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CHAPTER 13

Looking at the Nation through a Lover's Eye:

N. Padmakumar's Film, *A Billion Colour Story*

Shreerexha Pillai Subramanian¹

ABSTRACT

Cinematic response in India to social justice movements, even when aimed at rectifying communal violence and tensions, reifies entrenched orders separating Hindu from Muslim, citizen from the 'Other,' native from the diasporic. To the polyphony of films focused on interfaith love, a recent indie film adds a new 'look'. Narasimhamurthy Padmakumar's, *A Billion Colour Story* (2016) focalizes on a child's point of view in a black and white filmic narration to dismantle old hatreds and re-ignite love of culture and nation for the very diversity that has become pixelated, walled, entombed and reactionary. More like Nollywood in its reliance on a smaller budget, a do-it-yourself *chutzpah* and decolonial vision, the story revolves around a child, Hari Aziz, who becomes the instrumental force behind rendering his parents' dream true of making a film about their beloved nation, its teeming diversity, and its border-crossing love. The director, Padmakumar, addresses a host of current crises faced by those living in the shadow of Late Capital, culturally steeped patriarchies, and right-wing Hindu fundamentalism, while pointing to the billion colours that make up this teeming 'democracy' that might make its most significant issues clear in the binary of black and white. A close reading of this film reveals its decentering and decolonizing of hegemonic notions of nation, gender, class, and religion, -and of the hegemony of the Bollywood Gaze that dictates who will love whom, to what degree, at what costs, and to what end. What Narasimhamurthy Padmakumar provides in the diegesis, alongside the love story of a Muslim man and his Hindu wife, and the 'product' of their love, a child, is a film that encapsulates their 'looking' at the world. However, his looking leaves a lot to be desired on two registers: his looking does not see the active youth-led contestations taking place on the ground against the Hindu-led political hegemony and his looking refuses to call out the culprit, the excesses of violence performed by the nation-state and its Hindutva brigade against its minoritized 'Muslim' and othered subjects.

Keywords: Bollywood, Gaze, Decolonization, Hegemony, Hindutva, Violence

Introduction

A Billion Colour Story won the eighth Bagri Foundation prize (Rubin, 2017) for independent cinema from India in London. Dedicated by the director to the victims of recent lynchings by the Hindutva-centered national hegemony, the film sets up a modern moral tale against the backdrop of the film capital of Mumbai where the expat inter-religious couple, Imran Aziz (Gaurav Sharma) and his wife, Parvathy (Vasuki) move with their prepubescent son, the innocent young child narrator, Hari Aziz (Dhruva Padmakumar, son of the film's director). The film's

diegetic order remains firmly grounded in the gaze of the lover, one who loves intensely, i.e., the couple, their son, and their way of looking at the nation they consider home.

To briefly summarize the film, the basic plotline charts how the child bears witness to the parents' wonder and idealism and speaks about their identities as Indophiles who love all the colours that make up the nation – the sweets, festivals, customs and people that make up the nation. While stumbling to find funding for their initial 'cute' love story, the two give up as they also struggle to find housing as an inter-religious couple finally landing on a small flat in a Muslim enclave where the wife continues to arouse anger from the conservative gatekeepers. As they lose the little bit of funding through their missteps, they move into an even smaller home, sell all their belongings and shelve the earlier film to make one about an inter-religious couple during the 1940s whose love undoes the historical march forward into partition and ultimately imagines India and Pakistan as one people. The character of the progressive elder, Anand Shashtri who endorses the vision of the father, is assassinated for his outspoken peace work in the face of retrograde Hindutva that remains the echo chamber of the film's diegesis. Heartbroken, as the father is called to give his testimony at the police station, the son interrupts his football game to leap onto his father's back, a match cut that shows his leap interrupting a hidden marksman's gun set to kill the dad, instead finding its aim in the son's body. Even though the screen is black and white, we imagine red, going back to the colors that open the film's narrative identifying love, violence and hatred as red. Just as the dead child's narratorial voice guides us from the beyond, the child had rendered a video asking for funds for his father's project of love in order to render poetry back in his life, and monies had come pouring in. As the film closes on the parents setting to leave the country having given up on their ideals, the son rescues the father's dream by securing funds and faith from beyond the grave.

A couple of decades ago, Vinay Dharwadker published the essays of A. K. Ramanujan posthumously (1999) since one of the great tellers of tales, a translator, folklorist and poet himself, Ramanujan wrote a much studied and cited work on the many versions, tellings, and translations of the epic, *Ramayana*. In the layered translation-related wisdom Ramanujan imparts regarding an epic that is not a single text but a compendium, multiplicity proliferates and lives as separate but related organisms. Resonant with Edouard Glissant's rhizomatic complexity (1989) that is a profound truth of Antillean life and postcolonial transnational truism, Ramanujan's multitextuality is akin to the South Asian banyan, a variant of the ficus that casts down roots and continues to live on, the many trunks of story overlapping, shading over, and growing their own forests in their own times and places. Ramanujan writes, "In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling-and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyana* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'" (p. 158). Diminutive and humble as a man, Ramanujan's untimely death in 1993 was demoralizing to all of us who continue to bask in the long shade he provided, a shade long and dark enough to shake up the Hindu supremacists who outlawed his essay at Delhi University a

decade or so ago (Roy, 2011), considering it a threat to their vision of singularity that is pureed into Hindu authority and hegemony in the public sphere. Taking a small hint from Ramanujan's points about an epic text, the story of border-crossing love is 'always already' part and parcel of the fabric of South Asian discursive order that relishes the Laila-Majnoon (Hasson, 2018) and Heer-Ranjha love stories that end in dead lovers and living stories. In times marked by the rise and cementing of Hindu supremacist nationalism in India where such stories are buried alongside the great lovers who remain like ghosts, immortal and hovering just over the horizon like hope, the supremacists recast the mythopoeics and history of cross-cultural mingling and further cement religious divides that mark Muslim and minoritized bodies as other in the nation's body politic.²

The dog whistles to mobilize the pious to violent action, continued unrestricted in temples and pilgrimage sites, with a political order that tacitly, and more often, actively supports the anti-Muslim discourse permeating the public sphere.³ The film, dedicated to the victims of lynching in recent years, grapples with responding to these rising tides of religious fundamentalism, as manifested in the conservative Hindu and Muslim neighborhood committees (to counter Land Jihad) that govern who is included, allowed, tolerated or ejected from the artificial urban communities of apartment complexes and such. However, what has marked Indian national history through its twentieth century anticolonial struggles and nation-building post-1947, as marked by the watershed moment of Gandhi's assassination by a member of the Hindu Right is the birth of Hindu fascism as inspired by its corollaries in Europe (Hameed 2020), is its long hibernation and flourishing in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the reigning ideology and political power. In the wake of each of the major communal riots, a great number of the lives of the minoritized subjects, mainly Muslim, have been lost since Babri (1993), Godhra (2002), Dadri (2006), Muzaffarnagar (2013), just to name a few recent tragedies that have functioned as pogroms against Muslim communities. The film charts the frustrated clamor for justice by those who have suddenly been disappeared from the nation's fabric, the voices of the dispossessed haunting the film, as in the character Parvathi's question in the film, "Did the Godhra victims get justice?" (25:21). Here the camera pans to the curious son who is telling us the story and piecing together the catalog of injustices that inspire his parents to counter with their fictional works to right the wrongs of the nation they love and call home. Expressed recently by Anjali Arondekar in the conference, "Dismantling Global Hindutva," (Sept. 10-12, 2021), it is a spirit of *andolan*/resistance that fuels the filmic order that desires to unsettle the violence and loss through a spirited engagement with alternative possibilities for rethinking our past and reimagining our futures in South Asia and its diasporas. As Nandini Sundar concludes in her remarks at the same conference, which she attended and presented despite the prolific amount of death threats received leading up to Sept. 10 and on, she speaks about how Hindutva has hijacked all discourse but still, we need to move forward into the "India of our dreams," the catch-all ambition of this film as well. This conference is evidence of long decades of work by South Asianist scholars, historians such as Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib,

Wendy Doniger, Sheldon Pollock, Jeffrey Kripal, Christopher Jaffrelot who have written about the complex, multi-religious and cultural milieu that construct Indian identity, an effort at combating what I observed in an earlier article, “a colonizing space of Hindu-nationalist hegemony” (Subramanian 2011). More recently, these tensions have boiled over in textbook controversies between diasporic groups who identify as Hindu believers battling for positive images of Indian, i.e., Hinduism in textbooks over the South Asia studies scholars in the US who are seen as colonizing (Redden 2016). On the ground in India, youth-led resistance has been at the forefront fighting against the demagoguery of the right-wing government and its majoritarian policies. In the same period that Padmakumar labors on his film and it is released in 2016, student protests against the oppressive tactics of BJP fomented across dozens of universities.⁴

Death, Dispossession, and the Dream Shot from the Child’s Perspective

In resolving past the tired binaries, the film writes its way into transgressive border-crossing love of the kind that mark the history of commercial blockbuster Hindi cinema, from *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) to *Bombay* (1995), *Jodha Akbar* (2008), *Veer Zaara* (2004), *Padmavati* (2017) and so many such films that highlight the love stories of couples whose love survives the entrenched hatred and norms rendering such transgressions next to impossible. Nilanjana Paul’s analysis (2017) of the film, *Padmavati* addresses the layered registers at work in the censorship and discourse compelled by Hindutva political order, the ruling order since 2014 that has exacerbated the violence faced by vulnerable minority populations such as Muslims, migrants, and other vulnerable individuals identified as dissidents by the ruling party. Anderson observes, “Hindutva since 2014 appears to be more confident, proud, brazen, and belligerent than ever before” so that, he develops in his article, “Hindu nationalism now permeates into new spaces: institutional, territorial, conceptual, ideological.”

In thinking against the binaries that condition South Asian cultural mores from male/female, Hindu/Muslim, rich/poor, native/diasporic, adult/child, licit/illicit, mainstream/arthouse, faithful/faithless, patriot/traitor, the director renders this film in black and white which makes the story vivid and dreamy at once, a memory tale rendered intense in the absence of the usual Bollywood technicolor and glitz. Its title addresses the body politic as a billion colours, the very subject of the film, and the inspiration that leads the protagonists to return to their home locale. Similar to ‘black and white’ that are global film successes like Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2007) and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* (2018), the film attempts to drive the story of colors home through the heightened sensuality and visuality of black and white. As the child narrator of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, *Cracking India* (1988) brings us the guilt memoir of the author/child witness to the trauma of partition (Subramanian, 2013), this film centers the child’s voice to bring home lessons on death, dispossession and the dream of an alternative nation not founded on Hindu supremacy but rather an inclusion, permission, transgression and blurring of differences as depicted, with room for doubt, questioning, and defiance.

Walter Benjamin writes, “Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back” (p. 84). The power of the storyteller derives its authority from death, a direct relationship of looking into one’s mortality that is the source and inspiration of the story, what makes the work timeless, unforgettable, and meaningful in its exact details to “warming his shivering life” (p. 88). The film, from the opening reflections on colors, diversity and the flag of the nation meditates on the impossibility of this child’s being, prefiguring an ending that gives the story its breath, enlivening its point from the abyss of infinity. The film prefigures the child’s death, or a dead child talking because each interaction portends the death of the child born of a union delegitimized by the prevailing order of Hindutva. When Hari Aziz meets his new friend, Sofia in the building they move into, she has a goat on a leash, a pet she names Julie to which her father’s rejoinder is that Julie is only a temporary guest since she will be sacrificed as meat offering to Allah during Id celebrations. Sacrifices, as the event of Abraham’s ‘testing’ in the biblical tradition of willingness to give up his son Isaac, Ishmael in the Qur’an, upon the command of the Lord, is key. In the Islamic theological tradition, Baqri-Id is a significant ritual, the day the goat is ritualistically offered to Allah as sign of one’s submission to the one and only God.

For the father in this film, Imran Aziz whose religious conviction is displaced by love for a nation, his son is indeed sacrificed to bring his dream to living color. As the plot line shares the forced impoverishment on the parents who have to repeatedly uproot their home and homeschool their son as the school tuitions are beyond their pale, the child narrator wisely quips that there is no room for self-pity with nine civil wars raging across the globe. His is a voice of transnational empathy and cross-border wisdom, a voice that recollects his father’s memory of living in a Bombay chawl in 1992 in the wake of Ayodhya-incited communal riots where his neighbors stayed up to guard the lives and safety of six Muslim families against the Hindu mobs. Against the onslaught of sectarian divisions that mark the violence of the everyday (Das, 2006), the child’s memory sheds light on an alternate nation where Hindu majority protects, stands guard, and fights against the right-wing Hindutva ideology. In this imaginary, the ‘right’ conduct of a Hindu prevails over rights of the Hindu majority.

Akin to the street theater that works to help the masses ‘see’ the perniciousness of Hindutva, Ghosh notes, “Janam has responded to the demand from various mass organizations of the Left for a play to counter Hindutva politics” (p. 77). Deepa Reddy’s (2018) post-script on the Charter put forth on Hindu Rights in 2018 urges for a closer reading of the apolitical and anti-political discursive orders built into Hindutva that helps in undoing the political stalemate between the Right and the Left in India. The film’s denouement on the son’s death followed by the capital pouring in to realize the father’s dream can be figured as the transcendence of the nation over the limitations of its people. Religious fervor is replaced with faith in the nation, a corrective against the corrosive nationalist patriotism that deems Hindus as rightful citizens and all others, Muslims, Dalits, Chris-

tians, Queer and minoritized bodies as suspect especially after the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (Bhat, Ramachandran). Instead, faith in India's secular tradition summarizes the film's polemic, "India's poetry is still alive. A billion people can't be wrong." Unlike the clarity of the 'mob' that carts away Shanta, the central Ayah character who is symbolic of a prelapsarian pre-partition peace in Deepa Mehta's literary adaptation in her film, *Earth*, here the bullet that kills the child is left unmarked as originating from a Hindu Right or Muslim or other state/non-state actor. Beyond the film, or sadly, what it refuses to spell out is that in the current socio-political discursive order in India, it is militant Hindutva that takes down, through direct violence and other means, critics of its establishment (Deb 2019). The film raises sharp questions in the voice over of the sage child, a critical theological presence that resonates with the Upanishadic texts, a child of the ilk of Nachiketas who questions death itself and gains immortality, "Was my death communal?" since Hari Aziz's religion remains ambiguous. However, it is quite significant that in a film that meditates on the child's point of view, the diegetic order disappears the active grassroots work happening all over the nation by youth protesting the retrograde boundaries of class, gender, caste, religion, sexuality, and nationalism in which their lives remain confined.⁵

The medieval mystics of South Asian subcontinent, the Sufis and the Bhakts, were passionate in their quest for the divine. Desirous of a union with the supreme being, they often short-circuited existing forms of piety and hierarchy finding the powerful men of religion to be obstacles en route to God. For them, temples and mosques, rather than distinct emblems of religious establishments, were embodiments of God. Charged often for flouting the laws of religious practice, they sought the love promised within. Their message too radical even today, fifteenth century poet Kabir resonates here on whose death, it was not clear whether the people would bury or cremate him with a scuffle ensuing between his Muslim and Hindu devotees (Hess and Singh, 1983, p. 4). Upon lifting the shroud, they find a heap of flowers that they appropriately divide to complete their separate rituals of burial and cremation. In so doing, they end up missing the point of his teaching wherein he had castigated them for loving ritual over God, division over faith. Arguing over difference, they forget the essence of the divine, as Kabir emphasizes in his many *dohas*, "Hindus say, "Burn my body," / Turks say, "Follow my Pir." / They fight religious wars. / The swan discerns, says Kabir" (p. 72). For Kabir, the amphibious bird belongs to all the worlds – water, land, air, and never claims any one as its own. Although the child's death cannot be marked as one or the other, the diegetic order of the film points to communalism as the pernicious ideology that kills the dream of a united radically inclusive nation. It is a body politic constituted by a billion who can, in fact, agree on the sentiment of loving 'poetry' that comes to stand for love of the other who is minoritized, marginalized, dispossessed and shot dead in mid-life thus despite the ambiguity of his religion, becoming as Walter Benjamin observes regarding the storyteller, "an incarnation of the devout" (p. 92). In dying, the child ascends to become the one who is the fount of wisdom and knowledge, the one who can tell the story with the veracity and authority of the sage, see past difference as Kabir asked, and become the 'one' voice of the nation.

The Costs of Dreaming/Limits of Padmakumar's Vision

The meta-diegetic aspect of the film is that Padmakumar's vision is also about filmmaking. In highlighting the struggles faced by the nascent couple, mainly the father who is the primary driver behind their film, the mother recedes to the background as the nurturer and primary caretaker of the child. The film addresses the great struggle behind the costly and capital-heavy collaboration necessary for filmmaking. For any film makers who are pushing the envelope, from feminist (Citron) to experimental, art house, or anti-realists, the capital investment is the hurdle that sends many a project to the back shelves never to be completed or shared with any audiences, big or small.

From the film's opening, the curious and observant voice of the child narrator apprises us of the struggles faced by his idealistic father who believes in the teeming diversity and splendor of India which he seeks to encapsulate in a 'cute' film that just never seems to find sure footing through producers. The costs of the father's dream downsize the son's life – from a return abroad to an apartment complex in Mumbai, to smaller and smaller dwellings, homeschooling, the curtailing of life's little treats to the impossibility of buying new football kicks and a ball to finally, the cessation of life itself. The challenges of funding their film project leads to whispered conversations to avoid worrying the son, but the keenly observant narrator fills in the gap from looking up what he does not know and coloring in the rest. The lack of funding leads to the change of plans, and to an even larger vision, a film project that re-imagines the origins of the modern nation-state and imagines itself undoing the violence of partition through love.

Upon the death of Anand Shastri, a figure who might remind the audiences of Anand Patwardhan, the filmmaker who has been documenting and resisting the censor boards for decades (MacFarlane), the father finally gives up. Then, as they pack to leave the country, the representative from the bank reaches them just in time, a *deus ex machina* figure who magically blesses them with serious money raised by the son's evocative video speech on behalf of his father's dream. With a sum of thirteen crores in hand, the child's voice sums up, "India's poetry is still alive. A billion people can't be wrong." The film's logic, in the neat summation that resonates with the archetype of the sacrifice of Isaac, rights the wrongs of right-wing fundamentalisms, religious extremism, petty bourgeoisie differences, traditional mores, and at its core, Hindutva, through the capitalist correction. The father is able to fund his dreams, and since it happens with public support, the film's discursive order suggests that the viral video's popularity has somehow negated or cured the toxic virality of Hindutva. The film's logic signals that the teeming diversity of India can come together and rout the rabid ideologies of Hindutva. Upon the film's conclusion, diversity, in a material sense, translates into capital.

Rather than the hollow symbol of diversity that often remains a functionary of capitalism, it is necessary to remember the present and past work of youth-led resistance. The lifelong focused work of historian, Irfan Habib, speaks of the ways of remembering a figure like Bhagat Singh who

is celebrated for his anti-colonialist work, but not as much for trenchant critiques of “caste system, untouchability, and communalism” (xx), so remembering in the current climate of communalism can also be a form of misremembering. The resistance to Hindutva is coterminous in twentieth century with its birth and inception, as Habib’s introduction to Bhagat Singh’s lesser-studied writings cautions. The contemporary discursive order writes toward a homogeneity, a strain of the unity in a diversity thematic that sublimates difference and marginalizes the multiplicity of voices. Rather than constructing a true radical democracy that includes and makes the nation a safe home for all, as Bhagat Singh dreamt of in the early twentieth century, the film too participates in consensus across difference as made evident in the successful accumulation of capital.⁶ The weird circuits of capital work contiguously; the same pockets that subsidize ‘cute’ videos that sentimentalize a film project can also support videos and faith-work on promoting Hindutva-centered work at home and in the diaspora, promoting ideological work under the western alibi of countering putative anti-India sentiments.⁷ The immense backlash faced by the organizers of the recent conference comes at the heels of decades-long dissent and renders apparent the surfeit of capital that flows in multi-directional ways cementing Hindutva and its project of turning the ‘secular’ nation into a ‘Hindu Rashtra.’

Tanika Sarkar’s keen analogy parallels how the spurious science of race difference forms the building blocks of Nazi ideology asserting here that similarly, the spurious hold on history aids the project of Hindutva.⁸ Hindutva ideology remains firmly locked in place, and post-film release as the director receives four minutes of standing ovation at the London Indian Film Festival (LIFF) in Britain on November 3 (2016), the suffering of minoritized bodies alongside the ones protesting the violence continues unabated on the ground. Youth-led protests and its suppression took center stage from the start of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP from here on) ascendancy to power, and it continues to reign supreme into an uncertain future. As Angana Chatterji reminds us in tracing the fracture of the democratic enterprise always already in its inception in 1947, “At the intersections of history, geographicity, and residual conflict, the dominance of Hindus, fraught relations to Othered-subjects, and a multi-party system shaped India’s ‘conflicted democracy’” (p. 401). The film here, despite its idealistic efforts, falls prey to neoliberal interpellations. In sentencing the child to death in its diegesis, it also effectively silences the possibility of love across religious lines to thrive.

Since the collusion of right-wing Hindu ideologies with the governing party in power in 2014, the oppression of minoritized bodies has been severe. So, has the resistance to it. Yet, Padmakumar’s film fails to nod towards the real. Moumita Sen writes, “... since the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, and the coming to power of the BJP (as part of the National Democratic Alliance), the language and politics of blasphemy have featured prominently in national media debates. Lynching of Muslim men in the name of cow vigilantism and cattle protection (Venu 2017), talks

of rebuilding the contentious Ram Mandir (Press Trust of India 2017) and the witch-hunting of intellectuals as 'anti-nationals' (Bhattacharjee 2017) have been standing topics in the national media from a year or so after the BJP came into power in 2014. The rights and freedoms of minority groups such as Muslims, oppressed castes, indigenous groups and women have been the most threatened by the ideology of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism" (p. 149-150). Sen's summary of the rise of Hindutva, especially in the era of BJP governance, a position echoed by scholars across the disciplines (Thapar, Chatterjee, Prasad, Muralidharan, Jaffrelot, Truschke, Valiani, Balagopal) addresses the straight lines connecting capital and religious nationalism to Hindutva, a point that is elided in the neat feel-good conclusion of Padmakumar's project. It is not really about whether a billion people can be right or wrong; in the complex simulacra of neoliberal capitalism in which the media-consuming subjectivities are interpellated. It is possible to drop a dollar supporting the child's video homage for his father while also supporting in literal, figurative, orthodox and orthopraxic terms the ideology of Hindutva that prospers across the layered domains of contemporary geopolitical landscapes that constitute India. Romila Thapar's (2013) lifelong work on Indian antiquity presents a corpus of work that sheds light on historiography, source-checking, and methodology, scholarly practices that have been devalued in a public sphere dominated by Hindutva that has taken it upon itself to fantasize and mythologize a pure Hindu nation. Thapar points out that ironically the debunked colonial history is the very corpus of textual authority Hindutva cites to concoct its alternate past. In trying to play nice and remain palatable to a wide-viewing audience, the film fails to name the specter of Hindutva that is undoing the radical experiment of a nation meant to be an inclusive and safe home for all.

Destabilizing Prevalent Tropes in Dreaming Toward the New

Padmakumar's film utilizes the extreme close-up, a photographer's eye for the detail of objects, landscape, faces in order to bring the story home. In an attempt to destabilize existing tropes around nation, gender, class, religion, region, and even Bollywood, the film revels in the details that make the story of these three lives – the father, Imran, the mother, Parvathi, their son, Hari Aziz and the little community around them, an attempt to counter ideology through individuality. The struggle and its limitation are the premise that imagines an 'individual' way out of the ideological chokehold of Hindutva; the film refuses to name Hindutva as the toxin undoing the edifice of secular democracy as such, laying out the blame evenly on the rise of fundamentalist fervor from all ends, and fails to call out Hindutva as the culprit. Scholars such as Tanika Sarkar point to the pervasiveness of Hindutva in all projects, "a lethal mix of ethnic pride and ethnic hatred" (p. 169), then not naming it for the violence it perpetuates presents a serious gap in the 'feel good' conclusion of Padmakumar's diegetic order. In celebrating the billion colors of its title, translating the teeming diversity of its people into the 'tiranga' of its tri-color flag, the film signals toward a reli-

gio-nationalism that is holding its people at siege. During the most recent upsurge of youth protests in India, a young poet Armaan Yadav raps in his poem, “Saffron Ablaze,” “My country’s up in flames, and the flames look saffron./ Sentiments ablaze in the haze of violence/ No free speech, just days of silence.”⁹

Hari Aziz explicates the meaning of colors in the opening montage with the camera zooming in on the bloom of a flower or tears on a face, a sequence that culminates in the long shot of an Indian flag fluttering on a landscape dotted by snowclad mountains, a generic trope that is often employed in the decades-long border skirmishes with Pakistan over Kashmir. Instead of the flag standing as symbol of a bellicose patriotism, the child narrator unpacks the colors anew – saffron for renunciation, white for truth, green for vegetation and the wheel for dharma. His classmates break it down in communal terms – saffron is for Hinduism, green for Islam and white for all other religions. In both interpretations, the nation emerges from either a Sufi/mystical or interfaith nexus. By decentering Hindutva, the children ‘get’ it wrong much to the chagrin of the irate teachers who expect a verbatim regurgitation of Hindu nationalism vis-à-vis textbook patriotism, but in doing so, the children hint at the deconstruction of Hindutva that needed to be more pronounced in the film all along.

The parents of Hari Aziz, always already transgressive as a Hindu-Muslim couple also broke ground in coming together across the North-South dynamics that continue to haunt the Indian ecosystem.¹⁰ In bringing to light the petty grievances of either side, the child narrator claims an omniscience that rises above old frictions. The film fails to absorb how the neoliberal order in India absorbs and markets Muslim representations, such as clothing, language, culture, as it does with regional cultures all over India within the hegemonic neoimperialism of Bollywood. In its reigning simulacra, Bollywood manages to disappear histories of struggle with the same speed with which ‘difference’ appears on its screen, the regional variations signified via a tableau of exoticized bodies.

The parents remain outside the gender prescriptions of normative heteropatriarchy; at one point, the father does go out to work a ‘regular’ job for a television show but at this period, the mother stays home to home school and teach the son for whom they cannot afford school tuition fees. At another point when the father shelves his old film and begins a new project on partition, it is the mother who writes the new film script. The couple embodies an equality founded on mutual respect and collaboration in raising their child and nurturing their family sidelining old hierarchies that raise eyebrows all the same.¹¹ As the child of an inter-religious couple, the very thing outlawed by the Love Jihad ideologues, Hari’s very existence is anathema. Hari shares with his father that his classmates call him ‘377’, referencing the Indian penal code handed down from nineteenth century colonial annals that criminalizes homosexuality, pejoratively calling the boy ‘gay’ for his sensitivity, thoughtfulness and articulate speech, marking at once his alterity and the ideological right-wing policing that is part and parcel of everyday discourse. Paola Bacchetta, in charting the genealogies and iterations of homophobia in Hindutva, writes, “The self-identified queer

Muslim (or other Other) stands at the intersection of xenophobic queerphobia and queerphobic xenophobia” (p. 378). As a diasporic child returning to the homeland, and a child who stands as ‘sign’ of his parents’ transgressions, Hari Aziz is othered and subject to what Bacchetta names as xenophobic queerphobia.

Padmakumar’s directorial vision rejects the formulaic gestures of Bollywood; there are no song and dance numbers, no fantasized famous actors, but rather, the cast is an ensemble of lesser-known theater or arthouse actors, models, and the amateur youngster, the director’s son as the central lever of the film’s momentum. The film gives off the glow of an afternoon special, a home-made feel-good film that can be consumed but it carries with the do-it-yourself *chutzpah* and small budget that exudes a decolonial aspiration, an unyoking from the behemoths of Hollywood and Bollywood to generate a kitsch all the more successful due to the unique qualities of its cast of characters and storyline. Where the film falls short is that in presenting a syuzhet packed with mystical wisdom interspersed in the film’s chronology, the frenetic workings of Hindutva in the fabula remains unaddressed.

Utopias and Counterrevolutions: Representations and Misrepresentations

As the father figure in the film moves from a ‘cute’ love story to a love story for the nation, and revives the age-old dream of the anticolonial freedom fighters, some on opposite ends of British India, from the Khudai Khitmatgars (Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan) of the North West frontiers (Bannerjee) to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Zakir Husain, Mohammad Abdur Rahiman, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and other elders of the freedom movement who saw partition as a carving of a body politic that was violent, communal, and colonial. His vision is repeatedly lauded by his friends and well-wishers, and the elderly Indian progressive who sees in his work the eye of a Sufi, Imran Aziz revives the old Indian secular nostalgia for the nation pre-partition.

The seismic events of the moment bear witness to the India that is today a majoritarian state that suppresses dissent, punishes intellectuals, scholars, activists and journalists, and arrests students. The period of unrest marked by the BJP victory in 2014 leads into authoritarian tactics last seen during the Emergency, imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975-76. Student union leaders, at prestigious institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi, Aligarh Muslim University in Uttar Pradesh and dozens of others rise up against the draconian ‘Citizenship Amendment Act’ (CAA), ‘National Register of Citizens’ (NRC), and ‘National Population Register’ (NPR) policies that target Muslims and other minoritized subjects.¹² Student protests that began coterminously with the reign of the new regime now proliferates as recorded evidence on social platforms. They “negotiate with the seemingly impenetrable state apparatus, heavily guarded by the might of capitalist businesses, the security state, and geopolitics”¹³ through poetry, song, parody and comedy. Comedian Munawar Faruqui tells audiences about his child-

hood in Gujarat referencing the 2002 pogrom against Muslims, “I think I survived because the government is not good (a good pause here) in completing its targets.”¹⁴ Poet Varun Grover pens the poem, “Hum Kagaz Nahi Dikhayenge” (We Will Not Show Papers) against the dictum of NRC in which he reclaims the nation as a place of radical love. He recites in his opening stanza, “Tum zehar ki chai ubaaloge,/hum pyar ki shakkar gholke usko/gatt gatt gatt pee jayenge/hum kagaz nahi dikhayenge” (“You will boil poison tea/ We will stir in the sugar of love/We will glug it down/ We will not show papers” - translation mine).¹⁵ In the great tradition of dissidence, the poet protester refuses to cooperate with unjust state edicts, and yet, stands ready to suffer the consequences. Here we are, in fact, looking at the nation through a lover’s eye.

The film absents the activism and visionary groundwork on border-crossing peace projects (Waikar) that exist across the urban, rural and South Asian subcontinent. Anjali Arondekar’s close reading of the megacity of Bombay through a colorful cast of characters helps “unmoor us from settled understandings of how identifications and representations of difference and belonging operate within a city like Bombay” (p. 234). The work of on-the-ground activists is part of the knowledge production that should push into and be refracted as part of the film’s *syuzhet*. Padmakumar’s characters, and the father’s zeal for such a love story for undoing the violence of partition ties into decades-long literary, artistic and filmic imaginaries and contemporary ongoing activist labors that need to somehow be catalogued. What Imran Aziz begins in this film is evident as already having begun and what he births is work that is already in progress all over the South Asian subcontinent. From the minimalist stories of brutal cruelty of the partition recorded by Saadat Hasan Manto in *Mottled Dawn*, to Amrita Pritam’s poem that was recited by all in the decade after independence, “I call upon Varis Shah Today,”¹⁶ writers such as Qurratulain Hyder, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bhisham Sahni, Salman Rushdie, film makers such as Ritwik Ghatak and scholars such as Urvashi Butalia have kept alive a critical imaginary of the genocidal violence of 1947-48. In the most recent reincarnation of earlier activism, the beloved poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s poem resisting the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan, “Hum Dekhenge” (1981) resurfaced as the song of the times for the youth protesting against the oppression of religio-nationalist government of Modi. Faiz’s verses speak of bearing witness and winning against injustice, which the students render into their march song that takes off on campuses all over India, “Inevitably we shall witness/ the day that has been promised/ that has been etched on the pages of eternity/we shall witness/ when mountains of tyranny/shall be blown away like cotton.”¹⁷

The surface mien of the film is activist; the director wishes to transform hearts and minds through a narrative that arises out of a literary and cultural milieu of sentimentality. Rather than being reduced to tropes of maudlin afternoon soaps, the film could have claimed legitimacy since its imaginary arises out of a South Asian subcontinental interfaith milieu that prizes the performance, theatre and artistry of a sentimental ethos as well-represented in its literary and theatrical arts spanning several millennia. The moral caution here directly urges spectators to stop the faith-

based bickering and boundary-making, allow individuals to choose partners across lines of faith and belief, and if they fail to do so, society bears the cost of losses of the worst kind. The key thematic of the film, a son's sacrifice that serendipitously becomes the conduit to realizing the father's dream, resonates with the founding episode in the life of Abraham which the Tanakh calls "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (Genesis 22:1-19). The Qur'an references it in several surahs, as orders that arrive to Ibrahim in a dream that he shares with his son, Ishmael. Argued eloquently with a close reading of the Islamic account as one that is not in concert with patriarchy and asserts the autonomy of the son to respond and devise his own response to God's command, Asma Barlas speaks of the liberatory promise of Islam that gives us a story of dream interpretations and individual autonomy rather than obedience and faith. Barlas writes,

"If it is true, as Derrida (1995: 41) says, that death is 'the one thing in the world that no one else can either give or take: therein reside freedom and responsibility', then it is only by assuming his own death that the son can make his sacrifice a morally purposive and self-determining act rather than one of treachery or betrayal on his father's part. This is partly why I believe the Qur'an gives him a voice in his sacrifice; else, it could have made him like Isaac in the Bible, unaware of his fate" (2011).

Hari Aziz arrives to us through an Islamic imaginary as the voice which brings us the story and the witness to his own death.

The film is replete with nostalgia for a nation that never existed: nostalgia of the father for an India where entire communities stood together to save their Muslim neighbors during communal riots, or a secular India that made room for all faiths. Right alongside the nostalgia for the loss of a Nehruvian secular ideal is also the greater nostalgia that has funded the rise of Hindutva, the nostalgia for a lost and glorious past of oneness where the entire nation was putatively one *rashtra*, a pure Hindu nation of endless unity and *advaita*, a nostalgia for a fictional *pitrubhoomi* (fatherland). Perhaps the film ultimately signifies that in narratives where a son sacrifices for the father's cause, loss is the ultimate arbiter of reality. In line with the ideologies of Hindutva that simultaneously valorize and disappear women as quiet corollaries to the patriarch, the film refuses to unsettle hegemonic notions of the heteropatriarchal socio-religious family and nation. The film coexists rather than dislodges the Hinducentric mythogeography replete with maps, sites, and markers for belonging, legitimacy, and authority.

The toxicity of nostalgia, as measured in the rise of Hindutva as an ideology grounded in an illusion of an antiquity founded on a monolithic religious identity that never existed, can be repurposed by grounding it in historical, materialist, scholarly labors on the ground. The question looms large: can a child's direct message lift a collective out of extreme appropriations mired in ideologies of religious majoritarianism? The film seeks to redress the wrongs of Babri, Godhri, Dadri and more, but it remains uneven, hanging in abeyance as the narrative moves forward with resolution

toward the clarity offered by a viral video that is shared and funded by millions. After the film's release, the degradation visited upon the dispossessed and marginalized continue unabated as executive decisions such as CAA, detention centers, and state-sponsored killings of journalists and other outspoken intellectuals continue. The film's key female characters are locked in place as inspirational foil for the male figures - the young Sophia who immediately proceeds to fall in love with the boy, Hari as the wife; Parvathi performs the part of loyal companion to Imran Aziz, the father. Neither step out of character or trouble gender roles, existing as inspirations but not actors, in their own rights. Even as female voice rises in decibel, the feminist point of view remains muted.

The film, idealistic in its overture and dedication to changing minds, remains short of making room for the possibilities emerging from youth politics of grassroots work. Since 2014, the resistance against the oppressive policies of BJP government has been emblemized by youth across struggles waged across the subcontinent – disenfranchised migrants in the Northeast, military crackdown and internet crackdown in Kashmir, journalists, intellectuals, farmers from Punjab, to mention some of the many movements that boiled over in early 2020. The student movement,¹⁸ often referred to as 'Tukde Tukde' (pieces) symbolizes the spectral rising of masses against the ubiquitous omnipresent fist of the state. In a recent parody of Arijit Singh's Bollywood song, "Pachtaoge," a young protester sings, "*Tum students se jo takraoge/bada pachtaoge/Laathiyon se haunsla tum todd na sake/tear gas se iraada modd na sake/kalam se laathi tum jab laddwaoge/bada pachtaoge, bada pachtaoge*" (When you confront students/you will regret, you will regret it a lot/you were not able to break our spirit with your sticks/ you could not deter us with tear gas/ when you set out to make us fight your sticks with our pens/ you will regret it).¹⁹ The film refuses to name the zeitgeist of the moment into which it writes itself. In its desire to right historical wrongs, the film fails to call out the ideology of Hindutva that has accorded itself the place of moral and vigilante police of vulnerable lives. The film speaks of extremisms, pointing to fault everywhere, rather than calling out the ideology that is working in tandem with the political system to oust dissent and resistance in India today. Tethered on a capitalist individualist vision of reform, Padmakumar's film is not revolutionary. The film falls victim to the tired binary that imagines a false unity in a distant past that could have saved us all. Meanwhile, the dead keep dying and the living keep failing at moving forward into light.

In conclusion, in the idealistic longings and foreclosures presented by Padmakumar's cinema, the film seeks a revolution it fails to imagine. The director, in hoping to influence his spectators away from dogmatic position that wall Hindus from Muslims and create further divisions in a nation that he hopes retains the radical inclusion imagined at inception, augurs the centuries-long spirit of Sufism. Those were the poets and intellectuals who refused to abide by the religious doctrines of their times and radically loved producing a transgressive and syncretic corpus of poetry that stands the test of time and bears witness against the rising fundamentalisms of Hindutva and orthodox strains of Islam. I quote from one of the great poets of that tradition, Maulana whose

verses follow. As a Haji and devout Muslim who also was a complex being, a Sufi who praised the vision of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh, he repeatedly traveled to Mathura to celebrate Janamashtami, and wrote poems in Bhasha in the Bhakti vein celebrating God Krishna. His mysticism that emerges from Islam but is at home in Hindu piety points the way to a syncretism that is lost to our times. Prof. C. M. Naim's translations remind us of this lost discursive space generated by the great Maulana Hasrat, 1878-1951.

añkhoñ meñ nür-i-jalva-i-be-kaif-o kam hai khās/ jab se nazarpe unki nigāh-karam hai khās/ kuch ham ko bhi'atō hoki ai hazrat-i-kirishn/ iqlim-i-'ishq dp ke zer-i-qadam hai khās/ Hasrat kl bhi qubūl ho mathurā men hāzīrī/ sunte haiñ ashīqoñ pe tumhā rā karam hai khās

When he cast at me a special, benevolent glance, / My eye lit up with a boundless, unending vision. / Revered Krishna, bestow something on me too, / For under your feet lies the entire realm of love. / May you accept Hasrat's attendance at Mathura - / I hear you are especially kind to all lovers (p. 39).

In conjuring the great Maulana here and his syncretic poems written in the school of Surdas, Tulsidas and Kabir, and the many great Sufis like Shah Latif, Bulleh Shah, Lallan Faqir in whose genealogy he arrives, my article connects the earlier syncretic Sufi order to the film's discursivity, the lover looking upon the nation as a beloved. The Sufi and bhakti tradition of medieval South Asian mysticism involved iconoclasts who preached questioning prevailing ideas of piety, brought about spaces of religious syncretism, and spoke often of reaching the divine from within the self. As the Sufi looks upon God, the film looks at the nation through a lover's eye. Like the mystic, this eye is at once adoring, irreverent and defiant of existing practices. Padmakumar's film centers a syncretic 'looking', an oppositional gaze of the curious and questioning child, a product of transgressive love. In pushing against the prevailing hegemonies of existing patriarchies, religious ideologies and film industrial complexes such as Bollywood and Hollywood, the gaze here reconstitutes that of the besotted devotee at Krishna's feet, a deity who figures large in tales of love, and who makes room for licit and/or illicit love. But in making room for loving intensely, fearlessly, and transgressively, the film fails to nod at the histories of contemporary resistance, popular uprisings and youth-led 'looking' to point at the revolutions in making. The struggle of Imran Aziz is not a solo performance, but rather a concert, a litany and a cacophony. In refusing to point out the crimes of Hindutva and the multiplicity rising against it, the film fails to legitimize the 'looking' that rights the gaze of rightwing ideologies and at all costs, raises the fundamental right to love, pray, and live that the merging of a billion colors can begin to promise.

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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Hindutva, the right-wing Hindu ideology permeating and framing the current political order, disseminates its own toxic untruths in vocabulary that is circulated through social media and other easy forms of online dissemination. "...Love Jihad" and "Land Jihad," the manifesto stated, using the Hindu Right's catchphrases for the supposed menace posed by Muslim men marrying Hindu women and by Muslims occupying land – acts intended, according to the Hindu Right, to engineer a demographic shift" (For more, read Deb, 2021).
- 3 Mujib Mashal's (2022) latest reportage from Haridwar shares the call to "kill two million of them (Muslims)" from the Hindu holy city of Haridwar by one of the Gurus of a current strain of Hindutva, Yati Narasinghanand.
- 4 Reports on the anti-dissent policies of the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi includes the arrest of student union leaders at JNU, Kanhaiya Kumar and Umar Khalid, after they led student protests on the third anniversary of the hanging on Muhammad Afzal Guru. Accused of anti-nationalism and sedition, a crime left in place by the British colonial machinery, set in place to arrest the nationalists of the day, it is ironic that the same laws are now used to target youth and critics of the government under work considered anti-nationalist. For more, read Nikhil Kumar 2016.
- 5 Youth fighting against violence faced by Dalit groups formed the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association in 2014. Young women fighting conservative gender policing formed the Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage) movement in 2015. JNU student union leaders and youth across dozens of universities and colleges in India were targeted for protesting in solidarity with minoritized subjects such as Muslim, Dalit, and other vulnerable people. Kausalya Shankar, a young woman who witnessed her own husband being hacked to death as punishment for having married above his caste by his wife's family in an honor killing on Mar. 12, 2016, survives and continues to fight anti-caste violence and discrimination.
- 6 Suvir Kaul's theoretical interventions are of use in unpacking the point here. Kaul writes, "... in the subcontinent, national identities are not affirmed by erasing non-national affinities, but often by invoking them. The domestic politics that results allows less and less space for the articulation of minority voices or of divergent cultural and social practices: authoritarian and military priorities become acceptable political currency, in times of war and in times of peace" (p. 8).

- 7 Anti-India sentiments become code words for Hinduphobia, a sublimation that Audrey Truschke warns us to be aware of, and thus, the work of this article along with others is urgently required. In her article on “Hindutva’s Dangerous Rewriting of History,” she writes, “As Hindutva ideology exerts increasing influence within both popular and academic spheres, it becomes more pressing for academics to describe, document, and analyze harmful Hindutva approaches to remolding Indian history and distinguish these political uses of the past from academic approaches to history.”
- 8 Sarkar p. 152.
- 9 Armaan Yadav, “Saffron Ablaze,” poetry of protest from the Delhi streets, YouTube, Dec. 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-tWVHHBZ0Y>.
- 10 The mother’s family, from the South, worry about the tension they see in their grandson, signs of a child who is lost and at sea betwixt the faiths, with the ‘paati’, his maternal grandma, changing the child out of his green kurta because it is too Muslim in order to appease her own anxieties of where the child will belong, and which faith will claim him. The father’s Muslim family, North Indian, speak about Hari’s complexion as too dark, signifying he is looking ‘southern’ and not authentic enough as part of their lights-skinned lineage.
- 11 The father’s manhood is questioned by men in power who deem him ‘unmanly’ for being unable to look after his family or afford his son’s schooling. His mother is questioned around her gender performance when she walks out in cutoff shorts and a sleeveless blouse by Salimbhai who has assigned himself the role of modesty police for women in the building.
- 12 “The BJP’s embrace of the Hindu majority at the expense of minorities has seeped into government institutions, undermining equal protection of the law without discrimination,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government has not only failed to protect Muslims and other minorities from attacks but is providing political patronage and cover for bigotry.”
- 13 Borrowing from the CFP for this special joint issue focused on youth activisms.
- 14 For more, view Munawar Faruqui comedy.
- 15 For more, view Varun Grover’s poetry performance.
- 16 For more, read Amrita Pritam, poem, <https://panjpedia.org/en/wiki/english-ajj-aakhan-waris-shah-nu>.
- 17 For more, view “Protest Song” inspired by Faiz, sung by students first at IIT Kanpur, Dec. 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIWbO-6I7r4>
- 18 For more, read Neel Kamal’s report in *The Times of India*.
- 19 For more, view Poojan Sahil, Jan. 2, 2020, “Pachtaoge” (translation mine), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ze2UBSDJfM>.