

*An Ambiguous Journey  
to the City*

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The Village and  
Other Odd Ruins of the  
Self in the Indian Imagination

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## Preface

This book is an expanded version of the first series of Jerusalem Lectures in Indian Civilization, given at Jerusalem in December 1997 under the title of 'Imaginary Journeys'. It tells the story of India's ambivalent affair with the modern city through the myth of the journey between the village and the city and the changes that myth has undergone. The lectures were at the initiative of the Hebrew University and they remain associated in my memory with the fascinating intellectual exchanges I had with psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, philosophers, social and political theorists, anthropologists and, above all, David Shulman, the moving spirit behind the series. This book reflects that cultural context in its concern with uprooting, mega-deaths and, particularly, the fear of the self that has turned the urban-industrial vision into a patented cure for every ontological insecurity and the last word in human civilization—not merely in Europe in the 1930s and India in the 1940s, but also in Israel and India in the 1990s.

I write these words a few months after India and Pakistan have exploded a series of nuclear devices. In India at least, the new generation of a well-educated, urbane élite has been bristling for years at the limits imposed by the legacy of the country's freedom movement on hard-eyed political 'realism'. In the fiftieth year of the execution of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi by an assassin wedded to such realism, this élite has now finally shed the cultural and ethical encumbrances associated with his name. In place of these

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# *The Journey to the Past as a Journey into the Self*

The Remembered Village and  
the Poisoned City

'It is not binding on us to undertake the journey'

Manohar Wakode

**T**he nineteenth century in Europe was an age of arrogance. The values of the Enlightenment had seeped into popular consciousness and qualities earlier associated with the divine had come to be associated with secular human intervention in nature, culture and society—thanks to dramatic growth in the capacity to intervene. Complete knowledge, omnipresence and total power now seemed within human grasp. The Victorian social style, with its distinctive touch of interpersonal withdrawal and phlegmatic, if slightly diffident, Puritanism was built on understatement and innuendo. It became a good cover for the arrogance, though it never fully hid it.<sup>1</sup>

With arrogance came ornate psychological defences that justified new forms of dominance; these forms began to look like

<sup>1</sup> I am, course, following Carl Jung, generalizing the idea of the Victorian era from a historical phase in Britain to a cultural-psychological state in Europe. C.G. Jung, 'Sigmund Freud in His Historical Setting', in Frank Cioffi (ed.), *Freud: Modern Judgement* (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 49–56; see esp. pp. 49–50.

natural by-products of Europe's new self-confidence. Thus, European imperialism, already the main political-economic means of intervention in the world, became less obsessed with outright plunder and the need to Christianize the savage world; it began to develop subtler, more secular, social-evolutionary theories to bolster its claim to a civilizing mission. The occupation of distant lands and dominance over strangers now imposed more onerous responsibilities on the conquerors. They had to see themselves as part of an inevitable, historical movement towards a future defined by European progressive thinkers. These thinkers were eager to preside over the fate of millions in the non-western world by altering diverse ideas of a desirable society. To survive, these ideas had to now fit standardized European visions of a good society, whether conformist or dissenting.<sup>2</sup>

History, as a discipline and form of consciousness, came handy in this exercise. It flattened the pasts of all societies, so that they began to look like so many edited versions of European paganism and/or feudalism. The triumph of the idea of history in the southern world—over other forms of construction or invocation of the past—was ultimately a European triumph. This conquest was not merely over the selves of other societies, but often over Europe's own earlier selves that had stealthily survived into the present, either in Europe or in analogous or parallel forms within other cultures. Europe truly became Europe as we know it today only after it foregrounded the experiences of colonialism and a crypto-Hegelian idea of history within its self-definition. It also then ensured that these became parts of the self-definitions of all defeated civilizations.

These changes led to others. Within the colonial worldview, the victory of history and the theory of progress signalled human

<sup>2</sup> For a recent analysis from a different point of view, see David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

victory over time and space. When you conquered and dominated distant lands and shaped their futures, you transcended your own temporal and spatial limits. You not only crossed borders outside, you crossed them within.<sup>3</sup> Strange spaces, in the form of distant lands, were converted into familiar time (that is, into earlier historical phases of Europe); and other people's unruly visions of the future were tamed to conform to Europe's own domesticated visions. The sun that faithfully never set over the British Empire also marked the triumph of human will over the limitations imposed by the predictability of everyday life in Britain itself. This was another form of victory over elements of Europe's discarded selves, another form of self-construction and, above all, another form of death-denial that supplanted the existing non-secular modes of ensuring symbolic immortality.

Such radical cultural changes required new symbols around which the new myths of the modern West could accumulate. The nineteenth century therefore saw the emergence and institutional consolidation of a number of major symbols of conquest over space and time. Two of these quickly captured the popular imagination: the museum and the railways. In the museum one journeyed through time to view the unfolding phases of history and culture, usually through the eyes of one's society, nation or state. In the railway train one experienced a journey that connected the near and the distant, the known and the safely transient unknown, the neighbour and the stranger. The train redefined the concepts of a border and a frontier; it captured long-term diachronic changes in a series of snapshot-like changes in landscape and transient human encounters. Even the European fine arts began to show the influence of this new perspective on nature.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Howard Stein (ed.), *Developmental Time, Cultural Space: Studies in Psycho-geography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1987), p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Pinney notes that in the practice and theory of Western travel, 'as the world entered the modern period, travel became increasingly

At first sight, the museum symbolized the conquest of time and the railway that of space. However, both spilt over their representational boundaries. The museum grew to symbolize not merely mastery over past times and past cultures at home, but also over the diverse pasts and cultures of distant lands. It also became the record of a journey. It rearranged all cultures in a hierarchical, evolutionary order. As you walked through a museum, you paradoxically walked towards your own culture; only Others had to walk away from theirs. The train came to symbolize not merely geographical mobility, but integration and progress, reaching out from the centre to the borders of a society. Both allowed one to travel through vast expanses of time and space, but always left open the option of a quick, safe return.

Between them, the train and the museum defined an era. They were not the greatest technical innovations of their times, but they summed up the psychological profile and the core concerns of the age. Railways and museums captured, for popular imagination in the Victorian age, something of the dominant spirit of global awareness.

Both railways and museums indexed the domestication of time. They were the technological counterparts of epistemic changes in the means of acquiring and legitimating social knowledge in the Victorian world. The prototypical discipline of knowledge in this era was history (the way that in this century it has been economics and may, in the coming century, be informatics). History tames time in a manner that myths, legends and epics do not. In a massified society, it gives certitudes about the past, and, thus, a secular sense of continuity previously ensured only by faith. Once the historical vision entrenches itself as dominant, 'historical truths'

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systematized and rule-bound.' Christopher Pinney, 'Future Travel: Anthropology and Cultural Distance in an Age of Virtual Reality; or, A Past Seen From a Possible Future.' *Visual Anthropology Review*, Spring 1992, 8(1), pp. 38–55.

acquire an exalted, sacred status; exploitation and violence, for instance, begin to be institutionalized in the name of history rather than faith.

Once introduced on a large scale, the railways did not merely symbolize the conquest of space, as we tend to think. Symbolically, that conquest had been achieved much earlier, and perhaps better, by the great circumnavigators of the globe. The British and French empires had already been established and they consolidated that symbolic achievement before the railways came to criss-cross the world. The railways altered the way the Victorians thought. When children in the last century spoke of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Orient Express, the Frontier Mail or the Great Indian Peninsular Railway, they did not think so much of destinations as of the experience of travel. Even the American wagon trains represented a life style more than territoriality. They invoked the imagery of the railway compartment as a moving sanctuary. From within the confines of what Wolfgang Sachs calls a 'republic on wheels', the carriers of civilization were offered a stylized view of the shifting landscape, including the dangerous, exotic natives, 'half-savage half-child', and strange flora and fauna passing safely by at a distance. They marked the transition from the traveller as a tired, thirsty, and often-unexpected guest, pilgrim or explorer to the traveller as a spectator and a consumer. The traveller now travelled not because he felt obliged to open up an unknown world to civilization and progress, but because he had the time and the money to vicariously participate in that kind of effort.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Railways opened up, therefore—to borrow Wolfgang Sachs' expression—the possibility of consuming landscapes. In such consumption, 'one need not drink the landscape [or the exotic cultures] in great draughts, but here and there as well with the little sips of an epicure abiding in leisure.' *Der Motor-Tourist*, 1929 (9), p. 8; cited in Wolfgang Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile: Looking Back into the History of Our Desires* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), p. 153.

The museum was important because, having travelled to distant lands and encountered the strange and the exotic, you felt duty-bound to bring back artefacts that made it possible to transfer and bequeath memories of the journey to impersonal institutions and unknown fellow citizens. These memories had to be shared not so much with one's grandchildren as with those whom one's nation-state defined as compatriots. Museums sorted out these memories. They made the strange esoteric, but not confounding. They made even the past of strangers accessible, transparent and packaged. That past could be safely brought back to civilization for archiving and decent cataloguing. Ahistorical primitives could now make sense to civilization. Their oddities and incomprehensibilities, even their peculiar non-linear concepts of their own past, were ironed out by the scientific stare of the curator. Indeed your geographical journey was thus made more memorable as part of a larger cultural-historical odyssey.

There is another way of summing up the cultural-psychological impact of the metaphors of museums and trains. The former shaped the public imagination of history. History became for the moderns an authoritative museum, passing final judgements, and a substitute for medieval cathedrals. The psychological and mythic underside of history now became a certain sense of order and a theme of return. The train, on the other hand, shaped the Promethean imagery of a hard-earned victory of technology over the overwhelming odds posed by nature and human nature.



If space and time were both seemingly mastered by the end of the nineteenth century—or, if you like, the technology required for such mastery was felt to have been worked out—what now was left for the adventurous? What now remained for those fired by the

new self-confidence of Victorian science, for those itching to embark on spatial and temporal journeys pioneered by seers, mystics and artists on the one hand and by circumnavigators of the world on the other? The answer lies in the intellectual style of two of the greatest critical minds of Victorian times. Freud's time-travel was a journey to the past that allowed one to re-enter the present with the trophy of a conquered savage or primitive self. Marx's psychogeography was a journey to the savage world that allowed one to return with the trophy of conquered futures that promised to remain forever obedient to European social-evolutionist utopias. If Freud's double was the colonial anthropologist, Marx's was the colonial police. By stretching one's imagination, crime fiction can be seen as the popular culture that epitomizes Freud's moral vision (where the individual, either as a gifted criminal or as master sleuth, reigns supreme, and where the removal or correction of the faulty individual becomes the route to the reinstatement of a healthy society or community). Likewise, the popular idea of science fiction seems to sum up the Marxist vision of a predetermined future waiting to be scientifically identified and actualized. In that future, the ultimate hero is not just any human protagonist but the impersonal forces of technology and history, both liberated from 'misuse' by the ungodly.

It is with these vicissitudes of the metaphor of journey that I shall be concerned here. I shall treat the vicissitudes not as an experience that is uniquely Indian, even when they have their moorings in tradition, but as an artefact of Europe's age of arrogance in the tropics and as a register of the changing mythography of South Asian creativity during the last hundred years. It will be my argument that, during the period, certain core concerns and anxieties of Indian civilization have come to be reflected in the journey from the village to the city, and from the city to the village. Travel through space and time, the known and the unknown and, ultimately, the self and the not-self, get subsumed under these two

humble forms of journey. As we shall see below, even the great Partition, violence in north India, which killed millions during 1946–8, has become intertwined with the idea of the journey between the village and the city.

## I

THE POSSIBILITIES OF AN  
EPIC JOURNEY

The journey as a trope for growth, learning, the unfolding of personal or collective experience, and for life itself, has been a favourite of philosophers, scholars and mystics in South Asia for centuries. There have even been celebrated journeys into madness and out of it, journeys in self-exploration and self-realization, even journeys into another world—into heaven, hell and the nether world.<sup>6</sup> Only, in South Asia, heaven and hell, sanity and insanity, the self and the other, more often than not spill into each other. Journeys to the strange or the unknown, therefore, usually end up as private voyages to other, less accessible parts of the self. Arjuna in the epic Mahabharata visits the heavens, Bhima enters the nether world, Nachiketa in the Kathopanishad visits hell, and all of them profit from their experiences. Heavens and hells, gods and demons, animals and trees are not outside the human social world or alien intrusions into that world. You can go to heaven and come back, host or fight a god or demon with impunity, speak to a tree or birds in the course of a single day, and resume your normal social life the next morning.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>With the decline of the epic in the contemporary West, the metaphor has been picked up and reworked by popular culture. The most memorable uses of the idea of journey have been made not by the mystics or philosophers in the West, but by the likes of Charles Chaplin, the Hollywood Westerns, and futuristic movies like the *Star Wars* series.

<sup>7</sup>For a feel of the texture of divinity within which such oscillations between the sacred and the profane take place, see Ashis Nandy, 'A Report on the Present

Such journeys are probably more difficult in recent centuries. The anthropologist Jit Singh Uberoi claims that, even in pre-colonial times, there already was a qualitative difference between the ideas of journey in Guru Nanak and Guru Govind Singh. A journey to the latter meant saddling horses and packing food; to the former, a journey was a matter of closing one's eyes. True, even Guru Govind Singh's terrestrial journey can be remembered in many ways, but the subjective and the objective in such retellings have already become less fluid. They flow into each other less easily.

In both incarnations, the use of the metaphor of journey to theorize about growth, life, or radical long-cycle changes entails some cognitive manoeuvres. First, the remembrance of life as a journey is heavily dependent on the possible or available meanings of life. At the end of the life, the journey through life might look like a long, futile chase or a self-fulfilling struggle to actualize specific values. Either way, life, thus recaptured, can be an intervention in the present. Likewise, a journey through madness may mean one thing to a mystic or an artist and another to a teenage student who shows dissociative reactions to the problems of living. A journey in South Asia need not have a history, in the sense in which we look at history, but it can constitute part of psychoanalyst's case history, which grants human subjectivity a special status. Everything said, while for Victorian England a journey might have been primarily the frame through which others could be seen,<sup>8</sup> for South Asians it has been mainly the frame through which the self can be confronted.

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State of Health of the Gods and Goddesses in South Asia', Lecture at the *samskriti shivira* organized by Ninasam, Heggodu, Karnataka, 8–15 October 1995; and published as 'Facing Extermination', in *Manushi*, March–April 1997 (99), pp. 5–19.

<sup>8</sup>Pinney, 'Future Travel', p. 47.

Second, all journeys in the imagination can be summarized or collapsed into moments of imagination. Ernest Becker has calculated the number of chickens, sheep and cows an average human being consumes in an average lifetime. Given that he is talking of living beings, the figures look formidable, even forbidding, more so because he is not preaching vegetarianism, but trying to capture the principle of a journey by flattering it into a moment of time.

If the diachronic can be compressed into the synchronic in the imagination, the reverse should also be possible. Many momentary experiences can be re-imagined as parts of a longer journey. As we shall see later, the violence during the creation of India and Pakistan in 1946–8 has now become, in the South Asian imagination, part of a journey towards a modern nation-state. The idea of such a journey can become an effort to explain away instances of enormous, unnecessary human suffering as necessary sacrifices for a larger cause.

The journey as a pregnant metaphor is most conspicuous in South Asia in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, two epics organized around the idea of exile. The exiles in these epics are also great voyages. These voyages redefine both the life that has gone on before and the life that might be lived after the journey has been completed. Travel, the Victorians used to say, broadened the mind, but it can also be a play with the past and the future of the self.

Of the two epics, the Ramayana is more loved, but the Mahabharata is the one that underpins the Indian consciousness. It serves as a mythography of the Indian self and, at the same time, as a record of the disowned selves within the culture—the not-selves and anti-selves that contribute to the final definition of the

self.<sup>9</sup> Some of the epic's climactic moments are informed by the metaphor of the journey and it ends with one, the *mahaprasthan*, which becomes the final moral comment on the main protagonists, their lives and deeds. It is not easy to use the metaphor in India without drifting into the frame of some version of the Mahabharata.

I shall be concerned here with one particular, apparently territorial, journey—the one that uses the opposition between the village and the city, especially the changing myth of the city, as its nodal point. In the twentieth century Indians—for that matter, all South Asians—have been obsessed with the mythic journey between the village and the city and have used it to organize important aspects of their public consciousness. The journey is mainly from the village to the city, though it sometimes ends with a tragic attempt to return from the city to the village. South Asians have known this journey for centuries. Pilgrimages were always from the mundane village to the city of god and then back to the village. People knew such journeys were hazardous, but they undertook them all the same. The ones who completed the pilgrimage and returned home had a special status in the community. But so had those who fell on the way. A pilgrimage was a play with the boundaries of the self. Even the inability to complete the journey had heroic dimensions.

This journey to the city acquired a different meaning once, in the early nineteenth century, a new kind of city emerged in the region. The new city, usually a presidency town, was a centre of the colonial political economy; it reduced the importance of cities like Varanasi or Ajmer, which were mainly places of pilgrimage, and of cities like Cochin or Calicut, which were centres of trade and offered their own versions of cosmopolitanism. The new city

<sup>9</sup> At least one psychoanalyst has explored the possibility of using the Mahabharata as a theoretical frame for psychoanalytic therapy. Bijoyketu Bose, *Ja Ache Bharate* (Calcutta: Bijoyketu Bose, 1989).

enlarged the scope for a radical and legitimate rejection of the village as that part of one's self which had out-lived its utility. The journey to the city now meant an acceptance of the new city of the mind, which was to be founded on the ruins of an earlier self.



What made the colonial metropolis the pivotal fantasy and counterpoint to the village? The answer lies not in the 'truth' of the city—its demography, social institutions, civic amenities and job opportunities—but in its 'virtual reality' and mythic status. The structural explanations floating around the academic world for decades are only the necessary but insufficient clues to the political psychology of the city. Obviously, the anonymity and atomization in a city are doubly seductive in a society scarred by socio-economic schisms and cultural hierarchies. A Dalit, landless, agricultural worker or a rural artisan seeking escape from the daily grind and violence of a caste society has reasons to value the impersonal melting pot of a metropolitan city. He is ever willing to defy the pastoralist's or the environmentalist's negative vision of the city. Because to lose oneself in the city is to widen one's freedom in a way not possible by migrating to another village, however distant from home. The colonial city made a place for itself in the Indian's fantasy life by promising that freedom in place of caste-specific vocations, ascribed status, and the crosscutting obligations of the *jajmani* system.

Less accessible to public awareness is the way many Indians have come to own up the colonial city as the self, the village as the other. The addictive charm of cities like Calcutta and Bombay lies in this play of the self. The village-as-the-other allows itself to be studied, measured, corrected, engineered. For even at its best, the village is uncivil by virtue of being closer to nature and the natural. At its worst, the village is a symbol of India's fearsome diversity and unknowability. Colonial ethnography in Asia and Africa has turned

the village into a summation of the feared, untamed fragments of one's self, scattered carelessly across a strange landscape.

This re-imagined village cannot take care of itself; it is the sub-altern that cannot speak. All initiatives in the village, including remedies for social discrimination and institutionalized violence, must originate in the city. They can only be executed in the village. This presumption informs not merely the standard models of development, but even the revolutionary rhetoric concocted for the sake of the oppressed—by superbly read, well-motivated, urbane radicals, selflessly trying to occupy the moral high ground on behalf of the larger forces of history. The colonial city is now us, the non-village. It is now the new self, identified with history, progress, becoming.

As the flip side of the same story, the village of the imagination has become a serene, pastoral paradise. It has become the depository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, and of the harmony of nature, intact community life and environmental sagacity—perhaps even a statement of Gandhian austerity, limits to want, and anti-consumerism. The village, too, is no longer a village in itself; it is a counterpoint to the city. India lives in its villages—social reformers and political activists love to say, usually as a glib, ideological ploy. That statement has acquired a deeper meaning today. The village symbolizes control over self; the city reeks of self-indulgence and the absence of self-restraint. Beyond the temptations and glitter of the city lies the utopia of an idyllic, integrated, defragmented self, not tyrannized by the demands of atomized individualism. It is the utopia of the village as a self, controlling the self-that-is-the-city. The fear of the absence of self-restraint is actually the suspicion that one's control over one's self might have already partly collapsed.

The two co-ordinates—the infantilized village and the village as a geriatric responsibility—are not orthogonal, either in everyday life or in social theory. The former is the axis of the permissible way of looking at the world. The latter is the permissible way of dissenting, a luxury that those who can retreat from it into the

'realistic' world of a sweltering urban hothouse can sometimes afford.

As this image of the village encroaches upon larger areas of public awareness, it also begins to control the language of public life. Even those who do not live with such polarized images of the village and the city begin to use them as co-ordinates of their political idiom. Many public figures know that without invoking the first image of the infantilized village, waiting to pass its developmental milestones, they cannot hope to make sense even in their rural constituencies, where three-fourth of all Indians still live. But they also know that to participate now in national politics and pass the tacit censorship of the modern media, they have to make sense to the remaining one-fourth too. Hence, sometimes the strange spectacle of rural politicians in a predominantly rural society speaking of rural India as *if* they were from the cities. There is no escape from travelling to the village from the city any more. Arguably, this is the most important cultural change that has taken place in the region in recent decades.



Hence also the great contradictions associated with the imagination of the city in South Asia. Gandhi's savage critique of the railways as an agent of colonialism and his simultaneous use of railway journeys as a form of creative politics is only one such contradiction that centres around the idea of the journey. Likewise, the Naxalites, as committed Maoists, began with a theory of surrounding and defeating the city as the symbol of impersonal, institutionalized exploitation and immorality, but quickly converted their movement into a journey of self-discovery from the city to the village. The mix of idealism, innocence and sadomasochism in the movement made the rediscovery of the village and the global commons only

a cover for the anguish of the urban, middle-class, upper-caste youth facing dispossession, meaninglessness and inner exile. Even the Dalits have increasingly brought to the city what is primarily a movement to restore justice and equity in the village.<sup>10</sup> Such contradictions are the very stuff of myths and they have helped make the myth of the journey to and from the city an organizing principle of the contemporary culture of Indian politics.

## II

### THE DECLINE IN THE IMAGINATION OF THE VILLAGE

The obverse of the entry of the city as the locus of Indian consciousness is an erosion of the ability to imagine the village. By this I mean creative imagining—of the kind that invokes the fantasy of the 'archetypal', 'remembered' but nevertheless living Indian village—in those staying in villages and in others who have little or no connection with rural India. The erosion is not total; there *are* individuals whose works disprove the thesis of a decline. But, as a collectivity, creative Indians now have poorer access to the village of the imagination and the bonding that it once forged between individual creativity and its wider reception. The rest of this section spells out this proposition.

<sup>10</sup> Daya Pawar puts it movingly from the point of view of the Dalit youth when he speaks of Bombay in his autobiography: 'They say that Krishna tore Jarasandha in two pieces and threw them in opposite directions. In the same way in this city we are torn in two opposite directions. As I seek a place to merely rest my heart at the end of a hard day, all I have to come back to is a wretched hell that this city can offer.' Quoted in Vidyut Bhagwat, 'Bombay in Dalit Literature', Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (eds), *Bombay: Mosaic of Culture* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 113–25; see p. 114. Bhagwat goes on to add, 'For the Dalit in the city, the new situation takes a tragic form. His flight from the culture of feudalism and face-to-face repression in the village offers him both the reality as well as the illusion of becoming a member of a free universe. But he soon realises that once again he remains an unnoticed, expendable stone at the base of the edifice of modernity. . . .', p. 115.

I begin with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1861–1948), who is for many the ultimate exponent of the cultural principles enshrined in the Indian village. Gandhi took India's freedom movement to the village. He thought of the village as the basic unit of Indian civilization; and he envisioned the future of India around that of the village. Today, all major criticisms of village life as an anachronism, and the village as a change-resisting depot of popular superstitions, have as their locus a fear of Gandhi's vision of the future of India. It is the fear of a future that might be shaped in an open society by those whose minds we can no longer read.

Yet few know that the first time Gandhi came into direct, real-life contact with villages was when he reworked his political framework in his middle years. He was born in an urban family at Porbandar, a western Indian city, and was the son of a *dewan* or chief minister of a small princely state. He had his education in a city, at the ultra-élite Rajkumar College of Rajkot, and qualified for the Bar at London. He then worked in South Africa, where also he lived in cities, mainly at Durban. On his return to India he began to operate from the cities. It was only on the advice of his proclaimed guru Gopalkrishna Gokhale, the well-known public figure and freedom fighter, that Gandhi began to seriously explore rural India. That was in his late forties. The impact of the experience on him was deep, as though philosophically he had been preparing himself for it for years. After a while, it began to look as if he came from a village, as though he had lived in and fought for villages all his life.

How did a finished product of the city begin to speak and even look like a villager? Was there latent in Gandhi a retrievable imagination of the village which he could revive when he physically encountered the village? The answer may well be that the village was never dead within him. Its survival within him was ensured through the rituals, folklore, epics, legends and myths to which he was exposed through the traditions of his family, peer-group,

caste, sect and language. That imagination was waiting to be reclaimed. When Gandhi reclaimed the village within him, he could easily slip into the role of a larger-than-life Indian village headman. He had been only apparently an outsider.<sup>11</sup>



If Gandhi's village is Indian public life's first village, Satyajit Ray's village is the cinema's first Indian village. Ray's debut film, *Pather Panchali*, many claim, is the greatest film ever made on village India. More than one critic has claimed that, for the world of cinema today, the Indian village is Ray's village.

Surprisingly, Ray's first genuine encounter with a village took place when he started shooting *Pather Panchali*: 'Until then I had no direct experience of what one meant when using the expression village life . . . we slowly developed an idea of the life described in the novel . . . Consequently, I had to depend on the descriptions in the original novel. The book, however, was an encyclopaedia of village life. However, I also knew that I could not depend only on it; that there were many things that I would have to discover myself.'<sup>12</sup>

Ray was born in a distinguished family settled in Calcutta for at least three generations. The family *did* have an estate in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) but, by the time he grew up, they had no access to that land. One gets a flavour of his family environment from some of its contributions to Bengal's social and cultural life: one of Ray's uncles introduced cricket in Bengal, another introduced detective fiction in Bengali literature by translating the Sherlock

<sup>11</sup> This retrievable imagination of the village is not the same as the timeless, fully autonomous, idyllic village that some social scientists constructed, following European travellers, colonial administrators and missionaries. See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Apur Panchali* (Calcutta: Ananda, 1995), pp. 68–9.

Holmes stories. Ray's father, Sukumar Ray, arguably Bengal's most famous children's writer, ran a printing press and published a well-known magazine for children. It was a family known for its urbane cosmopolitanism and modern accomplishments. Naturally Ray was, and saw himself as, urban. He also had his early education in a quasi-Edwardian, elite public school, from within the walls of which the Indian village must have looked very distant indeed. The closest he came to a personal encounter with a village was when he sometimes visited villages during his student days at Viswabharati in Shantiniketan. Ray's relationship with the lifestyle of ordinary Bengalis can be gauged from his life-long practice of eating Bengali food with fork and knife, even the staple of rice and fish curry. In his early life, despite being partly educated in Shantiniketan, Ray had not heard much Indian music except Rabindrasangeet. He was brought up primarily on a diet of western classical music. Though he had studied Bengali as part of his course work, he had no self-confidence in handling the language. Upon graduation, when he took up a job in an advertisement agency, the firm was naturally British.

It was then that publisher Dilip Gupta of Signet Press invited Ray to illustrate an abridged, children's version of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's famous Bengali novel, *Pather Panchali*. The writer Sunil Gangopadhyay recounts how Gupta, shocked by the unsure Bengali of Sukumar Ray's son, gifted him Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's novel, *Kavi*.<sup>13</sup> Whether Ray read *Kavi* or not, his work for the illustrated version of *Pather Panchali*, published under the title *Aam Antir Bhepu*, changed his life. The book sparked his interest in Bengali literature and alerted him to the cinematic possibilities of *Panther Panchali*. Gangopadhyay adds that, if one compares the film script with the original novel, one finds that Ray's *Pather Panchali* is actually the children's version of the novel.

<sup>13</sup> Sunil Gangopadhyay, 'Priya Lekhak Satyajit Ray', in Shyamalkanti Das (ed.), *Lekhak Satyajit Ray* (Calcutta: Shivrani, 1993), pp. 17–20.

Where did Satyajit Ray, then, get his village? Why did his imagination of the village captivate his contemporaries, given his shallow acquaintance with it? Did the details of village life in the original novel ensure the authenticity of *Panther Panchali*, as Ray claimed? Or was it the poor exposure to village life of his audience? Given that *Pather Panchali* moved even those who knew village life first-hand, in this case, too, one is pushed to surmise that the imagination of the village was not dead—either in Ray or in his audience. It was there within him and in his immediate environs and, once he dipped into it, he could dredge up its formidable riches.

The village of the mind shapes the city of the mind, too. The novelist R.K. Narayan locates most of his stories in a small, imaginary town called Malgudi. By now, all English-speaking Indians and large parts of the Anglophone world know the town and its human-scale adventures and rhythm of life. By now, Malgudi is English literature's first Indian small town. It is such a living reality that one is sometimes surprised that maps do not show it; it is more real than many real-life Indian towns. Like Sherlock Holmes's Baker Street home in London, Malgudi deserves at least a gazetteer and a street directory.

The Malgudi stories supply clues to the imagery of the village that empowers the creativity of Gandhi and Ray. For, in these stories about a town, the village is a constant shadowy intruder. The village shapes the author's narrative of the town. Things happening at Malgudi cannot happen and characters at Malgudi cannot be what they are unless one imagines the surrounding villages telescoped into the town; many life stories in the town, in turn, branch out into these villages. These looming, omnipresent villages and the loveable absurdities their encroachment produces—defying a

sophisticated, urbane author who lives in a city and has, therefore, chosen to write about urban life—give the Malgudi stories that lively, ambivalent link with their author and their wit and irony. The imagination of the village even links one to the city differently. For a city can also be mirrored in its antonym.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the cultural logic of an Indian city demands the presence of the village. Not merely sleepy Malgudi, but some of the more anguished metropolitan slums in literature, too, are infected or infiltrated by the village. As a result, the slum is left forever trying to re-invoke a remembered village under different guises. Sometimes that is through the selective settlement of people (so that the slum becomes a ghetto of migrants from one particular caste, region or language group) or through the way it mobilizes collective passions to configure its community life in an atomizing, steam-rolling metropolis (as in a primordial riot). Even Bombay commercial cinema and TV serials, so dependent upon the appeal of deliberately unrealistic, glamorized slums, invoke unashamedly the village community.<sup>15</sup> The imagery of the slum in a serial like Saeed Mirza's *Nukkad* is a key to its romance. What looks like a slum turns out to be, on closer scrutiny, a village that has survived the seductive glitter of the city. As an escape from the oppressive village, the slum captures, within the heartlessness of the city, the reinvented 'compassionate' village.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The reverse also is true; the village also can be defined by its antonym. Many environmental and alternative technology movements in India work with concepts of the village that bear an inverse relationship with the urban-industrial pathologies to which the Indian city is heir.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R.A. Obudho and G.O. Aduwo, 'The Rural Bias of Kenya's Urbanisation', in J.B. Ojwang and J.N.K. Mugambi (eds), *The S.M. Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya* (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1989), pp. 65-75.

<sup>16</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Introduction: The Popular Cinema as the Slum's Eye View of Indian Politics', in Ashis Nandy (ed.), *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Popular Cinema* (London: Zed Books and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-18.

If Gandhi's village is the first Indian village of politics and Ray's that of the cinema, M.N. Srinivas' is the first Indian village of the social sciences. His famous texts have shaped the sociological imagination of the village for at least two generations of social scientists. In what U.R. Anantha Murthy calls Srinivas' greatest work, *The Remembered Village*, the author for once archly reveals the nature of his own emotional bonds with the village. Anantha Murthy's choice will not make sense to many academics, perhaps not even to Srinivas. For *The Remembered Village*, by the canons of the social sciences, is marred by tragic, empirical imperfections. Srinivas' data were burnt by mistake by an over-enthusiastic pack of radicals at a California think tank. Most social scientists consider the book scarred by that tragedy.

Anantha Murthy however is a writer, more at peace with human subjectivity. He cannot but admit the power of the imagery *The Remembered Village* invokes. Put heartlessly, to him Srinivas might have even been fortunate that his data got burnt and left him with only his memories. Surprisingly, some ethnographers seem to agree with Anantha Murthy.

What is important is . . . that most . . . think that Srinivas has succeeded in evoking the totality of village life in his account of it, that he has been able to vividly capture the human element and convey the 'feel' of Rampura to the reader. This is in contrast to his earlier major works in which we encounter no human beings, only customs and rules of social intercourse, only status structures and role occupants. . . . Chie Nakane suggestively compares *The Remembered Village* to a high-quality painting which, she writes, reveals more of the essence of a scene than does a photograph, by dramatising certain elements in it. Sol Tax's tribute to *Remembered Village* . . . as an ethnographic work which is also a work of art is echoed by most of the reviewers.

. . . Some readers will, perhaps, say that *Remembered Village* belongs more with the novels of Srinivas's famous friend, R.K. Narayan. It has the same emphasis on character and on the scenic in everyday life, the same delectable sense of humour as in Narayan's well-loved novels and stories about life in Malgudi. And did not Srinivas tell us in his *Social*

*Change in Modern India* that the sociologist who chooses to study his own society is rather like the novelist?<sup>17</sup>

Are these remarks an admission that Srinivas, by crossing the barriers between literature and the social sciences, has only enriched the latter? Or are they a homage to the creativity that, when forcibly distanced from hard empiricism, reaches paradoxically a higher order of empiricism?

This is the imagination of the village that has become a casualty of our times. The late Girilal Jain, for many years Editor of *The Times of India*, used to grumble, 'I don't want to go back to a village. Keep your Gandhi to yourself. You are from a city; you can speak for the village. I was brought up in a village. . . . My ideal India doesn't have a single village.' In that abhorrence, the village still had a place as a dystopia. On the other hand Sam Pitroda—for some years an icon and a mascot of modern, scientized India—is also from a village, belongs to an artisan caste, and once had close links with rural life. Indeed, he first used a telephone when he was twenty-one. Yet in his calculation of a future India there is neither hate nor love for the village. The village does not exist emotionally for him any more; he has cauterized it out of his self. In his algorithm of a creative society, villages are only statistics. One can do something for or to a village; a village cannot do anything for one or even itself.<sup>18</sup>

For a new generation of Indians, the village has increasingly become a demographic or statistical datum. Indian economists calculate national income and rural India's contribution to it; Indian sociologists and demographers know all about urban-rural

<sup>17</sup> T.N. Madan, *Pathways: Approaches to the Study of Society in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 46, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Pitroda, 'Development, Democracy, and the Village Telephone', *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1993, pp. 66-79. This is in many ways a moving paper, which however also makes it absolutely clear the journey from the village to the city is for the likes of Pitroda, culturally and psychologically, a one-way journey.

differences in education, modern health care, and population growth. Policy-makers mark out 'backward areas' where new factories can be established or dams built as therapeutic measures. Entrepreneurs think of producing a village in the heart of Delhi, at Pragati Maidan or Hauz Khas, where the rich and the mighty may go and see rural India at weekends.<sup>19</sup> But the village is no longer a living presence in mainstream Indian intellectual life. In the various visions of the future floating around in the region there is much that is worthwhile, but not the vivacity of an imagined village. The village is quickly becoming a place where strangers live, where sati and untouchability are practised, where ethnic and religious riots have been taking place for centuries, and where, unless the civilized intervene, the inhabitants continue to pursue the sports of homicide and robbery.

Some may claim that that is another imagining of the village at play. But that imagining, unlike earlier ones, does not lead to any great creative effort. Nor does it resonate to the village of the mind in millions of others. Today, no film producer will finance a project like *Pather Panchali*—in this respect, nothing has not changed since 1955 when Ray made his film—but, worse, no promising young filmmaker will choose to film something like *Pather Panchali* or, like Ray, pawn his wife's jewellery to do so. It is an open question whether that change has enriched or impoverished India's public culture.

One last word on the subject. Is the ability to reconnect to the shared village of the imagination only a matter of creative self-ex-cavation? Or does it subsume the idea of mythic journey that some

<sup>19</sup> Emma Tarlo, 'The Discovery and Recovery of "The Village" in Delhi: Hauz Khas 1986-94', Paper presented at the 13th European Conference of Modern Asian Studies in Toulouse, 31 August-3 September 1994.

cannot but undertake, and others can but will not? True, during the last hundred years, the village *has* been for the urban Indian the destination of an epic journey of mind from which many have returned richer, deepened, and whole. But it is also true that, for others, the same journey has been a traumatic descent into a nether world of the self that corrodes physically and emotionally.<sup>20</sup> In either case, it becomes the obverse of the tragic journey from the village to the city that has been the standard marker of the hero in Indian popular literature and cinema.

India may live mainly in its villages, as the Gandhians insist, but it is no peasant society. Traditionally, the city has had a distinct and identifiable relationship with the village and that dyadic bond has been an important theme in classical plays, such as those of Bhasa, and in epics such as Mahabharata. This mutuality broke down with the entry of the colonial political economy in the nineteenth century, and since then the great Indian mythmakers have been trying to reconfigure it in new terms. Sometimes that reconfiguration has been sought in a civic life that recapitulates the village, sometimes in a village reconceived by the city. But the search has always been there—as an epic search for another vision of a desirable society and of a future that will not be entirely disjointed from the past.

### III

#### THE REBIRTH OF THE HERO

The decline in the imagined village has altered the meaning of the journey between the village and the city in South Asia. It has become a journey from a disowned self to a self that cannot be fully owned up. The inner contradictions and tensions of the city-as-the-self, which trigger the painful journey back to the village,

<sup>20</sup> A brilliant 'take' on this journey is the short by Premendra Mitra, 'Discovering Telenapota', Trs. Rina and Pritish Nandy, in Premendra Mitra, *Snake and Other Stories* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990), pp. 1–10. We shall return to that journey in the third section of this book.

are often the exact reverse of the inner contradictions and tensions of the village, which triggered the fateful journey to the city in the first place. If the journey to the city was once an escape from oppressive sectarian and community ties, the demands of ascribed status, and the denial of individuality, the attempts to escape from the city are also often powered by dreams of an idyllic community and escape from hyper-competitive, atomized individualism.

The Indian city has re-emerged in public consciousness not as a new home, from within the boundaries of which one has the privilege of surveying the ruins of one's other abandoned homes. It has re-emerged as the location of a homelessness forever trying to reconcile non-communitarian individualism and associated forms of freedom with communitarian responsibilities, freely or involuntarily borne. Apparently, the city of the mind does not fear homelessness; it even celebrates homelessness. However, that merely camouflages the fear of a homelessness which can be cured only by a home outside home. Literature and serious cinema handle this issue as an inner conflict that defines a crisis of personal identity. Popular cinema sees it as a playful oscillation between the private and the public, the familial and neighbourly, the rustic and the urban.<sup>21</sup> The mother who is not the real mother but is more than one, the friend who becomes a brother and dies to prove the point, the self-destructive street urchin in love with a millionaire's daughter—in popular cinema, these are not merely anxiety-binding technologies of the self. They supply the cartography of a home away from home in a culture where homelessness, despair and the psychology of the outsider are all relatively new states of mind.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, the TV series by Ranjani Mazumdar and Shikha Jhingan, *The Power of the Image: The Tapani as Street Rebel* (New Delhi: BITV, 1998). Also, Ashis Nandy, 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema', *The Savage Freud and Other Essays in Possible and Retrievable Selves* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, and Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 195–236; and 'Introduction: The Popular Cinema as the Slum's Eye View of Indian Politics'.

The slum and the street urchin defy the 'predatory identity' of the city—as Arjun Appadurai might identify the process—to paradoxically navigate the city more efficiently, perhaps even creatively.<sup>22</sup>

Serious Indian literature has never been comfortable with this oscillation. Such negotiation with the city has all the elements of the lowbrow and the maudlin and uses too narrow a range of psychological shades. But perhaps for that very reason, popular cinema has turned it into an over-used, proforma cliché.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the film persona of actor-director Raj Kapoor, one of those who presided over India's mythic world in the 1950s, was basically built around an ambivalent celebration of the city as street culture.<sup>24</sup> In *Awara* (1951) and *Shri 420* (1955), two immensely popular films that frame his work for most viewers, Kapoor is the ultimate street person, celebrating Bombay the way Woody Allen pays his reluctant, nervous homage to New York. Yet even in these films, the hero, while living by his wits off the street, turns the streets of Bombay into a friendly village neighbourhood. As a loveable cheat, pitted against more menacing well-bred sharks, Kapoor has moral and aesthetic unease with the city but, unlike Allen, that unease derives from outside the frame of civic values and the urban personality. Raj Kapoor's Bombay, like R.K. Narayan's Malgudi, is also a tribute to a remembered village.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For an elegant statement along these lines, see Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (Bombay: 1988).

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the genre, see Ashis Nandy, 'The Popular Hindi Film: Ideology and First Principles', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 9(1), 1981.

<sup>24</sup> On the city as street culture, see the brief, suggestive essay by Arjun Appadurai, 'Street Culture', *India Magazine*, December 1987, 8, pp. 12–21.

<sup>25</sup> This also indirectly but powerfully emerges from Rajni Bakshi, 'Raj Kapoor: From *Jis Deshme Ganga Behti Hai* to *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*', in Ashis Nandy (ed.), *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Popular Cinema* (London: Zed Books, and New Delhi: Oxford University Press,

The unease sharpens in what is arguably the only non-commercial film Kapoor produced, *Jagte Raho* (1956). Written and directed by Shambu Mitra and Amit Maitra, two theatre persons with no link with Bombay's commercial cinema, the film re-chronicles the tragicomic journey from the village to the city in *Shri 420* with a different ending. The hero of *Jagte Raho* never gets the chance to develop the street smartness of the earlier heroes to survive the ravages of everyday urban guerrilla warfare; he must depend more on his instincts for survival. This unequal battle makes the humour in *Jagte Raho* more bitter; it is mostly barbed sarcasm against the hypocrisy and corruption of the sophisticated urban rich. Indeed, the only time the hero feels at home in the city is when he finds himself among labourers in a slum, singing an evocative folk song identified with eastern Indian villages.

*Jagte Raho* is set in Calcutta. In it Kapoor, the heart-throb of millions, deglamorizes himself to play the role of a villager who, in search of drinking water, trespasses into a multistoreyed apartment building. There he witnesses the inner hollowness of civic life, while being pursued as a thief. At the end, when cornered, he confronts his pursuers and manages even to embarrass them. As he walks out of the heartless building, he finds at last a person—a young woman, played by the famous star Nargis in a one-scene appearance—willing to give him some water. Wearing the traditional Bengali sari, at the gate of an incongruous, old-style mansion with lush green trees, she gives water to the thirsty hero. The message is clearer in the Bengali version of the film, where the hero's dialect identifies him not only as a villager but as a refugee from East Bengal, a victim of the massive violence that accompanied the creation of independent India. He is in the city by default and

1998), pp. 92–133. The journey from the first to the second film in the title of Bakshi's paper can be read also as a perceived movement from the purity of the pastoral-civilizational values to the impurity of the urban-industrial values.

under duress. Home has to have a touch of the pastoral, even when a poisoned village has caused the homelessness. Home is 'natural' womanly nurture in a rediscovered village.

Few seem to love the city in its own terms in India, even among those who would prefer to lose their identity among its anonymous masses and seem eager to extol that loss.



The mythic frame within which these oscillations fit is best reflected in the character of Karna in the Mahabharata.<sup>26</sup> Though Karna as the hero of the Mahabharata was not entirely unknown in pre-modern times, during the last century the character has been a particularly sensitive index of changes in Indian definitions of the ideal self, mediating between the village and the city. The journey of Karna is a remarkable testimony to the way a living myth in an epic culture—as against myths in cultures that have epics—can act as an alternative record of the shifting psychological contours of a culture. Indeed, during the last two decades, I have had to return more than once to the trajectory of Karna's life to trace the course of India's ambivalent relationship with the urban-industrial vision.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> In a fascinating paper, M.K. Raghavendra argues that there has been no new myth in Indian popular cinema, which by its own conventions must avoid a linear, historical narrative. As a result, such cinema cannot but be grounded in the myths of India's ancient epics. While there is an important element of truth here, one reason for the scarcity of new myths in Indian popular cinema could be the pliability and built-in diversity of the myths in Indian epics. They absorb, interpret and reconfigure new experiences, particularly new anxieties and fantasies, within the old myths. The myths do not become linear or historically tinged thereby, but history and time acquire different meanings in cinema. M.K. Raghavendra, 'Time and the Popular Film', *Deep Focus*, 1992, 4(1), pp. 10–18.

<sup>27</sup> Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists*, 2nd edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), Part I; and 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema'.

It is true that at least one other character in the Mahabharata has sometimes been an index of the cultural status of the journey to the modern city—namely Krishna. Numerous influential re-interpretations of Krishna's life and teachings during the last hundred years bear witness to this. However, Krishna is less relevant to our story because his break with his pastoral past is complete in most Mahabharatas and even the memory of that past does not play any role in his life as a king in an imperial city. Karna, though entirely urban, is dogged by his ambivalence towards the city; it does not often look to him adequately civic. The journey to the city is never complete for him. Naturally, he has served as a projective test for Indians caught in the same ambivalence towards the village, as a home and as a prototype of Indian civilization.

Both Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones have identified Karna as a classic hero, part of a long series beginning from antiquity and including Sargon, Moses, Oedipus, Cyrus, Perseus, Romulus, Paris and Heracles.<sup>28</sup> At least three elements in Karna's life conform to the paradigmatic life of the hero, according to Freud and Otto Rank: his mysterious birth, his first journey through water in a basket, and his humble foster parents who do not know the secret of his divine and royal origins.<sup>29</sup> There are also similarities between Karna and Freud's Moses who, unlike the Biblical Moses, is a scion of the Egyptian aristocracy and leads the enslaved Israelites to freedom, in a mythic unfolding of the oedipal drama. In Karna's case, the situation is reversed; he fights his own brothers, not knowing who he really is. However, it is an indicator of the

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trs. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth, 1940), p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, trs. Philip Freund (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959). Karna was born through his mother's ear. For a classical psychoanalytic study of the rich meanings associated with birth through the ear, see Ernest Jones, 'The Madonna's Conception through the Ear: A Contribution to the Relation between Aesthetics and Religion', *Psycho-Myth, Psycho-History: Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (New York: Hillstone, 1974).

vibrant presence of the mythic in India that whereas Freud's Moses is a marginal presence in contemporary Jewish consciousness, the various modern incarnations of Karna have carved out a place for themselves in contemporary India. Indeed, the traditional and modern Karnas coexist in reasonable amity in the Indian imaginary.

Karna might meet the classical criteria of the hero the world over, but he has won wide acceptability in India as the hero of Mahabharata only during the last hundred years. In the better known and more popular Mahabharatas, Krishna, Arjuna, Yudhisthira and, less frequently, Bhima have contested for that status. All these contestants have less-well-kept secrets of birth that should qualify them as heroes in textbooks of psychoanalysis. The new preference for Karna cannot be explained away as only a 'natural' cultural move towards the universal model for a mythic hero.



Karna's journey in Vyasa's Mahabharata begins with his natural mother Kunti, a princess, getting a boon that allows her to have a child by any god she wishes, provided she goes through a specific set of prayers/rituals. She first invokes, while still unmarried, the sun god. But when, as a result, she conceives and gives birth to a son, she fears a scandal and stealthily puts the child in an ornate casket and floats it on the Ashva river, from where it finally floats down the more sacred Jamuna and Ganga. A humble, childless charioteer, Adhiratha, and his wife, Radha, discover the baby. They bring him up as their son. Kunti later marries Pandu, the sickly prince of Hastinapur. A sage has cursed Pandu to die if sexually aroused. So he allows his two wives to use Kunti's boon to have children by the gods. As a result, the two queens become the mothers of five sons, the Pandavas. When Madri commits suicide

after the death of Pandu, Kunti becomes the guardian of all five. Pandu's blind brother Dhritarashtra, father of a hundred sons known as the Kauravas, becomes the new king of Hastinapur.

Karna grows up to become a gifted warrior, known for his bravery, self-destructive generosity and truthfulness. However, he also has other qualities that make him the most controversial character of the Mahabharata. These are revealed as he journeys through his life. From his early years he is subjected to the barbs and contempt of many as a lowborn nurturing inappropriate princely ambitions. He is particularly sensitive to such jibes. His first serious encounter with the Pandavas, the five legitimate children of Kunti, takes place in his youth. Once, when the Pandavas and the Kauravas are being trained in armed conflict by their guru, Karna impulsively challenges them to compete with him. Neither the guru nor his disciples pick up the challenge; competing with princes is also a princely privilege. As it happens, Karna has already befriended Duryodhana, the eldest among the Kauravas, who see the Pandavas as rivals. Duryodhana now shrewdly makes Karna the king of Anga. But birth still stands in Karna's way. His foster father, Adhiratha, comes to bless him before the competition and this reveals his humble origins. Karna is ridiculed and driven away.

Karna's next encounter with the Pandavas ends in even greater bitterness. Princess Draupadi decides to marry the winner in an archery competition. Karna wants to compete; so does Kunti's third son Arjuna, sired by Indra, king of the gods. Once again Karna is humiliated; Draupadi refuses to marry a charioteer's son even if he wins. Karna now turns even more hostile to the Pandavas and becomes even more defensively loyal to Duryodhana.

The Kauravas try to dispossess the Pandavas of their share of the kingdom in various ways. After defeating the Pandavas in a dishonest game of dice, they exile the Pandavas from Hastinapur for thirteen years. When the Pandavas return from their exile, Duryodhana again refuses to share the kingdom with them. The

doting father, Dhritarashtra, fails to check his sons. A battle becomes inevitable.

Karna naturally decides to fight for the Kauravas. However, on the eve of the battle, Lord Krishna goes to Karna's camp, reveals to him the secret of his birth and requests him to fight for the Pandavas. He offers Karna, technically the eldest Pandava, the kingdom of Hastinapur in the event of victory, the unconditional loyalty of his five younger brothers, and the hand of Draupadi in marriage. (Though Arjuna had won the archery competition and the right to wed Draupadi, due to a careless comment by Kunti she is now married to all the five Pandavas.) Karna turns down the offer. He says that even if he is made king of Hastinapur, he will have to give away the kingdom to Duryodhana and that would not be fair to Yudhishthira. Kunti now goes to meet Karna and asks forgiveness for abandoning him. She begs him to change sides and spare the lives of her children. At this point even the sun god appears and tells Karna to obey his mother for his own good. However, Karna is already an orphan psychologically; he refuses to betray a loyal friend who had made him a king and a kshatriya, a status his own mother denied him. However, Karna promises not to touch any of his brothers except Arjuna. He consoles Kunti that, at the end of the war, she will have her five sons intact, with or without Karna. In the war the inevitable happens. Karna dies battling Arjuna. However, Arjuna has to flout the codes of warfare at the instigation of Krishna, serving as his charioteer, to kill Karna. Only then do the Pandavas come to know Karna's true identity and sadly and guiltily perform his last rites.



Exactly, a hundred years ago, in 1898, the famous physicist turned plant physiologist Jagadis Chandra Bose (1858–1937), already a

living legend, wrote a letter to his friend, the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Bose was the first scientist in India who self-consciously tried to pattern a culturally rooted identity for Indian scientists and, when he wrote to Tagore, Tagore was already a public figure from a family that had played a leading role in the modernization of India. In his letter Bose pleaded with his friend to write on the life and the fate of Karna. Bose felt that Karna was the real hero of the Mahabharata and deserved reevaluation.

Of uncertain birth, insecure, defiant, and unwilling to adjust to his ascribed status as the son of a humble charioteer, Karna seemed to symbolize the predicament of the self-made person in a society not fully receptive to individualism and competitiveness. Bose wanted Tagore to grant Karna the justice that was denied him in life. Tagore accepted the challenge and wrote a verse play, *Karna-Kunti-Samvad*, a reconstruction of Karna's last encounter with his mother Kunti.<sup>30</sup> The play captures the anguish behind Karna's free-floating violence and arrogance and his response to his illegitimate birth and the trauma of maternal rejection. In the play Karna knows he is on the losing side but tells his mother that he cannot, on those grounds, abandon the losing side. Karna's death in the battle of Kurukshetra has thus an element of self-destruction. He can escape his fate but refuses.

The rivalry between Karna and Arjuna has many layers. In a pantheistic world reflects the eternal, natural conflict and rivalry between Indra, the king of the gods, whose personal weapon is thunder, and Surya, the sun god. On this plane the battle between Karna and Arjuna is a clash between two cosmic forces. At another plane, Karna's is an infinitely sad story of a person fighting a society insensitive to his desperate attempts to break out of ascribed status, to seek sanction for competitive individualism and personal

<sup>30</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Karna-Kunti Samvad', *Rachanavali* (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1999), vol. 3, pp. 145–50.

achievement, and the story of rage at his failure to do so.<sup>31</sup> It is the story of a charioteer's son who becomes a great warrior, keeps the company of kings, and hankers for upper-caste status, not knowing that by birth he has a right to that status. Bitterness pushes him to the margins of ethics. Bose identifies with Karna's anguish. His plea to the most respected Indian writer of his generation is a plea to legitimize the first modern Indian in India's epic culture. Seeking acceptance for Karna must have meant for Bose seeking acceptance for his vision of India.

In the hundred years since Bose wrote his letter, Karna has reappeared on and off to haunt India's urban middle class. Attempts to reinterpret him as a wronged hero, victimized by an unjust society, obdurately hostile to the norms of equity, have recurred. Novels like Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya* and plays like Buddhadev Bose's *Prathama Partha* have contributed to the effort. In theatre, Karna's chequered career during the last hundred years has ended with Peter Brooke's Mahabharata, in which he is the hero. In cinema, Shyam Benegal's *Kalyug* locates Karna in the ruthless world of corporate rivalry, facing an unjust fate, a meaningless clan war, and conventional morality.<sup>32</sup> In all these incarnations, Karna is explicitly a double of Arjuna, the earlier idea of a Mahabharatic hero.

Popular culture has returned to the myth less selfconsciously but with more vigour. Kunti, Karna and Arjuna cast their shadows on a number of characters and plots in the commercial cinema. One of the better-known efforts in the genre, *Deewar* (1974), is identified in public memory with the emergence of a hero whom some critics have described as the first urban-industrial man in Indian popular cinema. In this film the rivalry between two brothers takes many forms but finally centres on recognition and

<sup>31</sup> Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Nandy, 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema.'

acceptance by their mother. In this now-stereotyped story of two brothers who take to the city in different ways, one grows up to become a police officer, the other a criminal. The criminality is shown to be a response to injustice and feelings of rejection; the anger against an unjust society finds voice in asocial violence. The police officer acts like the hand of destiny, backed by the mother's moral convictions and her identification with him. When, at the end, the police officer shoots his brother in the course of his duty, the hero dies in his mother's arms, completing the tragic journey of a wronged, discarded child who grows up to become a street-smart, urban warrior, negotiating life mainly through the technology of violence. *Deewar's* hero is the prototypical urban man, but somewhere along the way he has fought for and lost his mother's acceptance. That acceptance comes posthumously and hardly absolves the modern metropolis of its moral culpability.

Mani Ratnam's *Dal-pati* (1994), which retells the story of Karna, never seriously deviates from the conventions of popular cinema and the stylization that goes with them. However, it anticipates the director's later films, especially, the taut, thriller-like narrative he weaves around an epic journey to a strange city that becomes a nightmare and yet, at the same time, expands and enriches the self. In all, 'enemies' turn out to be bound by deeper ties to the self and women mediate between apparently incompatible psychological worlds through a form of maternity that deepens conjugality. All are recurrent themes in popular creative imagination and no amount of erudite film criticism is likely to dent Mani Ratnam's popularity or wean him off the cocktail of the classical, the folk, and the slum-flavoured urbanity in which he specializes.<sup>33</sup>

*Dal-pati* begins in an idyllic village where a teenaged mother delivers an illegitimate son. The next scene shows the mother sobbing and running after a goods train speeding towards the city; she

<sup>33</sup> Nandy, 'Introduction: The Popular Cinema as the Slum's Eye View of Indian Politics.'