast-growing structures of glass and steel towers where I reside, in cyber-city Gurugram. My installation (above) depicts the fast-changing characteristics of Indian cities, so I was wondering about the fate of our paradise on earth, called Kashmir..."

Iconic Landmark
The Zero Bridge with the Himalayas in the backdrop

GETTY IMAGES

A 370° Turn

The recent Supreme Court verdict upholding the central government's move to abrogate Article 370 of the Indian Constitution impacts Kashmir and its people deeply

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

*(Edited by **Mayabhushan Nagvenkar**)*

NEARLY four years after the abrogation of Article 370, change is afoot in Srinagar. It is evident on the streets of the capital, in its people and on new signages in the city. Near the Zero Bridge, an Akash Institute hoarding invites students to excel in competitive exams at its Rajbagh branch. The institute-chain was acquired by BYJU's, an edu-tech behemoth with 500 centres in 200 Indian cities. Its offline branch by the Zero Bridge is now part of a pan-India network.

Paramilitary forces stationed in three fortified bunkers continue to patrol near Church Lane by the Bridge. Though the once unsettling routine frisking of passers-by has somewhat lessened, the men in olive green are still there, behind wire-clad posts, suggesting that while some things appear to have changed in Kashmir, they are still the same.

Rajbagh, a posh address in Srinagar, appears to be flourishing with new buildings, new houses, new hotels and tuition centres. The Zero Bridge, which was washed away in the 2016 floods, is now a tourist destination, where tourists spend hours watching the Jhelum jostle by.

There is another pair of eyes on the Bridge: that of a native, Irfan Ahmad, a businessman in his early 50s. He, too, watches the river flow by peacefully. But in his heart there's turmoil. Ahmad has been deeply impacted by the import of the recent Supreme Court decision upholding the central government's move to abrogate Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.

He is "crestfallen". On the verdict day, Ahmad was at a condolence meeting. He believed the country's top court would rule against abrogation. "I felt (like) someone stabbed my heart. Incidentally, I was at a condolence meeting, a perfect place to mourn," he says. As he tries to elaborate, his friend intervenes, urging him to "avoid" political talk. Ahmad, too, perhaps realises the gravity of his comments and stops the conversation abruptly.

Ahmad's caution and unease reflect a widespread fear of discussing the current political situation in the Valley.

On December 11, a five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud upheld the abrogation of Article 370 as "constitutionally valid" in its verdict on a clutch of petitions challenging the abrogation filed by the National Conference (NC), Peoples Conference, CPI(M), the local High Court Bar Association and former bureaucrat-turned politician Shah Faesal.

The petitions were filed days after August 5, 2019, when the BJP government revoked Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution, bifurcating Jammu & Kashmir and downgrading the now-former state into two Union Territories, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.

Following the verdict, the only comfort for regional political parties lies in the Apex Court's directive to the Election Commission (EC) to conduct elections by September 2024, also urging the government to promptly restore statehood.

The long-drawn legal battle was not without surprises.

Shah Faesal had already withdrawn his petition months before the final hearing, claiming Article 370, for many Kashmiris like him, was a thing of the past. "Jhelum and Ganga have merged in the great Indian Ocean for good," he had proclaimed.

Unlike Faesal's 'change of heart', young singer Jibraan Nasir, who *Outlook* met by the Bridge, appears to be oblivious to the development, which has the potential to tectonically alter the unique identity of the region.

Unlike the charged atmosphere of the pre-Article 370 era, when artists, poets, rappers and singers were more vocal about the region's politics, Nasir claims he is simply disinterested.

"I am an artist and I will not talk about politics," he says. "Even on the day of the verdict, I was with other friends and didn't take notice of what happened."

According to a human rights lawyer, people now fear that the government might know what they are thinking just by looking at their faces. "It seems bizarre, but it is so true," he humorously chips in.

Where else could people talk? "Dal Lake!" quips a photojournalist, who was within earshot.

At Ghat number 12, 72-year-old Shikrawalla Mohammad Abdullah Sagdu bemoans the tourism slump this season as the temperature in Srinagar during the night drops to minus six, affecting his boat business.

He initially opens up about Article 370. "Article 370 was ingrained in our lives, a part of our identity. Its removal was unwarranted," he says. But Sagdu hesitates to discuss the impact of its abrogation on Kashmir and its people. "We have left everything to God. Let us see what God has in store for us," he says.

Sagdu navigates past flower-laden boats and tourists, halting at Tariq Ahmad Patloo's ambulance boat. Tariq, known for ferrying patients across the water, expresses dissatisfaction over Article 370's removal. But his cousin, Mohammad Yasin, a 45-year-old businessman, who was initially saddened by the move, now supports it. He believes the Valley requires peace and stability. Yasin, who was in Ukraine during the abrogation, now says that Article 370 should have been abrogated earlier.

"There are no stone-throwing incidents, no strikes. There's a semblance of peace in Kashmir. Tourists are arriving in large numbers. What more could you ask for?" he says.

Kashmir has "faced a severe crackdown on media freedom, including arbitrary arrests and communications blackouts," according to the International Press Institute's latest report. The state of journalism worsened post-August 2019, after the Indian government revoked Article 370, removing Kashmir's autonomous status, the report says.

After the Supreme Court's confirmation of the abrogation, an upbeat Lt Governor Manoj Sinha, known for criticising regional parties, hailed Prime Minister Narendra Modi for laying the foundation for a "New J&K" on August 5, 2019.

Optimistic about the future, he said, the SC verdict brings hope and strengthens the nation's unity and integrity. "After the abrogation...strike calendars are not issued by our neighbouring country and stone-pelting has become history," Sinha said, adding that by November this year, tourist footfalls to J&K had surpassed two crore.

However, J&K was initially hit by curfew-like restrictions after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and later by COVID-19 curbs in 2020, and regional parties dispute Sinha's figures. They allege the government inflates numbers by including pilgrims visiting the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine in Jammu to project the figures in crores.

On August 2, 2019, just before the abrogation, government orders in view of possible terror strikes had created panic in Jammu and Kashmir. Tourists and pilgrims were instructed to leave immediately, severely impacting the flourishing tourism sector. Following that advisory, the UK, Australia, the US and Canada issued their own travel advisories for Kashmir. Despite easing restrictions in 2020, none of the countries lifted or modified their previous adverse advisories. In 2020, only 41,267 tourists, including 3,897 foreigners, visited Kashmir, marking the lowest number since 1990.

Prior to Article 370's removal, massive force deployment, augmenting paramilitary presence, hinted at a war-like scenario before the abrogation shockwave eventually hit the Valley on August 5, 2019.

Since December 2021, the Valley's tourist numbers have significantly increased, months after the government released a 76-page booklet titled 'Jammu and Kashmir Marching To A New Era'. The booklet listed the central government's achievements

> SINCE THE 2003 CEASEFIRE, BOTH INDIA AND PAKISTAN, DESPITE INITIAL SCEPTICISM, HAVE MAINTAINED THE STATUS QUO, EVEN AFTER THE REVOCATION OF ARTICLE 370 IN 2019.

in J&K, crediting the central government's "One Nation, One Constitution On Flag" resolve and application of 890 central laws to the two Union Territories, including rights for weaker sections, children, senior citizens, laws for governance, new land, and domicile laws facilitating citizenship.

Nearly five years after abrogation, security forces remain prominent in Kashmir and the practice of halting traffic for army or paramilitary convoys persists.

Irrespective, Yasin hopes for the better and for a bigger tourism boom. "I believe whatever happened was for the better... It's time for us to move on and welcome foreign and Indian tourists to Kashmir," he says.

At Srinagar's iconic city square Lal Chowk, a separatist leader taking a stroll on a crisp, cold day, is critical of Pakistan's statements on Kashmir. Pakistan's implicit endorsement of Article 370's abrogation became evident in the 2021 ceasefire reaffirmation, signifying consent, he claims. He advocates negotiating with New Delhi to preserve land, employment and demographics, provided the government engages in such discussions. "I don't see any other alternative," he says.

There are many like him, who bemoan lack of options and harbour no hope that the Apex Court will ever overturn the government's significant political and geostrategic decision.

The paucity of options has made Mohammad Yousuf, a houseboat owner, anxious. "Article 370 provided safety to Kashmiris, their identity and the region's demography," he says, worried about their future.

Amidst India-Pakistan tensions, on February 25, 2021, the Directors-General of Military Operations from both countries had issued a joint statement, urging adherence to existing agreements, understanding and a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC), effective from midnight on February 24-25 that year.

Since the 2003 ceasefire, both India and Pakistan, despite initial scepticism, have maintained the status quo, even after the revocation of Article 370 in 2019. Contrary to expectations, no ceasefire violations occurred in 2022, in stark contrast to the 740 violations recorded from Pakistan up to February 24, 2021. The LoC border areas in J&K, once tense, are now emerging as new tourist destinations.

Two days after the Supreme Court verdict, the National Conference (NC) office is deserted. Party spokesman Imran Nabi Dar wasn't at home when the apex court pronounced its verdict. "I had to be at a different place other than my house, as I suspected the police had the same plan that it executed in 2019 before the abrogation: to arrest all leaders," he claims. He was called to the local police station on December 11 ahead of the SC order. "I told the caller that I'm not a criminal and will not come to the police station," he adds.

Two days before the verdict, district magistrates across Kashmir issued orders directing "online unregistered news portal or social media platform" not to publish any current affairs without any verification and accountability. The Cyber Police Kashmir too issued an advisory asking all social media users to use "social media responsibly" and refrain from sharing "any rumour". The pattern was similar to orders issued days before August 5, 2019.

Dar anticipated a favourable Supreme Court verdict, on account of arguments posed by lawyers Kapil Sibal and Gopal Subramaniam, representing the NC petition. The NC, he says, will continue to talk about the restoration of the region's special status. "Nothing stops us from talking about the restoration of the special status. The party will fight for it," he says.

In August, the NC, optimistic about its robust legal case, fervently campaigned for elections in J&K. The verdict, however, has dashed their enthusiasm, particularly that of Vice-President Omar Abdullah. Party President Farooq Abdullah was so dejected by the verdict that he even told reporters in Delhi, "Let J&K go to hell."

With no specific direction from the Apex Court on statehood restoration, Dar fears the government may prolong J&K's reinstatement to statehood."We had gone to Court to challenge the abrogation of Article 370 and instead, they gave the Election Commission of India directions to hold polls in September 2024. Why not hold polls now with the Lok Sabha elections? What if the ECI refuses to adhere to directions in September 2024 too, citing some excuse?" Dar asks, adding that the BJP's claim about development and ending militancy in J&K has been always contested. "But no one listens," he counters.

In the course of the hearings in the Apex Court, the Centre submitted before the five-judge Constitution bench that "since 2019, the entire region has witnessed an unprecedented era of peace, progress and prosperity". The Centre had also claimed the region's return to normalcy after three decades, with the end of daily strikes, stone-pelting and bandhs.

"The development projects executed by the government at present were started by previous governments," Dar insists. "They have developed Lal Chowk and the Jhelum bund as Smart City projects. That is all they showcase. Let them show tourism figures for 2011, 2012 and onwards. The present figures are slightly higher. That is all," he adds.

Despite deadly attacks since 2019 in the Pirpanjal mountain range, the government avoids discussing the ongoing militancy in Rajouri and Poonch, Dar says, adding that militancy is in fact on the rise there after a lull of 15 years. On November 17, in the Rajouri jungles, terrorists ambushed and killed five army personnel, including two officers. This year witnessed 14 army casualties in five major terror incidents, with back-to-back ambushes on April 20 and May 5 claiming 10 lives. Since October 11, 2021, the region has faced increased militant violence, with two encounters resulting in nine army fatalities. On January 1, 2023, terrorists targeted minority community members in Rajouri, killing seven civilians, including two minors, through firing and an IED blast at Dhangri village.

But local police claimed in October that J&K's militant count has hit an all-time low, about 50, resembling 2013 levels. Top police officials told the media in J&K that they "achieved a significant milestone in the fight against terrorism this year,"with the Union Territory "witnessing the lowest number of terror incidents and civilian deaths in over three decades."

Earlier, the best year in terms of security was 2013, which witnessed the lowest level of militancy, police claimed, inadvertently acknowledging that militancy was also low a decade earlier too. Terror-related cases have plummeted from 113 in 2013 to a mere 42 in 2023 and in 2018, while 210 persons joined militancy in 2023, the figure was down to a mere 10, with six of them killed, police said.

PDP's Mehbooba Mufti—a vocal government critic—likened J&K's current state to occupation following the Supreme Court verdict. "What is the difference between an occupation and a government?" she asks, quoting Arab poet Ansar Yawar. "Expecting a solution from those who created the web is like a bug asking the spider for its freedom, not realising the purpose of the web." Many in the PDP feel that approaching the Supreme Court was a mistake, as Article 370 was the result of a pact between J&K and the Centre, ratified by the Constituent Assembly even before the Supreme Court's existence. "How can a pact between Jammu and Kashmir and the Government of India, duly recognised by the great leaders of both sides, be set aside by the Court?" they ask.

Former MLA Mohammad Yousuf Tarigami, spokesperson of the Peoples' Alliance for the Gupkar Declaration, an amalgam of regional parties, on the contrary, claims that that the Supreme Court is an important institution vis a vis the issue of restoration of Article 370. "It upheld the abrogation of Article 370, but it also stated that the procedure adopted to abrogate is ultra-vires. The Court didn't address whether a state can be turned into a Union Territory legally. I am in touch with my legal team to explore further legal options," he says.

Tarigami says that after the abrogation of Article 370, thousands have been booked under the Public Safety Act and the UAPA and other laws. "The jails of J&K are overcrowded. The government and the BJP often say there is no protest in Kashmir and everyone is silent. They don't tell us whether they allow anyone to even squeak. If you post anything on social media, you are booked. Imagine if someone comes out to protest. Have you ever seen protests in Tihar jail?" he asks.

In his room, lines from Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem '*Bol ke lab azad hain tere*' and Habib Jalib's verse '*Zulm rahe aur aman bhi ho, kya mumkin hai tum hi kaho*' are on display. Tarigami points to Faiz's poem, declaring it is time to speak up. "The Supreme Court verdict hasn't sealed the fate of Article 370. The five-bench judgement has big loopholes," he claims, optimistic that a larger bench would be able to see through them. But voices in the Valley—on Zero Bridge and at Lal Chowk—appear to be reluctant to share his optimism. ⬤

PTI

The Kashmir Life A woman walks with her children as security personnel stand guard

Burhan Majid
IS AN ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR OF LAW AT THE
SCHOOL OF LAW, JAMIA
HAMDARD, NEW DELHI

A Constitutional BACKSLIDING?

The judgement of the Supreme Court in the Article 370 case heralds an ever-increasing disconnect between constitutional law and constitutional reality in post-colonial India

FOUR years after the unilateral abrogation of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, the Supreme Court of India eventually endorsed the Central government's contentious decision on December 11, 2023. The judgement exemplifies the Supreme Court's fragmented track record of disengagement with J&K's unique constitutional position.

For the uninitiated, J&K stands as the only state that actively bargained the terms of its membership with the Indian Union. This exceptional constitutional arrangement reserved J&K's legislative authority on all matters except defence, external affairs, and communication, which was later codified in Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Hence, J&K retained a unique and distinct status in the post-colonial Indian landscape, acceding but not merging like other states. Article 370 also recognised the state's autonomy to frame its Constitution. The December 11 judgement bypassed the Constitution and its precedents. More than the outcome of the ruling, the conspicuous absence of constitutional reasoning in the judgement is baffling. A closer reading of the judgement highlights that the court has complicated a legally easy issue.

Contrary to the time-honoured understanding, the court held no qualms about obliterating bilateralism in the text and context of Article 370. The court has virtually decimated the 'will of the people of J&K' by ruling that Article 370 could have been abrogated without 'concurrence' from J&K's 'Constituent Assembly'—a prerequisite under the Article. Surprisingly, the presidential order of 2019 at least attempted a facade of bilateralism—changing the reference of 'Constituent Assembly' to 'Legislative Assembly' in Article 367. Interesting to note here, J&K's Constituent Assembly was a result of

adult-franchise-based elections, unlike the Indian Constituent Assembly. Symbolising a transition of the 'residual sovereignty' of J&K from the Maharaja to the people, the state Constitution was drafted. A fact also confirmed by the report of the Basic Principles Committee of the State's Constituent Assembly. The Committee observed: 'The sovereignty of the State resides in the people thereof and shall, except regarding matters specifically entrusted to the Union, be exercised on their behalf by the various organs of the State'.

Yet, the court refused to accept that J&K retained 'internal sovereignty', arguing that J&K had surrendered full sovereignty after a Proclamation was issued by Yuvraj Karan Singh in November 1949. The court's invocation of the proclamation is self-defeating for two reasons. First, it was meant to oversee the state's transition from the applicability of the Government of India Act, 1935, to the Constitution of India. Second, such a proclamation cannot be invoked to overshadow the constituent power of J&K's Constituent Assembly that shaped the relationship between J&K and the Indian Union.

At the time of hearings in the case, I have argued elsewhere that the SC had erred in not referring the Article 370 case to a seven-judge Constitution Bench as there were two conflicting decisions by five-judge Constitution Benches in P*rem Nath Kaul v State of J&K* (1959) and *Sampat Prakash v State of J&K (1968)*. Relying on a interpretation of the bare text of the Constitution, Prem Nath did two things: It emphasised the ratification by the J&K's Constituent Assembly to extend any provision of the Indian Constitution to the state. It established that J&K has retained internal sovereignty while giving away external sovereignty.

Instead of following the precedent in *Prem Nath*, the Court has deliberately chosen to diminish its import in subsequent cases. In *Sampat Prakash*, a narrowing down of the constitutional precedent was on full display. Extrapolating the silences of Article 370, the court vastly expanded the President's authority to modify the provisions of the Indian Constitution for J&K, potentially risking abuse. In effect, the court's interpretation of 'modification' in Article 370(1) essentially permitted radical amendments subsequently, relegating it to a procedure for abusive constitutional alteration rather than safeguarding J&K's autonomy. The court further stated: 'Article 370(2) only refers to the concurrence given by the Government of the State before the Constituent Assembly was convened and makes no mention at all of the completion of the work of the Constituent Assembly or its dissolution'. Notably, all the SC orders since *Sampat Prakash* appear to have sanctioned executive actions, even after the dissolution of J&K's Constituent Assembly—the sole body authorised to endorse presidential orders. The contradiction, highlighted by the two cases, was, however, dismissed by the SC in the initial hearings in the Article 370 case. Now that the final verdict is out, the refusal to consider *Prem Nath* speaks for itself, amounting to a stealth narrowing of constitutional precedent.

Contrary to the mounting evidence, the Court has given a weak explanation for calling Article 370 temporary. Centralising the word 'temporary' in the Article's marginal note and the political conditions at its conception, the Court has altered its stance on the Article's permanence time and again. Paradoxically, in *Sampat Prakash*, the Supreme Court indicated the permanence of Article 370 by interpreting it to widen the presidential power to modify the provisions of the Indian Constitution applicable to

THE ARTICLE 370 RULING MAKES A PERFECT CASE OF CONSTITUTIONAL SUBTERFUGE IN INDIA'S POST-COLONIAL CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY.

J&K. Not long ago, the Court reiterated the permanent nature of the Article in *State Bank of India v Santosh Gupta* (2016).

It is noteworthy that the word 'temporary' was put in the marginal note because the final form of the constitutional relationship between J&K and the Indian Union was to be decided by the Constituent Assembly of the state. Since the Constituent Assembly of the state had not been convened yet, and its recommendations were awaited, Article 370 was initially meant to be temporary when the Indian Constitution was enforced on January 26, 1950. However, later, on January 26, 1957, the Constituent Assembly was dissolved without making any recommendation on the abrogation of the Article.

Apart from the substantive questions of constitutional erosion in J&K, the judgement raises a host of other crucial questions in the context of stripping J&K of the statehood in August of 2019. Effectively giving the executive a free rein to do anything, including the exercise of non-law-making powers of a state legislature under Article 356, the judgement is a rewriting of *ADM Jabalpur v Shivkant Shukla* (1976)—a verdict that has infamously endorsed the emergency of 1970s. Both the abrogation of Article 370 and J&K's reorganisation have been validated by the Court, stating that in the absence of the state legislature, the Parliament can express 'views'.

This constitutes a blatant misreading of the President's power under Article 356. According to constitutional principle, the President can merely exercise 'powers' under the Article; the said power does not, by any stretch of imagination, extend to the expression of 'views' on behalf of a state legislature. Yet, the Court held: 'Once the Presidential proclamation has been approved by both Houses of Parliament, so as to reflect the will of the people, the President has the power under Article 356 to make irreversible changes, including the dissolution of the State Assembly'. This doesn't even fit into the Court's rhetorical reference to J&K as reflecting 'asymmetrical federalism' within the Indian Union. Worse still, the Court has abdicated its responsibility by not agreeing to scrutinise the degradation of J&K into two Union Territories, whereas in the same breath validating the creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh!

The upshot is that the Court's interpretivism, though employed inconsistently, has shown a troubling disregard for the Constitution and its own precedents. With a history of patchy engagement with J&K's unique constitutional position, the Article 370 ruling makes a perfect case of constitutional subterfuge in India's post-colonial constitutional history.
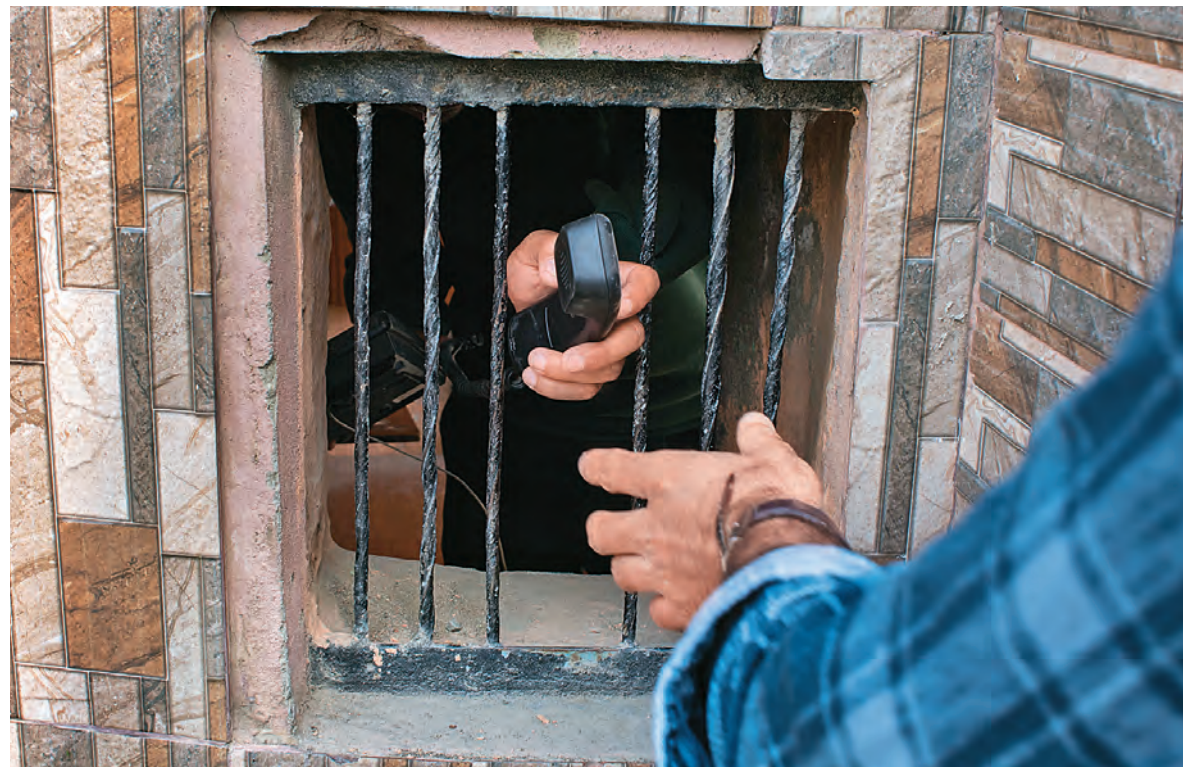
(Views expressed are personal)

Tabish Rafiq Mir
IS A SRINAGAR-BASED WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER AND ILLUSTRATOR

Parallel Parking in Downtown Srinagar

''Kashmir was *constitutionally* up for grabs. 'Buy the exotic Kashmiri land' and 'marry the apple-cheeked Kashmiri women' was the refurbished two-point policy of settling in Kashmir''

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Redacted A Kashmiri man helps another to speak on a landline phone as cell phones and internet services were suspended

SIX months after that fateful day—August 5, 2019—succumbing to inactivity, Kashmiri user accounts would drop from WhatsApp groups like flies. It had the world worried. It had my world worried. Kashmir had been blacked out by the Indian state for a record period; long enough for WhatsApp to deem them/deem us, non-users/non-entities. WhatsApp groups with Kashmiri presence were being emptied. A communication blockade unlike anything ever seen. Truly unprecedented. Mobile internet, phone calling, Wifi, landlines, postal services—decimated/redacted in one fell swoop. Redacted—that wonder of modern war machinery; digital, intangible, ambiguously and infinitely negotiable in nature. Unprecedented.

Mothers waited in queues outside dreaded police stations of the most dreaded, purely homegrown Jammu and Kashmir state police; hour-long queues at the tail-end of 30-second surveilled calls. Not unprecedented. "We are okay here. How are you? Okay, you take care; people are waiting in the queue behind me. Don't get into trouble" Beep. Slam. Next call. The queue, also surveilled, moves another miserly step toward the much sought-after landline in the local police station.

'And yes, don't grieve to anyone. Be careful'.

Away from their homes, Kashmiris in parts of India and other parts of the world started exhibiting symptoms of the siege: nightmares of genocide—the true makings of a well-planned fear psychosis; a successfully executed siege. Characteristic reminders of the trauma that the memory and psyche of those times had left us with were the dreams that we had, and still have—vivid, horrid nightmares of murder and genocide. Both consciously and subconsciously, a lot of us resorted to self-harm to keep these dreams at bay; sometimes gagging and waking up to find a bleeding mouth from having bitten down too hard on the tongue in agony; shoving an entire hand into the mouth like a wooden spool bitten down on in times of war; twisting a bone; spraining our necks from having tossed and contorted around too much; hitting and injuring our heads on the bed-boards; perpetually trying to run from whatever it was that we were seeing in our nightmares, and then finding ourselves sweating on the cold morning floor with deafening and piercing radio static running through our bodies—a whole body raging with a numb tinnitus. We had lost any semblance of space, and any semblance of time.

Kashmir was *constitutionally* up for grabs. 'Buy the exotic Kashmiri land' (with what money?) and 'marry the exquisite apple-cheeked Kashmiri women' was the refurbished two-point policy of settling in Kashmir for the now enabled Indian upper-middle and bureaucratic class. A new game had been found to get lost in as the conflict raged and the conflict-ed plunged to their deaths. The most accurate history lessons were left out—that Kashmir, the land, is cursed. That if you own land here, you own the curse too. That if you peek into the heart of Kasamira, it turns you to stone.

Whatsapp groups and rallies spoke of a collective heave of relief and celebration in the Indian subcontinent. 'Finally', they exclaimed in erogenous harmony—forever unified once again, and to the tunes of the cries of Kashmiris languishing in prisons. People dreamt and salivated over a world they would most certainly never be a part of. *Cheerleaders of bureaucracy, customers of democracy.*

The middle class, as always, unknowingly recruited by the state, subscribed to a dream, paying for it, as is often the case, with the scavenged scraps of their conscience. The middle class, now going home with compact SUVs—those cars which are SUVs, yes, but not quite, were up in diligent arms to serve what they thought was the motherland. The faux SUVs, like the faux autonomy, the faux luxury, and the faux power of

the middle class—of the Indian subcontinent, harvested and contained masterfully by a sly wedlock between the political elite and the capitalist brass.

In the midst of this celebration for bringing home a desolation, only an ailing Kashmiri would fly back into a blacked-out prison, airdrop into an active war-zone, just to be home. *'If there is heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here...'*. What is it about this land, people wondered, that made Kashmiris return to *such* tragedy, such madness, such mad masochism. This is why Kashmiris don't get ahead in life, well-meaning Indians said. 'They revel in their own tragedy. *They return to their death.'*

* * *

Back in Kashmir, *back home*, surrounded by the impounded, embargoed silence of those imprisoned at home, an Indian 'tourist' flew into the freshly liberated vale, and unfurled the Indian flag along the banks of the world famous Dal lake on a hot and desolate August afternoon. A *myena*—the bold and boisterous myena—chirped away awkwardly in the distance. The dusky ravens in the poplars croaked; gawking and gasping at the strange colours of the Indian tri-colour. Watching from *their* homes in parts of India, viewers and subscribers of democracy cheered. A military sigh, a military heave of victory.

Hoo-ha, cheered the Indian citizenry.
Hoo-Ha, cheered the military.
Hoo-ha, screeched the compact SUVs.

A much deserved celebration of a nation which had made it through the annals of development and civilization, overcome poverty, prejudice, polio, classism, casteism, disease, and now the ever evading, only remaining eyesore of the civilized, unified Indian Society—Kashmir. The Indian State claimed once again that the hearts and minds of Kashmiris had been conquered. Kashmiris, the elusive specie, had been won over.

I must now compel you, the reader, to revisit with me yet again, what followed the midnight on the cusp of August 4 and August 5. A zodiac of occupation. Signs of human-life and gadget-life were amiss. Data was officially contraband. In the best of times—the subsequent months following the blackout when things seemed 'normal', people came out onto the streets, rather shyly, rather slyly, like an orangutan freed after a life behind bars, and exchanged news and pirated movies which were flown in from New Delhi—the capital city of the aspiring superpower. Ingenious ways of proxies were found, and unprecedented speeds of data transfer were unlocked.

Meanwhile, at the International Defence airport in Srinagar, waiting in queues by the now-half-tilted railing outside the departures gate, under the gigantic Indian flag blowing and dropping hoarsely in the bewildered wind, strange people with weary faces were handing out notes to stranger people—landlocked castaway Kashmiris handing out notes to commuters flying out of the now erstwhile Kashmir: messages to be sent to their kin outside Kashmir. 'We are okay', these notes said. 'Grandma passed away last month. I am sorry you couldn't get the money for college admission in time. Let us hope for next year, or the year after that, or the year after... Don't come home.' ◙

(The author is finalising this book. Views expressed are personal)

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Ladakh Wants MORE

While the Union Territory has welcomed the abrogation of Article 370, it is demanding Sixth Schedule status and full statehood

Naseer Ganai

CELEBRATIONS erupted at the main market in Leh on August 5, 2019, soon after the BJP government in Parliament announced the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) into Union Territories—J&K and Ladakh. While Kashmir reeled under a curfew-like situation, the atmosphere in Leh was different. Residents gathered at the main chowk in Leh to commemorate the event. At the time, the Ladakh Buddhist Association thanked the BJP government for turning Ladakh into a Union Territory and fulfilling the long-standing aspirations of the people.

However, on December 11, when the Supreme Court of India gave its verdict on the bunch of petitions challenging the scrapping of Article 370, upholding the abrogation and granting Ladakh the status of a Union Territory, there were no such celebrations in Leh.

Thupstan Chhewang, a former MP and now the president of the Leh Apex Body, also called the People's Movement for 6th Schedule for Ladakh, however, hailed the Supreme Court's verdict. He described the verdict "as a strong step in the direction of strengthening national integration", but at the same time, he called for granting statehood to Ladakh. The Leh Apex Body, which is

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The Hills are Alive Following the revocation of Article 370, Leh has witnessed a shift in its political landscape

an amalgam of various religious and political organisations of Leh district, including the Ladakh Buddhist Association, welcomed the Supreme Court's observations about the early restoration of J&K's statehood and holding polls in J&K before September 2024.

Chhewang hopes that the Union government would now reassess the situation and give Ladakh its due "by elevating it as a full-fledged state". "The large area—where highly patriotic people are waiting for due recognition and faster development—with its strategic location and distinct ethnic and cultural identity, eminently entitles Ladakh to be made a state," says Chhewang.

After the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A and the bifurcation of J&K state into two Union Territories, it was widely believed in Leh that the BJP government would grant special status to Ladakh and bring the region under the ambit of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to protect the small population and unique environment of the region.

But as no such announcement was made, Ladakh's famous inventor and Ramon Magsaysay and Rolex Award winner, Sonam Wangchuk, in a widely-circulated video in October 2019, stated that "the people in the region have even started asking whether the status of a UT was granted for others to exploit the vast resources of Ladakh". In January this year, on Republic Day, the Ladakhi innovator observed a five-day climate fast for Ladakh's inclusion in the Sixth Schedule category and got a huge response in the region.

Until its abrogation, Article 370 granted J&K and Ladakh a distinct status with its constitution known as the Constitution of J&K. While Article 35A imposed restrictions on non-residents from purchasing property in J&K and Ladakh and ensured job reservations for permanent residents, Article 35A also gave the government of J&K the authority to identify "permanent residents", and enabled the government to grant them special rights and privileges in matters concerning public employment and the acquisition of property within the state.

In 2021, following the revocation of Article 370, Leh witnessed a shift in its political landscape, marked by the

> IT WAS WIDELY BELIEVED IN LEH THAT THE BJP GOVERNMENT WOULD GRANT SPECIAL STATUS TO LADAKH AND BRING THE REGION UNDER THE AMBIT OF THE SIXTH SCHEDULE OF THE CONSTITUTION. BUT NO SUCH ANNOUNCEMENT WAS MADE.

formation of the Leh Apex Body. This body advocated for constitutional protections to safeguard the local population, pushing for the implementation of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The body exerted so much pressure that on September 3, 2021, the BJP-led Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council Leh passed a resolution calling for safeguards under Article 371, the Sixth Schedule, or domicile laws to ensure the preservation of tribal rights for Ladakh's indigenous people.

However, Kargil, from day one, opposed the abrogation of Article 370 and the division of the former J&K state. Earlier this year, the Kargil Democratic Alliance, a group of religious and political parties of Kargil formed after the abrogation of Article 370, aligned with the Leh Apex Body. Together, they had four demands—full statehood for Ladakh, constitutional protections under the Sixth Schedule, the establishment of a Public Service Commission and the creation of separate parliamentary constituencies for both Leh and Kargil.

In Kargil, the response to the court verdict has been sharply critical. While no one from Leh moved the Supreme Court to challenge Article 370, three prominent politicians from Kargil—Asgar Ali Karbalai of the Congress, Qamar Ali Akhoon of the National Conference and Sajjad Kargili representing the influential Islamia School, Kargil—were among those who filed petitions before the Supreme Court to challenge the removal of Article 370.

"We are disheartened by the verdict of the Supreme Court. We were expecting that the abrogation of Article 370 would be rejected and the erstwhile state of J&K would be restored," says Kargili. He says he concurs with the demand of full-fledged statehood with the legislature for the Ladakh region as stated by the Leh Apex Body. "But it doesn't mean we have given up our struggle for the restoration of Article 370," adds Kargili.

Strategic Implications

China says that it does not recognise the Union Territory of Ladakh set up unilaterally and illegally by India. "India's domestic judicial verdict does not change the fact that the western section of the China-India border always belonged to China." In 2019, China had termed the "reorganisation" of J&K state as "unacceptable", while referring to the creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh.

Analysts say that while the Supreme Court's verdict is a "domestic legal closure that ratifies the central government's decision to scrap Article 370, its international significance remains limited". "Though Kashmir is largely seen as a bilateral issue between Pakistan and India by most domestic and international observers, China remains an equally important player due to its claims over the Ladakh region. India and China do not even agree on the length of the LAC because China disputes the LAC in Ladakh," says Praveen Donthi, a senior analyst for the Crisis Group. "In August 2020, China, at the UNSC, said that India's actions "challenged the Chinese sovereign interests" and that it is "not valid in relation to China". "So Beijing's reaction is not a surprise. Because China is also a party to the dispute as it is in possession of the Shaksgam Valley, a part of J&K that Pakistan ceded to it in 1963," adds Donthi.

OVER *Political* LAP

Post Poll Shivraj Singh Chouhan (left) and VD Sharma, state president of the BJP in MP (right) greet Mohan Yadav

The Politics Of
SOCIAL ENGINEERING

By appointing a mix of Adivasi, OBC, Dalit, and Brahmin leaders as CMs and deputy CMs, the BJP is keeping a close eye on the 2024 General Elections

Abhik Bhattacharya

EVER since he became the chief minister of Jharkhand in 2019, Hemant Soren never missed an opportunity to reiterate that he is the 'only Adivasi CM'. However, that status has changed now. The decision of the BJP to appoint Adivasi leader Vishnu Deo Sai as the CM of Chhattisgarh surprised many, but political insiders believe this is a masterstroke by the party at a time when Soren's evocation of Sarna dharma against the Hindutva narrative has gained popularity among Adivasis in the Hindi heartland.

Notably, Sai is the first Adivasi CM of Chhattisgarh since the formation of the state in 2000. "The state has not got a single Adivasi CM even after having a 31 per cent tribal population. This decision is not only going to amend the past mistakes but also has broader implications in the bordering state of Jharkhand that is going to the polls in 2024," says an Adivasi activist based in Jharkhand.

Chhattisgarh was not the only surprise. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP brought in former education minister Mohan Yadav as the new face, sidelining four-time CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan—even though the party gained an overwhelming majority banking on schemes promoted by him and his popularity. Political analysts think that the appointment of Yadav as a CM will have multiple consequences. The strategic move is not only going to cater to the OBC vote bank in a state that is estimated to have more than 50 per cent OBC population; but

it will also have an impact in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where the Yadavs have always sided with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), respectively.

After Babulal Gaur, who became the CM following Uma Bharti's dismissal in 2004, the state didn't have any Yadav leader. "One has to look into the politics of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to understand Yadav's selection. After the Bihar caste survey, they understood the population strength of the Yadavs. They have given a *savarna* CM to UP; so, to influence the politics of Bihar, they chose a Yadav in MP," says Sulabh Singh, a political strategist based in Bhopal.

The politics of representation is not limited to the OBCs and tribals. The party chose Jagdish Devda—a Dalit leader—as one of Yadav's deputies. While Adivasis-Dalits-OBCs are given representation in Chhattisgarh and MP, in Rajasthan they deputed Bhajan Lal Sharma, a first-time MLA and a Brahmin. Reflecting on the politics of representation, Ashish Agarwal, the BJP spokesperson in MP, says: "The Congress makes only fake promises and the BJP walks the talk."

Analysts feel factors like the resurgence of OBC politics, followed by the Bihar caste census and the Opposition's demands to hold a caste survey, have been strategically reined in by the BJP's politics of social engineering.

Post-Mandal Social Engineering

The concept of social engineering politics gained traction after the former Prime Minister V P Singh's implementation of the Mandal Commission report that opened the floodgates of protests—both for and against OBC reservation. Parties like the SP, RJD, Janata Dal (United), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) fixed their own constituencies—depending on the numbers and their support base. The BJP was not far behind.

In the 1980s and 1990s, organisations affiliated to the RSS started giving representation to 'backward caste' leaders following instructions of their ideologue KN Govindacharya. It was when leaders like Uma Bharti, Kalyan Singh, Sushil Modi, Narendra Modi, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, and Bangaru Laxman took the political centre stage. This politics of bringing backward caste leaders to the forefront was termed by Govindacharya as 'BJP's attempt at social engineering'.

On the one hand, a section of the BJP continued to oppose the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, saying that "all Hindus come under one umbrella"; on the other, they tried to "shift the terms of political debate from Mandal and caste to religion by resurrecting the old crusade for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya at the site where stood the Babri masjid, for this was Lord Ram's birthplace".

The implementation of Mandal Commission report paved the way for social justice politics in the Hindi heartland. Political leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan, to name a few, shot to fame and garnered formidable mandates in their respective constituencies. The BJP understood the implication of such politics very well, given the percentage of OBC votes.

Catering to Non-dominant Castes

Since 2014, the party, however, adopted a different social engineering strategy. To confront the dominant OBC castes like the Yadavs, it shifted its focus to the less-dominant

> SINCE 2014, THE BJP HAS ADOPTED A NEW SOCIAL ENGINEERING STRATEGY. TO CONFRONT THE YADAVS, IT HAS SHIFTED ITS FOCUS TO THE KURMIS AND MAURYAS.

castes like the Kurmis and Mauryas. Among Dalit groups, it started targeting non-Jatav communities and gave them representation. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the party reaped the benefits of the changed strategy. It defeated the SP-BSP alliance and won 64 of the 80 seats in UP.

While talking about the BJP's successful negotiation with caste politics, Satish K Jha, a Delhi-based political analyst, says: "Social engineering of the BJP predates the caste survey and the Congress party's recent approach towards this. The BJP has successfully done social engineering in UP by giving representation to some of the backward castes that were denied their due share in the SP and BSP regimes."

However, the latest strategy of the INDIA alliance to evoke caste census again has forced the BJP to modify its social engineering politics. That the selection of a Yadav leader as the CM of MP would not only impact the OBC politics of the state, but also have an influence on the politics in UP could be gauged from the first speech he gave after he was sworn in. Evoking the sentiments on Ram Mandir that is going to be inaugurated in January, he said: "Kar sevaks were subjected to atrocities at the UP border during the Ram Mandir andolan."

The social engineering of the BJP is based on the consideration that neither backward nor upper castes are monolithic entities and politics is an art to find space for new electoral alignment and re-alignment with various caste groups based on several local factors—the primary ones being their numerical strength, their sense of deprivation of political power and their yearning for representation, adds Jha.

In Chhattisgarh, the party selected a Sahu OBC as Sai's deputy, along with Vijay Sharma, a Brahmin face. A similar strategy has been followed in MP, where they have chosen a Dalit and a Brahmin as deputy CMs. "The BJP has come up with the idea of two deputy chief ministers to give representation to all major communities. The four individuals in the three states represent their communities significantly," says Yatindra Singh Sisodia, a Bhopal-based political analyst.

Does this new form of social engineering have the potential to impact the caste census demands of the INDIA alliance? Sisodia thinks that during the assembly elections, caste census was a major campaign issue for the Congress, although, it has not paid any visible political dividend to the party. The major idea, however, was to create a rift in the big block of this class. The BJP does not want the issue of caste census to gain momentum ahead of the 2024 elections. This move of leadership distribution may help spread the narrative that they have already touched upon the caste factor and don't want other political parties to make it a political issue, he adds. ◙

The Narrowing Window

While the climate change conference marks the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era, India will have to urgently find ways to move away from coal. Securing finance for new projects is going to be a big challenge

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya

A strong pushback by some countries, including India, led to the agreement to "transition away from fossil fuels", but without a mention of their "phase-out" at the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai. Contesting the proposal which stipulated that no new coal-fired power plants can be commissioned without an in-built carbon capture and storage facility has come as a breather for India.

The discussion around fossil fuels was the most hotly-contested issue, dividing experts and countries, but the consensus was that "COP28 marks the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era". After the conference, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in a post on X, said: "Whether you like it or not, fossil fuel phase-out is inevitable." He specified that he was addressing "those who opposed a clear reference to phase out of fossil fuels" during the summit. "Let's hope it (phase out) doesn't come too late," Guterres wrote.

There were two main reasons why the phrasing 'phasing-out of fossil fuel' did not find a place in the adopted text. According to an Indian delegate who was part of the negotiations, the oil and gas lobby vehemently protested the idea. The coal-dependent developing countries also opposed it because it would be suicidal for their economies as long as they do not get the necessary funds and transfer of technology from the developed countries. "But the developed countries weren't willing to make that commitment," said the delegate.

Though the phrasing has come as a breather, India's window to transition away from coal is narrowing, even as the country is set on a coal expansion path for at least another decade.

India has "the target of a minimum 80,000 MW (or 80 GW) of coal-based capacity addition by 2031-2032," Union Power and New and Renewable Energy Minister R K Singh informed the Parliament on December 15, two days after COP28. This

Long-term Goals
India has the target of 80,000 MW of coal-based capacity addition by 2031-2032

means about a 40 per cent increase over the current coal-based thermal power installed capacity of 207 GW.

In the same period, India plans to add 375 GW of renewable energy capacity over about 133 GW of existing capacity. Getting funding for the expansion of renewable won't be easy. Multiple reports have shown India is not getting the finance necessary for the kind of expansion the country is aiming for.

"Energy security of the country cannot be achieved by renewable sources of energy alone," said Singh on December 15, adding that the dependence on coal-based generation is likely to continue till cost-effective energy storage solutions are available. However, a report published in December by the Delhi-based Centre for Financial Accountability (CFA) and Climate Trends shows that for the second year in a row, no coal power plant has received project finance lending in 2022.

Joe Athialy, executive director, CFA, points out that the cost of renewable energy with a storage system is currently comparable and cheaper than new coal plant construction, irrespective of the location. Coal power plants are losing out to renewable energy on per unit cost of electricity. "Financial institutions are reluctant to fund coal projects, be it power plant construction or coal mining, knowing well that the global outlook on coal remains heavily in the negative," Athialy says.

That the situation did not improve in 2023 was evident when, in October, the coal ministry organised a meeting between 91

new coal block allottees and banks and financial institutions, urging the banks to finance new coal projects. The coal ministry even requested the Department of Financial Services to consider classifying the coal sector under the 'infrastructure sector' to help them get finance.

For India, coal is not only a matter of energy security but also a source of livelihood. So, while transitioning to renewable energy is inevitable, the phase-out has to be methodical.

"The phase-out of fossil fuels will only be possible with the right financing package for poor and vulnerable nations. The text does not even set out the need to agree on a definition of climate finance or take any steps to improve the transparency of financial flows," says Friederike Roder, the vice president of Global Citizen, a US-headquartered non-profit. Despite a strong start with the creation of the Loss and Damage fund, in the end, the financing package falls short of expectations and lacks any reality, she says. "Reiterating old promises, like doubling funding for adaptation by 2025, without requesting implementation plans is no progress," adds Roder.

To draw greater attention to the cause of adaptation and resilience building was one of the major issues for developing countries. However, the draft text of the Global Goal on Adaptation has upset civil society.

According to Teresa Anderson, global lead on climate justice at the global non-profit Action Aid, the text "has only soft language that politely encourages developed countries to play their part, but doesn't go far enough in actually requiring wealthy countries to provide the finance needed to make the

> FOR INDIA, COAL IS NOT ONLY A MATTER OF ENERGY SECURITY BUT ALSO A SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD. SO, WHILE TRANSITIONING TO RENEWABLE ENERGY IS INEVITABLE, THE PHASE-OUT HAS TO BE METHODICAL.

adaptation goal a reality on the ground."

The final text also expressed "concern" over the pre-2020 gaps in both mitigation ambition and implementation by the developed countries and noted their failure to achieve the emission reduction targets set for them by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The balance, nevertheless, remained tilted towards the rich. Ulka Kelkar, executive director of climate at the World Resources Institute's India chapter, says that though the text recognises that the gap in adaptation finance is "widening" and that doubling the current low levels of adaptation finance will be insufficient, it also "exonerates the developed countries" from making up the finance gap so far.

According to the UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) Emissions Gap Report (EGR) published in November, globally, the 10 per cent of the population with the highest income accounted for nearly half (48 per cent) of emissions. Two-thirds of this group lives in developed countries. The bottom 50 per cent contributed only 12 per cent of the total emissions. It is the developed countries that are supposed to mobilise the required finances. Hence, the outcome has upset most of the developing and least developed countries.

Despite pressure from scientists, climate activists, civil society, and the small countries most vulnerable to climatic changes, the text was a result of several compromises due to conflicting interests between countries at different stages of development. However, there have been several outcomes that experts and civil society members welcomed and even termed historic. The most important was the first explicit mention of fossil fuel instead of singling out coal.

COP28 marks the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era, says Linda Kalcher, executive director at the pan-European think-tank, Strategic Perspectives. "This outcome must be harnessed by governments and markets," she adds. However, with the kind of anti-fossil fuel atmosphere that COP28 has created, dealing with the immediate coal expansion and subsequent phase-down in a "just, orderly and equitable manner"—as COP28 calls for—is poised to be one of India's biggest challenges in the coming decades. ⭕

BLOOMBERG

Substrata

Ashutosh Salil
IS AN IAS OFFICER

Poetic Faith

The realness of the house on screen

An Ode to a House Screengrabs from *Gamak Ghar*

THERE is a lone tree. A few floating clouds. A serpentine road and then the house is revealed. The house is a spectacle that is both mute and articulate. A kitchen, a courtyard, windows, rooms, and the entrance. The screen is a landscape of desire, of nostalgia, and of loss. It is a portal.

A single ray of sunshine, that breaks through the old window bars and falls on the floor in the frame, is enough to take me where I have not been in years, to make me see that house again, to feel the loss, to be in that house once more.

Cinema has that power. To take us where we haven't been, the promise of a house. In watching a film, we gaze at a space we can never occupy but can live in or have lived in. In Achal Mishra's *Gamak Ghar*, which was released in 2019, the house is the protagonist. The house hasn't been scanned and it is here that we experience the tenuousness of property relations and through it, the story of migration, of aspiration, and of loss.

The film is set in Mishra's ancestral village, Madhopur, in Darbhanga and is about the house that his grandfather built in the 1950s. A structure becomes home with presence and this real, lived-in space was where fiction intersected with the real and then, with my own story.

It is real and, in its realness, it contains a thousand other such homes. Like memory, which can't be created. It is both real and surreal. The house inspires, it acts and it disintegrates. I wonder if the house would be the same if it were made up of footage and insertions. Would I then enter it the way I did?

In one of the scenes in the film, the grandson is looking for his dead grandfather in the belongings that the latter has left behind. There is a diary with minute details of all expenditures, photo albums and drama books, all tied up in a red piece of cloth and stored in a big aluminium *sandook* (chest) by the grandmother. That *sandook* is ubiquitous. Objects are triggers. That's realness.

I watched the grandson in the film shuffle through the photo album and felt that perhaps we could have gone back, broken the locks of our old house in Pipra in Khagaria, Bihar, and seen some of the old furniture lying there still. Like my grandparents' bed or the circular table in the veranda where I would sit in the company of my grandfather and his friends during my visits.

Gamak Ghar is a personal testimony, an ode to a house that has been abandoned. But like an old woman who waits for a final reunion, it waits until it can't anymore and becomes a fixture in memory. The film is a memory piece about families and migration and the house is the setting and the protagonist. It speaks for many such houses. Like mine that we left behind. In the film, the family of three brothers, a sister and a widowed mother have all migrated to different cities. They visit their village home only occasionally now. Either to celebrate or to mourn. Like we did.

There is the language too. The Maithili language film represents the people of Mithila. It is the language that I grew up with. The language I spoke to my mother in.

It is in the abandonment of the house in the film that I feel the magnitude of a collective loss. A decade ago, when I visited Pipra, my village, my ancestral house looked abandoned. Like any other abandoned house from the past. Uninhabited and unkempt, home to wild grass, vegetation and bats. The abandonment was recent though. The roof and the walls of the house were still intact then. So were the grills, the doors

Released in 2019, *Gamak Ghar* is a cinematic exploration of familial ties, memories and the architectural language of an ancestral house in Bihar's Maithili-speaking Darbhanga region. The film is a portrait of a large extended Indian family over several decades as they gather at their matriarch's rural home, following the inevitable rhythms of change, children moving away to the city and the inevitable decay of traditional village life.

and the window frames like the memories. Memories of four generations, including that of my great-grandmother and brother, who had lived under its roof.

It was a very brief visit that lasted less than two hours. We only crossed the house then. That abandoned house that was once a home. I could only steal a glance. It was locked. It was nothing like the home of our childhood. But I guess that is true for all abandoned houses. They can never resemble the living homes of your childhood.

It was the house that also contained my language, which is Maithili.

Gamak Ghar represents the architecture that many houses in the region carry from that era. There would be a veranda in the front and a courtyard at the back. Men would occupy the veranda and women would use the courtyard. The veranda, like in the film, had big pillars and it opened to an empty space in the front, which then led to the main village road.

What is a home? It is perhaps a silent witness to the lives lived and memories created behind its thick walls. *Gamak Ghar* is that. A storehouse of memories.

You return to the house via the film. I might not be as lucky as the grandson in the movie who found the diaries and the albums. All my grandfather's books, diaries and letters would probably have been lost to termites or time itself.

In the absence of anything tangible, a film becomes a reflection of a landscape. The celluloid space is full of potential where real sites are found within the narrative and offer spatial reconnection. A lived space is a continuum.

Watching *Gamak Ghar* was like watching our own lives on celluloid and probably that of every family that migrates, leaving behind a home and years of collective memories.

Unlike the grandson in the movie who rebuilds the house to keep it ready in time for his son's thread ceremony, I doubt my brother or I would go and rebuild our village home. Unlike the grandson in the movie, who has migrated to a nearby city in the same region, I seem to be a perpetual migrant, traversing across the length and breadth of the country. Every shift further weakening the link to that home. Perhaps in the future, someone will come to live there. They will make their own home, create their own memories and make their own 'Gamak Ghar'.

Gamak Ghar, the film, is a tangible reflector, an imaginative prism where imagination is activated and all filmmaking is also about shifting that material existence into a mental reality. The village home is an in-between place, a contested space and where the house is social space, a personal space. It is not a generic place, but a particular one. I strive to arrive there. There is that possibility in its realness. ⬛

Diary

Vineetha Mokkil
is Assistant Editor,
Outlook

Of Sickness and Health

French writer Marguerite Duras once described writing as "a kind of illness" in an interview. Apart from this 'illness', which struck quite early in life, I hadn't suffered from any serious disease as a child or an adult. That is, until I was diagnosed with a severe case of typhoid about a month ago.

Like the rest of humanity, I've had my share of headaches and fevers over the years. Headaches come and go (talking of Michelangelo). Best not to make a fuss about them. As for fever, there is always paracetamol in stock at the familiar neighbourhood chemist's store. I manage to stay away from doctors. To dodge them—to be more accurate. It's nothing personal. Doctors across the world who are snowed under their patients' demands are fine people. The best of the best. My avoidance strategy is an inherited tic. Growing up, I saw my parents steer clear of doctors and hospitals unlike most of the adults in their social circle. Doctors came into the picture only when there was some sort of life-threatening emergency. Otherwise, it was all commonsense measures and home remedies—ginger and green tea, lemon and honey, turmeric, garlic, grandma's potions— gulp them down, keep calm and carry on.

Anyway, back to last month. After failing to shake off a fever for a week and feeling quite wretched, I let my sister drive me to the hospital. The doctor ordered a few tests. The report confirmed the doctor's suspicions: typhoid. The bacterium had not only invaded my system, it was thriving at an alarming pace. Pills wouldn't work. Antibiotics had to be injected into my body to fight off the invader. Like a brazen colonising power barging into a sovereign nation, *Salmonella Typhi* had taken complete control.

A Foreign Country

I felt betrayed by my body. Why was it playing host to this pest? Why hadn't it sounded a louder warning? Why had I, the sole inhabitant of this body, suddenly become so powerless to control it?

I crossed over from the world of the well to the world of the sick. Curled up on a hospital bed covered with a starched white sheet, the distinction felt painfully real. The soft-spoken nurse sticking a needle in my arm, scouting for a vein, referred to me as "the patient". My sister, hovering by the bed, pale with worry, became "the bystander". This is hospital protocol. Patients are patients. Accompanying family members or friends are called bystanders.

Words make it clear that the sick are in a world of their own. The rest are bystanders from the world of the healthy. Hartley's immortal lines popped up in my feverish brain that night: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." Replace "the past" with "illness". The lines apply…

There was a beautiful garden in the hospital's backyard. Well-tended, shaded by green canopies. From my third-floor window, I could see the treetops swaying in the breeze. The sun setting, amber and gold, behind the branches. Patients were not allowed to walk in the garden unless accompanied by hospital staff. And overworked nurses and orderlies didn't have the time to spare to accompany anyone on a stroll. So, nature had to be communed with from a distance. Like a lover so close, yet so far away. I imagined my fellow sufferers, housed in different floors of the hospital building, peering out of windows, yearning to walk barefoot on the grass, savoring the imagined pleasure of strolling on that patch of green.

The Possibility of Healing

We could walk up and down the hospital corridors unsupervised. A few rounds in the mornings and evenings. Arms punctured with needles, slowed down by casts, slowed down by sickness, we formed a slow but steady procession. I felt a sense of solidarity with everyone I walked past. We were too addled by antibiotics to strike up conversations. We nodded at each other, acknowledging each other's plight, and presence, before moving on.

Recovery seemed like a faraway prospect some mornings. Feverish, hallucinatory nights beat you down. But the nurses who came by with fresh syringes and medicines were full of smiles. The doctor sounded confident about the antibiotics working. It was just a matter of time. The bacterium would lose the fight soon. The trick was to keep one's hopes up. To take it one day at a time. To believe that recovery was not a mirage. To trust in the possibility of healing. ⏺

ILLUSTRATION BY CHAITANYA RUKUMPUR