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Cuts and Continuities

Caste-subaltern imaginations of the Bengal famine of 1943

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

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Abstract

The Bengal famine of 1943, in which nearly three million people died, was man-made. A multitude of factors led to the famine, including British colonial policies, war, hoarding and profiteering by local elites and businesses, and existing faultlines of caste, class and gender. In recent years, scholars have focused on scrutinising the famine from an anti-colonial perspective. Still, a gap exists in exploring the intersectionality of caste-related subalternities and the famine. However, the immediate concern with filling this gap is ethical-methodological: even from the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? This dilemma and tension animate this PhD in Artistic Practice. The main starting research question is – how can film practice, both as methodology and outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore negotiated imaginations of the Bengal famine from a caste-subaltern perspective?

Taking the Gramscian notion of subalterns as people/groups on the margins of history, subaltern studies, especially in India, have consistently focused on the need to write history from below.

On the one hand, scholars and historians have looked at archival materials for erasures of subaltern history and foregrounded them. On the other hand, they have mobilised methods such as oral history to recuperate the subaltern histories. In a limited sense, this research adheres to this tradition. It looks at existing films on the Bengal famine and makes critical interventions in them to foreground the caste question, and it also aims to create 'new' material through collaborative fieldwork-filming and workshops. However, this PhD also departs from the tradition as it is not a recuperative historical project. It focuses on the creative, collaborative, and negotiated processes of imagining and engaging with that history.

Through an iterative, collaborative and reflective film practice, this research suggests that filmmaking can foreground subaltern epistemologies and ontologies when it is not merely seen as product-oriented but also as a knowledge activity. Moreover, it can foreground an ethos of active and continuous negotiation and enable the emergence of multiple, contested and layered narratives. Lastly, this research proposes a shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of the 'authentic' caste-subaltern experiences of the famine and toward negotiated imagination.

Keywords: Artistic Research, Bengal famine, Film, Caste, Subaltern, Dalit, Negotiated imagination

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Glossary of terms

Caste

While the 'caste system' is always qualified by the context, it is broadly characterised by social stratification based on endogamy, hereditary status, hierarchy, graded occupation, and purity and pollution. The 'caste system' consists of four Varnas in the following hierarchy – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This is followed by a group considered to be so 'low' that they are outside of the Varna system. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution and a prominent Dalit thinker, saw the 'caste system' as graded inequality with control of resources and the idea of purity and pollution as its organising principles.

Dalit

Literally 'ground down' or 'oppressed'; the term Dalit was popularised by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. In contemporary India, it refers to the preferred political self-identification of social groups belonging to 'ex-untouchable castes'. The Indian State, through its constitutional framework, has designated and refers to this group as Scheduled Castes (SC).

Adivasi

Meaning 'old inhabitants' in several Indian languages, it is considered a preferred self-description of communities listed as 'Scheduled Tribes' in the Indian constitution.

Other Backward Classes (OBC)

OBC is a collective term used by the state to categorise social groups which are educationally or socially disadvantaged but are not listed as 'Scheduled Castes' or 'Scheduled

Tribes'. This group comprises mostly castes belonging to the lowest of the four varnas (Shudras). Instead of castes, the term 'classes' is used to incorporate 'backward' groups from religious minorities.

Bahujan

Literally means people in the majority; it denotes the political collective of all oppressed communities, such as Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs and religious minorities. The term has been popularized by the Bahujan Samaj Party to create political solidarities amongst these groups.

A note on the contents and structure of the research

Cuts and Continuities: Caste-subaltern Imaginations of the Bengal famine of 1943 is a practice-based PhD, and it adopts the submission format of a compilation thesis. In other words, this thesis is not a singular, integrated monograph. The compilation consists of five films, four published articles and a kappa.

The purpose of the kappa, meaning "overcoat" in Swedish, is to set the context for the articles and films to be read as standalone contributions united under a larger theme. Therefore, this kappa is just one element in larger sets of elements submitted for the PhD. The function of this kappa is the following: to introduce the research and research tasks; to briefly explore the broader political, ethical, methodological, and aesthetical frameworks and debates that the research is in conversation with; to provide a guide to all the other submissions and how they aggregate to be constituted as a PhD and finally, to summarise the key points developed in the films and articles. These stated purposes are not solely explored in the kappa; they have also been actively pursued and negotiated in the films and published articles. Consequently, a certain degree of repetition is inevitable, but wherever possible, an attempt has been made to avoid the risk of duplicating the material.

This kappa puts writing into play. While embracing the academic conventions and requirements, an attempt has been made to pursue writing in its expanded form. Therefore, the writing in this kappa dwells in multiple registers, such as discursive, descriptive, poetic, performative, fictional, diagrammatic etc. This shift, when the pages are in white and the text in blue, is by me. Conversely, when the pages are blue and the text in white, is by another author.

Prologue

MEMO NO - 22

Date- 6-5-08

प्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी सह अंचल अधिकारी
बुन्डू

महोदय,
आवेदक जाति के प्रोफेशनल
एक वर्ष समाप्त होने
मध्यावधि वर्ष के लिए
6.5.08
R.C

Fade in.

INT. Day. Video Editing Room.

We see Satyajit **Ray**'s film *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)*[1] being played. The filmmaker is scrubbing the video. It gives a sense that the filmmaker is searching for something. Finally, the filmmaker stops at the credit roll. The filmmaker pauses and indulges in a future imaginary –

What would change if every Indian film revealed the Cast(e) of characters?
(the bold text appears on the screen)

Fade out.

The script repeats (with some changes)

Fade in.

INT. Day. Video Editing Room.

We see Mrinal **Sen**'s film *Akaler Sandhaney (In Search of Famine)*[2] being played. The

1. *Ashani Sanket*, directed by Satyajit Ray (Calcutta: Balaka Movies,1973), https://archive.org/details/AshaniSanketUnTrue-noLejano.
2. *Akaler Sandhaney*, directed by Mrinal Sen (Calcutta: D.K. Films, 1981), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRZqN-b0VpM.

filmmaker is scrubbing the video. It gives a sense that the filmmaker is searching for something. Finally, the filmmaker stops at the Cast of Characters. The filmmaker pauses and indulges in a future imaginary –

What would change if every Indian film revealed the Cast(e) of characters?
(the bold text appears on the screen)

Fade out.

Contextualising the research

This PhD attempts to explore, foreground, and negotiate caste-subalterns', especially Dalits', imagination of the Bengal famine of 1943. Conceptually and artistically, during my PhD, I have had to take many turns and reevaluate both my film practice and theoretical propositions. However, I kept returning to these three poems, all written in post-independence India by Dalit poets from different states.

1.
Hunger;
What comes first—
The tree or the seed?
Hunger; you turn the question into a conundrum.
Hunger, just tell us, to what race does this ape belong?
If you can't answer that, we'll fuck seventeen generations of you.
We'll fuck your mother, hunger ....[3]

2.
The stove is made out of mud
The mud is sourced from the lake
The lake belongs to the landlord

(We have) A hunger for bread
Bread made of pearl millet
Pearl millet grown in the fields
The field belongs to the landlord

3. Born in a Dalit family in the state of Maharashtra, India, Namdeo Dhasal is a leading poet known for his anti-caste literary and political work. In 1972, he helped found the Dalit Panthers, a radical activist group that was inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States. The excerpt is from his poem titled "Hunger". See Namdeo Dhasal, "Hunger", in *Poet of the Underworld, Poems 1972 – 2006*, trans. Dilip Chitre (Navayana Publishing, 2007), 76.

The bull belongs to the landlord
The plough belongs to the landlord
The hands on the shaft of the plough are ours
The harvest belongs to the landlord

The well belongs to the landlord
The water belongs to the landlord
The crops and the fields belong to the landlord
The neighborhood lanes belong to the landlord

Then what is ours? The village? The city? The nation?[4]

3.
I have to feed my family ant-eggs
That look like white grains of rice
That is enough to sustain the children
They take up their bows and arrows
And even without caring for
The true meaning of revolution
Bare their chests in front of the barrel of the gun[5]

4. Born in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, Om Prakash Valmiki, is a well-known Dalit author and poet. His autobiography titled *Joothan*, meaning the scraps left on plates that are then given to Dalits to eat, is considered a milestone in Dalit literature. This excerpt is from his poem titled "Thakur Ka Kuan", meaning 'landlord's well'. The poem is originally in Hindi. For the English translation, which has been reproduced here, see Om Prakash Valmiki, "Thakur Ka Kuan", in *Jaggery: A DesiLit Art and Literature Journal*, trans. Archit Gupta, accessed January 29, 2023, https://jaggerylit.com/the-well-belongs-to-the-landlord-kuan-thakur-ka/.

5. Kalyani Thakur Charal, a Dalit feminist poet from West Bengal, has been instrumental in advancing the Dalit literary work, especially Dalit women's writing, in the state. She has published several volumes of poetry. This excerpt is from her poetry collection *Chandalinir Kabita*. See Kalyani Thakur Charal, "Chandalinir Kabita," in *Cordite Poetry Review*, trans. Sayantan Das, accessed January 29, 2023, http://cordite.org.au/poetry/dalit-indigenous/chandalinis-poem/2/.

Why are these poems relevant in the context of the Bengal famine considering two out of the three poets don't even come from the region of Bengal, and all three were written decades after the famine? This question was answered, at least partially, when I met one of the poets – Kalyani Thakur Charal. I wished to include her poetry in one of my films and therefore had gone to her village to meet her. I knew that she was a prominent Dalit poet, author and activist based out of West Bengal, and I had also read that she, along with others, had been responsible for running a book stall in Kolkata called *Chaturth Duniya* – meaning the Fourth World. The idea behind the bookstall is to promote and make Dalit literature available to people. I was so taken by the name that I wanted to name one of my films *Fourth World*, which I eventually did.

She described the Fourth World as a world where people whose existence and stories have been denied by the first, second and third world can speak about their experiences and stories with their heads held high. It's a place of freedom. A place where Dalits and other marginalised groups can relay stories of exploitation and their resistance to it. A place to ask for rights. A place that encapsulates the desire and imaginative capacity to build an equal society.

Seen in this light, while caste experiences and structures vary temporally and spatially, we find a thread of commonality in all three poems. These texts emerge from what Charal calls the Fourth World. My constant return to these poems was, perhaps, a way for me to avoid the mistake of treating the Bengal famine as a historical event frozen in time. They guided me to expand the spatial and temporal horizon of the famine. Most importantly, they served as a reminder not only to study the famine from a historical vantage point but also to politicise it from a contemporary lens. My return to these texts was a way for me to anchor myself back to the intellectual and artistic core of the project, which was to foreground the stories about the food, hunger and famine that emanate in the fourth world and to explore what such an endeavour's political, aesthetic, ethical and methodological implications are.

One of the most horrifying atrocities to have taken place during the British colonial rule in India was the Bengal famine of 1943-44. Close to three million Indians perished from starvation and malnutrition, and millions more were pushed into abject poverty.[6] For a long time, the British administration and intelligentsia attributed the famine to natural causes. Most scholars today concur that the famine was a result of a complex set of factors, but the primary reason was the policies of the British government.[7] Favouring the export-oriented cash crops such as jute and indigo at the expense of food crops had made food shortages a regular occurrence. The second world war made the matter only worse since the food supply was severely disrupted. By 1942, when Japan occupied Burma, there was already a rice shortage, and India used to import 15% of its rice from Burma. Upon the capture of Burma, this supply was stopped by the Japanese army, which added to the food shortage. Furthermore, the colonial government prioritised food supplies to its troops over the local population. Since Calcutta was the centre of British India's war efforts in terms of production, close to a million people in the city were involved in military works, and they were covered by

6. Estimates vary from three to five million. See: Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Cormac ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Amartya Sen "Famine Mortality: A Study of the Bengal Famine of 1943" in *Peasants in History: Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

7. Most scholars, after a close look at the data on food availability and weather patterns, have concluded that food shortage or adverse weather events had a very limited role in causing the famine. They attribute the famine to British policies. For more detail, see: Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981); Sugata Bose, "Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan, and Tonkin, 1942-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (1990): 699-727; Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapur 1919-1942* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997); Ritu Sharma, "Explained: How researchers used science to show Bengal famine was man-made", *The Indian Express* (March 27, 2019), accessed February 20, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/how-researchers-used-science-to-show-bengal-famine-was-man-made-5644326/. A few scholars have challenged this position and contend that food shortage had a role in the famine. See: Peter Bowbrick, "The Causes of Famine – A Refutation of Professor Sen's Theory," *Food Policy* 11, no. 2 (1986): 105-124; Mark B.Tauger, "Entitlement, Shortage, and the Bengal Famine: Another Look," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 31, no. 1 (2003): 45-72.

distribution arrangements and food subsidies.[8] The requisition of food and other essential supplies for the war led to unsustainable inflation and food shortage. The government further exacerbated the situation by introducing boat denial policy – reducing boat transport lines in eastern and coastal Bengal out of fear that Japan would invade Bengal through Burma.[9] Moreover, they initiated and executed a scorched-earth policy which meant seizing and hoarding food supplies. Removal of essential boat lines and rice supplies contributed greatly to the famine. A massive cyclone further aggravated the agony of the people in 1942, which affected the coastal areas of Midnapore and 24 Parganas.[10]

Even at the height of the famine, the British government did not respond appropriately to alleviate the suffering and displayed a callous approach. Nothing captures this callousness more than Churchill's infamous statement when he was informed of millions dying in the famine. He asked, "Why hasn't Gandhi died yet?" He blamed the famine on the Indians, saying it was their own fault "for breeding like rabbits."[11] Despite the knowledge that famine was imminent, the government denied the release of reserve food stocks. Inflationary and market-related concerns, along with prioritising food reserves for the British troops fighting in the War, meant starvation and death on a large scale.[12]

The Bengal famine of 1943 was not an isolated famine to strike India during British colonial rule. Famines in Madras

8. See Cormac Ó Gráda, "The ripple that drowns? Twentieth-century famines in China and India as economic history," *Economic History Review* 61, no 1 (2008): 5–37; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People Is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

9. See Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, (London: Hurst, 2015).

10. Senjuti Mallik, "Colonial Biopolitics and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943," *GeoJournal* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10803-4.

11. Michael Safi, "Churchill's policies contributed to 1943 Bengal famine – study," *The Guardian* (March 29, 2019), accessed February 12, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/winston-churchill-policies-contributed-to-1943-bengal-famine-study.

12. Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*; Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*.

(1782–1783), the Agra famine (1837–1838), the Bihar famine (1873–1874) and the Bombay famine (1905–1906) are just some of the major famines to have occurred in India during the British colonial rule. In addition to these major famines, India also experienced small-scale famines at regular intervals.[13] Scholars contend that while weather-related famines(especially those caused by droughts) happened in pre-colonial times, the intensity and regularity of famines increased manifold with colonialism and capitalism. Bohdan Klid posits that food shortages did not necessarily lead to widespread starvation, and it was almost always political decisions that caused mass starvation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given that the worst instances of mass starvation happened within empires or their colonies, he argues for the need to study the connection between empire-building, imperial rule, and mass starvation.[14]

Extraction, commercialisation of agriculture, disrespecting indigenous knowledge of agriculture, forcing the move from food crops to cash crops irrespective of local culture, climate and soil, and therefore increasing the risks from any food crop failure, profit at any cost, general disregard for the local population, and complete apathy in the wake of famines are some of the common threads that connect colonialism and famines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[15] The Bengal famine of 1943 is not an exception in this regard; therefore, it warrants a wide range of scholarship exploring the connections between British colonial policies and the famine. Amartya Sen, in a way, brought this to the forefront with his analysis of entitlement relations and colonial policies. Through a detailed economic and policy analysis, he

13. Mallik, "Colonial Biopolitics".

14. Bohdan Kild, ed., *Empire, Colonialism, and Famine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (University of Alberta Press, 2022).

15. Along with the previously referenced scholarly work, the following work make explicit the connection between colonialism, imperialism, and famine: Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London and New York: Verso, 2001); Hamilton Sipho Simelane, "The Colonial State and the Political Economy of Famine in Swaziland, 1943–1945," *South African Historical Journal* 66, no 1 (2014): 104-121. DOI: 10.1080/02582473.2013.787641; John Iliffe, *Famine in Zimbabwe, I890-I960* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1990).

concluded that "starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat".[16] Subsequently, several other scholars have turned their attention to this issue. Some of the analytical focus of these scholars are: investigating how resources were extracted from the region[17]; understanding how a complex land tenure devised by the British rule had been pushing the people with small or no land holdings into abject destitution and debt traps[18]; debunking the theory that the famine was a natural disaster; the role of British prime minister Churchill[19] and finally, evidencing apathy, inadequacies and incompetence in relief work.[20]

There has been a renewed interest in understanding the famine from an anti-colonial perspective in the last decade. Praiseworthy as these studies are, there exists a glaring gap; the stories of the famine that emanate and circulate in the fourth world are largely missing. Except for some scholarship that is available on the intersectionality of class and famine[21], the questions of

16. Sen, *Poverty and Famines,* 1.

17. Shashi Tharoor*, Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (Penguin, 2018).

18. Partha Chatterjee, "The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920–1947," *Past & Present* no. 110 (1986): 169–204, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650652; Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885–1947," *Indian Historical Review* 2, no 1 (1975): 106–65; Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal.*

19. Madhusree Mukerjee, "Bengal Famine of 1943: An Appraisal of the Famine Inquiry Commission," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 11 (2014): 71–75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24479300; Cormac O'Grada, "'Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency': Revisiting the Bengal Famine of 1943-44,"(August 24, 2010). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1664571 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1664571.

20. Lance Brennan, "Government Famine Relief in Bengal, 1943," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (1988): 541–66, https://doi.org/10.2307/2056974.

21. There exists some literature that centers on the question of peasants in the study of the Bengal famine. See: Paul R. Greenough, "Indian Famines and Peasant Victims: The Case of Bengal in 1943-44," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (1980): 205–35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/312413; Debarshi Das, "A Relook at the Bengal Famine," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 31 (2008): 59–64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277803. However, these studies don't mention the term 'caste'. While there is an overlap between 'peasants' and 'lower castes', the two cannot be collapsed into a single category. Malbika Biswas in her analysis of

indigeneity, caste and gender still require considerable attention. This PhD acknowledges that each category is equally important for advancing a multifaceted understanding of famine but focuses on the caste question.

Caste, as a complex and deeply rooted institution, greatly influences a person's social, economic, and political status in India. As a system of hereditary social stratification based on endogamy, hereditary status, hierarchy, graded occupation, and purity and pollution, caste perpetuates social inequality, limits social mobility, and severely constrains access to economic resources and opportunities.[22] Since caste has such a bearing on Indian society and determines a person's abilities and vulnerabilities in normal times, it would be commonsensical to assume that its impact during a crisis is accentuated. Therefore, scholars in the field of disaster studies and climate change have started focusing on pre-existing vulnerabilities to understand uneven impacts.[23] Linking caste and existing inequalities, Mohammed Irshad Sharafudeen contends that the "uniqueness of the caste system is manifested in rights over resources, which impinges on the right to get access to resources even in times of disaster".[24] This is echoed by National Dalit Watch, an effort led by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR).

Manik Bandyopadhay's short stories of the Bengal famine of 1943, elucidates on the risk of constituting lower castes into a monolithic peasant class. See Malabika Biswas, "In Search of Progress: Caste and the Modernity of the Left in Manik Bandyopadhay's Short Stories of the Bengal Famine of 1943," (April 1, 2021). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3836550 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3836550.

22. I explore and contextualise the 'caste system' in some detail in the next chapter. Meanwhile, I suggest the following article, especially the introduction section, which I think summarizes the concept quite well. See Anup Hiwrale, "Caste: Understanding the Nuances from Ambedkar's Expositions," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 6, no 1, (2020): 78–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481120944772.

23. See Nibedita S. Ray-Bennett, "The influence of caste, class and gender in surviving multiple disasters: A case study from Orissa, India," *Environmental Hazards* 8, no 1, (2009): 5-22, DOI: 10.3763/ehaz.2009.0001.

24. Mohammed Irshad Sharafudeen, "Caste, Asset and Disaster Recovery: The Problems of Being Asset-Less in Disaster Compensation and Recovery," *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 22, no 2, (2014): 137, doi:https://doi.org/10.1332/175982714X14013610020765.

In their study of rampant caste discrimination in relief and aid work during the Indian Ocean Tsunami in Tamil Nadu (2004), they concluded that discrimination and vulnerability get magnified and multiplied during disasters.[25] It is reasonable to assume that if caste plays such a significant role in deciding the outcome of an adverse event in contemporary times, it could also be true during the Bengal famine.

More than the question 'why' (establishing the rationale, motivation and urgency to study the intersectionality of caste and the famine), the question 'how' (ways of doing it and presenting it) motivates this PhD. Even from the lens of caste-subaltern perspectives and consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? A particular focus on 'how' is prompted by a deep appreciation and acknowledgement of the urgencies and difficulties involved in any caste-subaltern work. These kind of complexities associated with subaltern work has been articulated succinctly by Gyan Prakash:

> A sense of impossibility has always marked the writing of subaltern history. There has always been an underlying awareness that the project of "recovering" the subaltern as a full-blooded subject-agent must fail, for by definition subalternity implies a "minor" position that cannot be undone retroactively. So, it was understood that the project of writing the history of the subaltern must fall short of its aims. But this does not mean that subaltern histories cannot be written. If subalternity is defined by a certain "lack," it is also construed as intractable, resistant to complete appropriation by the dominant system.[26]

25. The National Dalit Watch (NDW) is an effort spearheaded by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. They have done exemplary work on the question of caste-based exclusion in disasters. For a better understanding of differential vulnerabilities caused by caste during disasters, see their reports http://www.ncdhr.org.in/national-dalit-watch/.

26. Gyan Prakash, "The Impossibility of Subaltern History," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 2 (2000): 287, muse.jhu.edu/article/23894.

In light of the (im)possibility running concomitantly with the urgency and immediacy of subaltern work, as invoked by Gyan Prakash, this PhD turns its attention to the question of process and posits that more than recuperating caste-subalterns', especially Dalits', authentic histories of the famine, focusing on the process of engaging and actively negotiating those histories might open up new imaginaries.

The main starting research question that underpins this research is – how can film practice, both as methodology and outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore negotiated imaginations of the Bengal famine from a caste-subaltern perspective? Within this broad and umbrella-like question, two other questions nest: what are the ethical-methodological and aesthetic manifestations of caste-subalternities in film practices, and how can they be informed by and moved closer to caste-subaltern epistemologies and ontologies?

To situate this research better, some demarcations are required. My interest in moves that offer critiques of recuperative or representative histories should not be read as implying a simplistic caricature of the discipline as a whole. Rather, I am attempting to demonstrate an alignment with those within the discipline who propose that revisions of history must necessarily include new approaches to the project of historiographies. The study is in conversation with and invokes several established fields of study, such as Dalit studies, famine studies, ethnography, oral history, and subaltern studies, but at the core of this study is a practice-based approach through which questions are explored. Film practice constitutes the bulk of the research activities undertaken during the PhD. Submitted films bear testimony to this because, along with several other elements, they also contain documentation of their methodological processes and impulses; in other words, how they were conceived and carried out as research activities. The other important delineation is that despite invoking film practice as the central method and outcome, this PhD sits under the larger rubric of artistic practice. Therefore, there is not only kinship to the term 'artistic practice', but occasionally, this research is in dialogue with other artistic modes and methods.

The third, but perhaps the most important delineation is that, although the study primarily focuses on Dalits' experiences of the famine, I am using caste-subalterns, a broader umbrella term that accommodates other groups on the margins because of their caste identities. These two terms are not interchangeable, and my reasons for using caste-subalterns are explored in the following chapter.

SHADOWS OF THE RESEARCH SCRIPT

I often state that my research focuses on the caste-subaltern imaginations of the Bengal famine of 1943. While I am comfortable with the ‘caste-subaltern imaginations’ part, I am quite concerned about the ‘Bengal famine of 1943’ part. The source of my apprehension lies in the fact Bengal famine of 1943 serves as both the entry point as well as the only detailed case study upon which the research rests; however, my attempt in this research has been to take the absence of caste question in the studies of the famine to open up larger questions about caste inequality, graded access to resources, food, nutrition, hunger, starvation etc.

The real danger in talking about a ~~historical event~~ is that it can turn it into an occurrence from the past. Despite intentions to the contrary, it can happen that various structures, fault lines, gaps, designs, processes, past-present-future, past-future-present, present-past-future, present-future-past, future-past-present, and future-present-past become crystallised into a thing of the past. Despite the intentions, 1943 can become the point zero of the suffering, and 1945, the endpoint. A thing of the past demands less. What if one wants to demand more? The other issue with a ~~historical event~~ of such a large scale is that scale can universalise. Despite the intentions to the contrary, it can happen that all sufferings become one. A ~~historical event~~ can flatten out the differences, or at least give that impression. Traversing a flat surface demand less.

What if one wants to demand more?

Despite anchoring the research in the Bengal famine of 1943, I hesitate to overstate the research focus. Also, what if the postcolonial state wants us to stay in the past because it demands less from the state? What if one wants to demand more?

An inventory of the film submissions follows this introduction. In the first chapter of this kappa, I conceptualise, contextualise, and map out the key terms – caste, famine and subalternities. In the second chapter of this kappa, I provide an account of ethical-methodological approaches and choices made during the study and trace their underpinnings to the research. In the third chapter, I focus on questions concerning film practices and aesthetics, especially in relation to caste-related subalternities. Without getting into interpretative hermeneutics of my own films (or in simple words, translating and subordinating the films to written words) in this chapter, I explore the myriad aesthetic modes, devices and strategies that were considered in the making of the films and their implications in the broader research. In the last chapter of the kappa, I summarise the study, present core arguments, and offer closing remarks. Besides this kappa, this doctoral thesis comprises four published articles, all double peer-reviewed and based on a specific film made during the research.

The first two articles undertake a close reading of the two most notable films on the Bengal famine – Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)* and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhaney (In Search of Famine)*. These articles also reflect on my artistic interventions in these two films, which were geared towards re-negotiating the material from a subaltern perspective, but in and through the language of the film itself.

The first article, "Contracts of making, viewing and listening: Researching in and through films", provides my reading of *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)* from a caste-subaltern lens. By retracing the journey of my intervention in *Ashani Sanket*, the article also focuses on multiple conceptual and material contingencies of researching in and through film practice. Subsequently, it delves into the broad questions of the representation of Dalits in Indian cinema and its specificities in Ray's film. This article, and the intervention on which it is based, draw from Homi Bhabha's 'minority discourse' and 'intervention' to explore what happens when Dalit subjectivities inflect and destabilise a particular kind of universal humanism that Ray is known for.

The second article, "Where We Rats Lurk", offers my critical reading of *Akaler Sandhaney (In Search of Famine)* and explicates my intervention in the film. This article explores the limits of self-reflexivity and auto-critique in Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhaney* and asks if they can be unsettled without undermining their critical potential in filmmaking practices. Based on my intervention in Sen's film, where I bring a subaltern fable to scrutinise the self-reflexive positions of an 'outsider' filmmaker, in this article, I ruminate on the gaps between subaltern consciousness and filmmakers' consciousness. Taking a broader view on filmmaking practice, in this article, I propose that while the two should not be collapsed, it is possible to submit our reflexivity to examination in a way that strengthens its rhetoric and method.

The third article is titled "Negotiating caste-subaltern imaginations of the 1943 Bengal famine: methodological underpinnings of a creative-collaborative practice". This article starts with unpacking causality and visual (non-film) artistic responses to the Bengal famine of 1943 and then proceeds to contextualise the caste question in contemporary Bengal. However, at the core of this article is an ethical-methodological question: even from the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? Drawing specifically from the fieldwork-filming I conducted in two Dalit villages in the West Midnapore district in the year 2019, where I collaborated with two local practitioners of Patchitra tradition (scroll paintings accompanied with songs), in this article I explore how caste-subaltern experiences of the famine can be creatively and collaboratively imagined and negotiated. The paper proposes shifting away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of the 'authentic' caste-subaltern experiences of the famine and toward negotiated imagination. To illustrate and make a case for this shift, this paper contextualises the term 'negotiated imagination' and provides a detailed description and analysis of methodological processes attempted in fieldwork-filming. This article was written for a social sciences journal without the possibility of including or embedding the corresponding film *Fourth World* in it.

Therefore, the article is written in a way that it can be read and comprehended independently of the film *Fourth World*. However, when read in conjunction with the film, the link between methodological questions and their implications in film practice becomes clear.

Written in assemblage style, the fourth article, "Elephant Trumpet. In/out of the black box.", critically engages with ideas around 'critical presence' and the 'representation' of Dalits. The text also explores notions around malnutrition, hunger, starvation, and famine as categories; 'recovery and representation' of caste-subaltern histories in the context of famine; opacity and affect as aesthetic choices; and performative-collaborative practice as a method. This text is in conjunction with, next to, between, and in/out of the film *You deny my living and I defy my death* which emerged as a result of a collaborative-performative workshop between two caste-subalterns – a performance artist and a filmmaker. This article critiques default imaginaries assigned and afforded to subalterns, which are either essentialising or reductive. Drawing from the workshop and the resultant film, this article argues for a move towards an anti-caste affective-expressive register where feelings, emotions, a sense of embodiment, metaphors, and visual and acoustic sensory experiences are mobilised in engaging with a historical event. In the article, I posit that if caste operates as a sensorial regime, why can't we put into play the film medium's sensory and affective qualities to break caste's spatial-sensory order?

Since these articles and the films cover a lot of ground with respect to research background, theoretical mapping, ethical, methodological and aesthetic questions, and my reflections on the research goals, tasks and findings, in this kappa I am making a choice to avoid repeating the content and instead build further on aspects that either do not find enough space in the articles and films or that will enrich and add layers to the broader PhD enquiry.

In the following section, I list the films in a particular order with short summaries and links. After reading the introduction, I wish you to watch the films in the order I have provided before proceeding with the rest of the kappa and the articles. I believe this particular choreography better captures the progress of research and arguments.

Film submissions with
short summaries and links

1. *I Hesitate*

Weblink: https://vimeo.com/796576682
Password: Hesitation


Several shots of children on the streets fighting for food
- very disturbing.
A powerful film, extremely well put together about starvation in India.
Tags: Bengal, India, Villages, Jungle, Crowds, Food, Children, Poverty, Famine

Synopsis:

Famine in Bengal: 1940-49 is an archival video owned and published by British Pathé. The video is accompanied by a long text that contains – a shot summary, a description, tags and film data. *I Hesitate* is an artistic intervention into the video and the descriptive text accompanying it.

By removing the video and foregrounding the descriptive text, this intervention attempts to highlight the ways in which the representational realm of the famine is constituted and practised. This intervention also explores the complicities of the film medium and language in the production of alterities. Moreover, it puts forth hesitation as an ethical-creative mode to contemplate both the banality and the generative power of enacting the juxtaposition – the 'past' and the 'present'. While useful in hinting at the continuum of suffering and injustices, does juxtaposition not bind us to the dialectic and therefore come in the way of future imaginaries?

[

Insert Archival Footage

]

[

Insert New Footage

]

[

Insert Archival Footage

]

[

Insert New Footage

]

2. *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*

Weblink: https://vimeo.com/465384524
Password: contracts


at times,
you become
a cat
Hunger

SYNOPSIS:

Contracts of making, viewing and listening is an artistic intervention into Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*) – made in 1973, the film tells the story of the effects of the famine in rural Bengal through the eyes of a Brahmin couple. In Ray's *Ashani Sanket*, the only Dalit woman the audience meets is Moti who appears in brief spurts to highlight the humanity of the Brahmin protagonists and to testify to the restrictions of caste that these protagonists are meant to transgress by way of consummating their humanity. Moti is accorded a mere fraction of the total screen time and spoken parts within the film and is promptly relegated to the background when the narrative purpose of her appearance is met. The artistic intervention is geared towards critically reading and materially renegotiating the film from the lens of Dalit consciousness.


I've no strength

3. *Where We Rats Lurk*

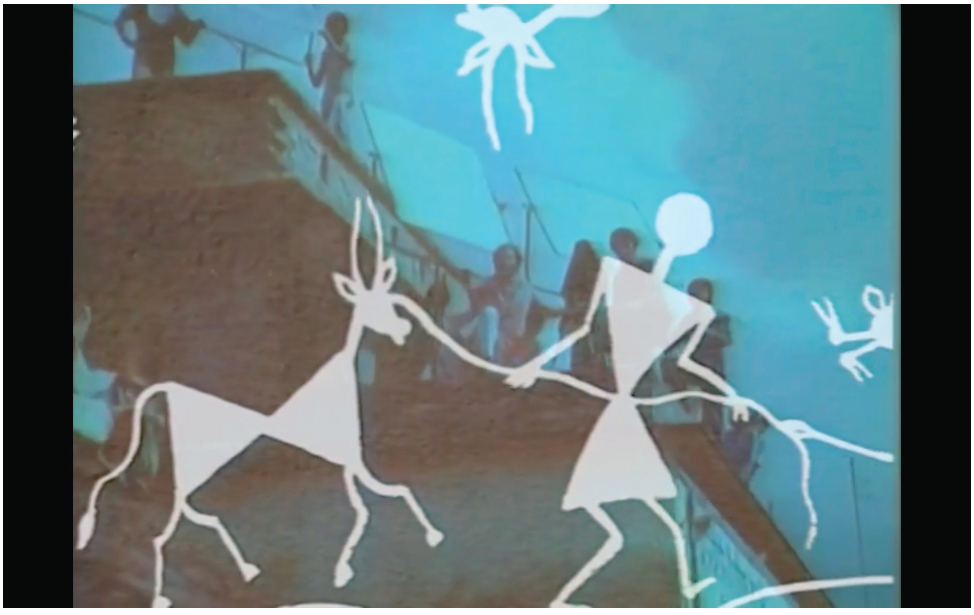
Weblink: https://vimeo.com/675877708
Password: RATS

Synopsis:

Where we rats lurk is an artistic intervention into Mrinal Sen's film *Akaler Sandhaney* (*In Search of Famine*). Using the strategy of a film within a film, *Akaler Sandhaney,* made in 1981, deals with both the famine and an urban filmmaker's efforts to make a film about the famine, using as their location a village that the famine had seriously affected. Sen's self-reflexivity and critique in this film are aimed not only at revealing the filmic process but also at interrogating the capacities and incapacities of an urban filmmaker's attempt to 'authentically' represent the rural and the (im)possibility of such a film.

Where We Rats Lurk investigates the limits of self-reflexivity and auto-critique in Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhaney* and asks if they can be unsettled without undermining their critical potential in filmmaking practices. This unsettlement is pursued through a subaltern fable titled *Rats*.


The gentleman have created a famine
after coming to make a film on famine.



4. *Fourth World*

Weblink: https://vimeo.com/853340562
Password: Famine

Synopsis:

Drawing from the fieldwork-filming conducted in two Dalit villages in Midnapore, Bengal, in 2019, this film documents the various facets and stages of a creative-collaborative practice that attempted to foreground and engage with Dalits' experiences of the famine. The methodological impulse, both during the fieldwork-filming and in making the film *Fourth World* itself, was guided by an ethos of negotiated imaginations and processes as opposed to 'recovery' and 'representation' of those experiences and translating them into a film as a final product. The film tries to exceed the documentation of creative-collaborative actions initiated and facilitated in the field; it weaves together fieldwork footage, poetry, oral histories and traditions, and essayistic writing to stage a layered and complex set of complementing and contesting narratives about the famine. The film investigates the methodological and aesthetical implications of seeing and facilitating caste-subalterns as creative subjects.

5. *You Deny My Living and I Defy My Death*

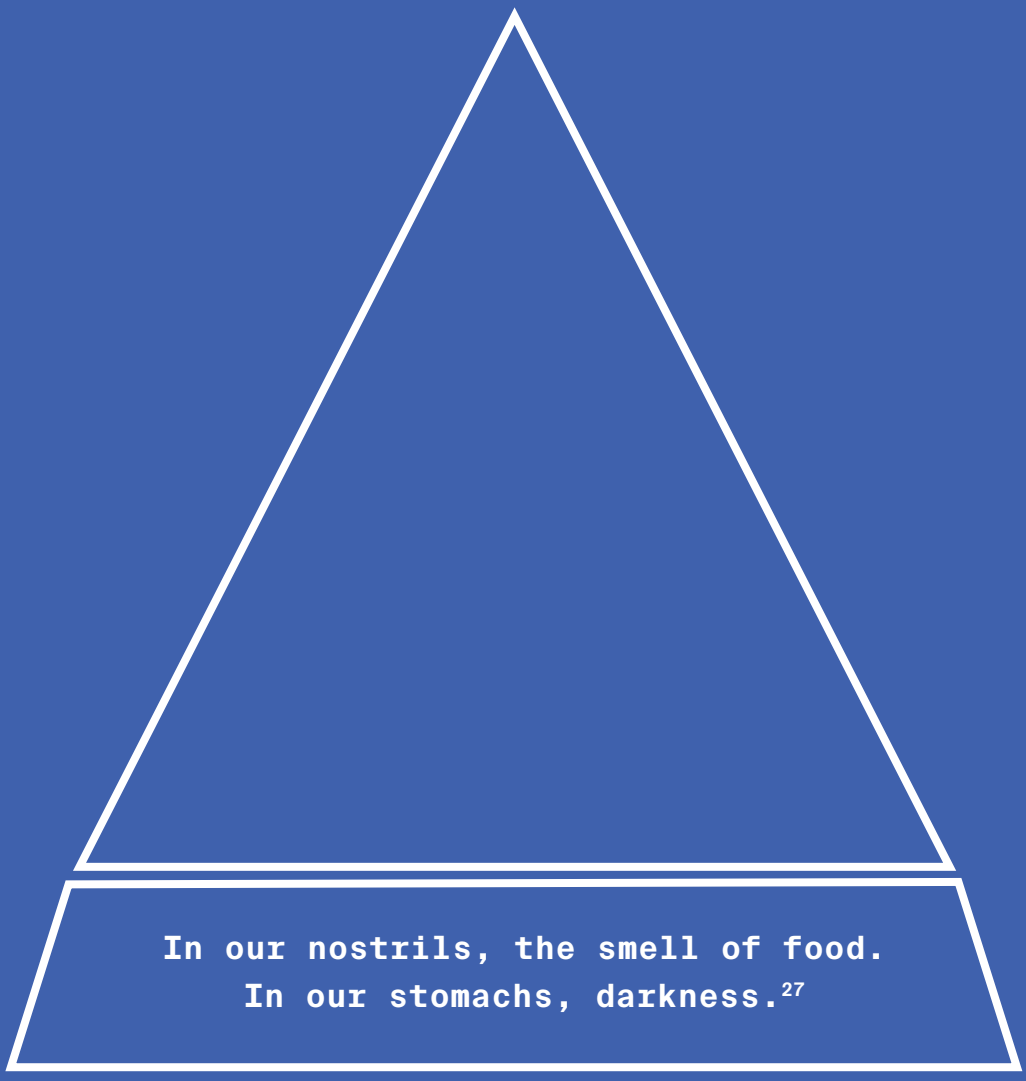
Weblink: https://vimeo.com/776126510
Password: Death

Synopsis:

Not entirely a resolved film, this is an experimental audio-visual documentation that has been edited from a workshop that meditates on the (im)possibility of foregrounding Dalits' experiences of the Bengal famine through an 'anti-caste affective aesthetics'. This work has emerged as a result of a collaborative-performative workshop between Durga Bishwokarma, a performance/theatre artist and me. Like the workshop, the editing of its documentation is further animated by the desire to explore the complexities involved in the 'representation' of Dalits' experiences of the famine. Moving away from the indexical and mimetic, this work embraces the affective-expressive and participatory registers to (en)act out the difference between 'critical presence' and the representation of Dalits.

Chapter 1: Caste-subalternities and famine

This chapter first aims to conceptualise caste-subalterns and famine, the two most essential elements of the research, and then explore their intersectionality. The introduction section of this kappa, the published articles and the submitted films already situate the specificities of the Bengal famine (causality and artistic responses to the famine and the broader caste question in the region). Therefore, the focus here is on mapping the broader understanding of these two terms. In the first section, I focus on caste, the incomplete synonymy between caste and subalterns as two different terms, and the affordances of hyphenating the two, especially in the context of this research. The second section is dedicated to exploring myriad definitional debates and conceptual frameworks through which famines have come to be studied. The final section considers a glaring gap: while caste has such a bearing on Indian society regarding access to food and other resources, it is largely missing from studies of famines in India. In this section, I explore the intersectionality of caste and famines.



In our nostrils, the smell of food.
In our stomachs, darkness.[27]

27. Waman Nimbalkar, “Mother,” trans. Priya Adarkar, in *No Entry for the New Sun: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1992), 36, accessed March 28, 2023, http://roundtableindia.co.in/lit-blogs/?tag=waman-nimbalkar.

Caste-subalterns

> To begin with, caste may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system.[28]

> (T)he caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); division of labor, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.[29]

> Caste is a hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised, it has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. The relation between caste are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality, i.e., inter-dining occurs between castes.[30]

The term 'Caste' is so complex and has received so much scholarly attention that it is an academic discipline in its own right. Any attempt to arrive at working definitions of the term is laden with all sorts of challenges. Its features and their manifestations

28. André Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in Tanjore Village* (California: University of California Press, 1965), 46.

29. Louis Dumont, *HOMO HIERARCHICUS: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Complete Revised English Edition, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1960), 21, accessed March 15, 2023, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.149555/mode/2up.

30. Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (New York: Asian publishing House, 1962), 171.

have constantly evolved across time and space, yet a continuum persists.[31] The term was first introduced in India by Portuguese missionaries.[32] The Portuguese word 'Casta' connotes lineage or race, originating in the Latin word 'Castus', meaning pure. Although Indian usage of caste is the most common, there is no exact translation of 'caste' in Indian languages. Varna and Jati are the most common terms used in India to designate caste membership.[33] Although they refer to different things, the distinction between Varna and Jati is not consistently maintained. The English word 'caste' is often used interchangeably for Varna and Jati, creating confusion; however, solving this using 'castes' and 'subcastes' has its limitations. It can be both difficult and tedious.[34] The term 'Varna' means colour and relates to four principal divisions of ritual classification as described in religious texts, whereas Jati implies different sub-groups within each Varna that are unique to each area. Jati indicates an enclosed membership to a group acquired by birth, and the reproduction of this group is ensured through endogamy.[35] The Varna model distinguishes Hindu society into four hierarchised categories according to their degree of purity: Brahmins (priests and teachers), Khastriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers, traders and merchants) and Shudras (labourers). Each Varna is associated with a part of the body of Brahma, the Hindu

31. See: Surinder S. Jodhka, *Caste in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015); Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, ed., *Caste, Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (New Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 1996); Anup Hiwrale, "Caste: Understanding the Nuances from Ambedkar's Expositions," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 6, no. 1. (2020): 78–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481120944772.

32. Floriane Bolazzi, "Caste, class and social mobility: a longitudinal study in a north Indian village 1958-2015" (PhD diss., Université Paris Cité and Università degli studi, 2020), 34-35, https://theses.hal.science/tel-03506287/document.

33. Hiwrale, "Caste: Understanding the Nuances from Ambedkar's Expositions".

34. M.N. Srinivas states that the Varna scheme has distorted the picture of caste, but it has enabled ordinary people to understand and assess the general place of a caste within this framework throughout India. It has created a common social language which works in all parts of India. See Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays, 69*. Also, see Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power*.

35. For more on this, see: Govind Sadashiv Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969); André Béteille, "VARNA AND JATI," *Sociological Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (1996): 15–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23619694.

god of creation. The Brahmins are considered from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet.[36] The contemporary category of Dalits, which is a preferred political term of the 'ex-untouchable' community to denote their status in society and to struggle against it, were placed outside of the Varna system. They were considered so low that they were called 'outcastes'. Caste is not limited to India alone, it is a south Asian phenomenon, and moreover, it cuts across different religions in the region. According to Ambedkar, the explanation for this comes from seeing it as a unity of culture which forms the basis of the caste homogeneity across the continent.[37]

As a system of social stratification, caste has been studied from multiple perspectives. Jodhka has identified three critical moments in studying caste, which are somewhat overlapping and not in chronological order.[38] Early anthropological and orientalist thinkers, including Louis Dumont, saw caste as a religious feature, tradition, and hierarchy, inadvertently positing a unified notion of the caste and sidestepping its regional and contextual multiplicities. The second moment is associated with scholars like Nicholas B. Dirks, M.N. Srinivas, and Gloria G. Raheja, who emphasised the role of dominant castes in shaping power politics. While underlining how the institution of caste could negotiate with democratic and electoral politics, it failed to address "the political questions internal to the structures of caste hierarchy and/or its ideological system, questions of power, discrimination and social exclusion. Even subjects like untouchability remained

36. See Prashant Chaudhry, "Caste as an Institutionalised System of Social Exclusion and Discrimination: Some Evidences," *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies* 1, no. 1, (2013): 56-63, accessed March 10, 2023, http://ijgws.com/journals/ijgws/Vol_1_No_1_June_2013/full-text-5.php.

37. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 3-22, accessed January 20, 2023, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_castes.html.

38. Sanam Roohi in her review of Surinder S. Jodhka's book *Caste in Contemporary India* has succinctly summarised the three moments. See Sanam Roohi, *Sociological Bulletin* 65, no. 2 (2016): 286–88, accessed February 21, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26368045.

peripheral to this literature on caste."[39] The third moment, according to Jodhka, is about the articulation of caste from below, and it proposes that caste is a system of domination, disparity, discrimination and denial.[40]

Reproducing or capturing every aspect of its origins, definitional boundaries, historical and contemporary contours, and regional variations is neither my goal here nor within the scope of this practice-based research. Instead, I wish to focus on caste, as expressed and analysed in its third moment, because it centres on socio-economic exclusion, inequality and discrimination, which advertently or inadvertently can determine differentiated experiences of famines. Ambedkar got to the roots of the caste structure when he explained it in terms of graded inequality. He wrote, "no society has an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt."[41] Taking to task those who defend caste as a necessary, universal, and simple division of labour, Ambedkar argued that the "caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers."[42] Building on this further, he contends that caste is based on a dogma of predestination and obliterates any scope of individual capacity, sentiment or preference.[43] Anup Hiwrale, based on his readings of Ambedkar, has succinctly summarised the characteristics of this graded inequality:

> The process of graded inequality involves: (a) fixity of occupations according to hierarchy; (b) graded wage

39. Surinder S. Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste: Academic Discourses, Identity Politics and State Policy," *Working Paper Series: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and UNICEF* 2, no. 2 (2010): 12, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299916898_Engaging_with_Caste.

40. Sanam Roohi, *Sociological Bulletin*, 286.

41. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7 (Bombay: Maharashtra Bombay Education Department, 1979), 26, accessed on January 20, 2023, http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume_07.pdf.

42. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (n.d.), 16, accessed January 20, 2023, https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf.

43. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 17.

structure—higher wages for Brahmins per unit of work and lower to Shudras; (c) forced immobility of labour and wages; (d) prevention on any enhancement of skills and closed knowledge hubs and (e) graded punishments for enforcing the compliance by the lower strata of the society.[44]

44. Hiwrale, "Caste: Understanding the Nuances from Ambedkar's Expositions," 85.

RESERVATION

Had hunger been reserved
They too would know what the pangs feel like
Perhaps the bile could melt their hearts
After generations of domination
Would a few starving nights really hurt so much?
What difference do a few sunken eyes make?
It has been the norm for centuries in this nation
Where forty of every hundred are chronically malnourished
When have hearts melted for them?
When have we seen riots against hunger and inequality?

Had scavenging been reserved
The brahmin too would have been gifted
With the opportunity to experience
The stench of overflowing drains
And the aesthetics of cleaning toilets
Perhaps it could touch their hearts
Bring forth a wave of empathy
Perhaps confronting humiliation first hand
Would leave no need for textbooks on humanity
The nation would be rid of religious dogma
And they would be rid of mindless rituals
What has the nation ever gained
From their endless chants in the temples?

Had herding, tanning, and slaughter been reserved
The baniya (trading caste) too could have tasted
The remains of a dead cow or the white flesh of a chicken
And a new life...

Without the supplies of cream, nuts, and fruits
Would they have lost their vitality?

Why do reservations exist in employment, education, and politics
Only for the Dalits and marginalised?
Upper castes too should have equal representation everywhere
Fixed quotas for instance in occupations like
Pig-rearing, incinerating carcasses, scavenging manual waste
They too are our brothers and sisters
With equal rights to our joys and sorrows, wins and losses[45]

45. This is an excerpt from Suresh Chandra's poem titled "Reservation". The original poem is in Hindi and has been translated in English by my friend Srilata Sircar. See Suresh Chandra, "Aarakshan," *Dalit Sahitya Varshiki 2016*, ed. Dr. Jaiprakash Kardam (New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan, 2016), 342-44.

Along with graded inequality, social exclusion as a central facet of the caste structure has started receiving scholarly attention. Social exclusion can be defined as "the inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic, and social functioning of the society in which she lives."[46] More precisely, it is "the denial of equal access to opportunities imposed by certain groups of society upon others."[47] According to Mayra Buvinić and Jacqueline Mazza, the first definition captures the multidimensional nature of social exclusion, and the second definition points to the fact that it affects a defined group and is embedded in social relations.[48] Thorat and Louis have argued that group identities like caste, ethnicity and religion form the basis for discrimination, isolation and deprivation in India.[49] Considering that the caste system regulates much of social, economic and political life in India, its exclusionary characteristics must be understood. At its core, the organisational principle of caste is that individual castes' civil, cultural, and economic rights are pre-determined; it is ascribed by birth. However, in its allocation of those rights, it is highly unequal and hierarchical, and moreover, through social and economic ostracism and penalties, it regulates and enforces the structures.[50] Because of differential ranking and hierarchy, rights

46. Panos Tsakloglou and Fotis Papadopoulos, "Identifying Population Groups at High Risk of Social Exclusion: Evidence from the ECHP," Discussion Paper 392, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, 2001, 2, accessed March 05, 2023, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/21252/1/dp392.pdf.

47. Jere R. Behrman, Alejandro Gaviria, and Miguel Szekely, "Social Exclusion in Latin America: Perception, Reality, and Implications," in *Who's In and Who's Out: Social Exclusion in Latin America*, eds. J. R. Behrman, A. Gaviria, and M. Székely (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2003), 11, accessed March 11, 2023, https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/viewer/Who-In-and-Who-Out-Social-Exclusion-in-Latin-America.pdf.

48. Mayra Buvinić and Jacqueline Mazza, "Addressing Exclusion: Social Policy Perspectives from Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Inclusive States: Social Policy and Structural Inequalities* eds. Anis A. Dani and Arjan de Haan (The World Bank, 2008), 124.

49. Sukhadeo Thorat and Prakash Louis, *Exclusion and Poverty in India: Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Muslims* (overview paper), (New Delhi: DFID, 2003).

50. Sukhadeo Thorat and Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal, "Caste and Social Exclusion: Issues Related to Concept, Indicators and Measurement," in *Children, Social Exclusion and Development* 2, no. 1, Working Paper Series (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and UNICEF, 2010), 7, accessed March 10, 2023, http://dalitstudies.org.in/media/cawb5dhg/working-paper-on-social-exclusion.pdf.

and duties of different caste groups get defined and also coupled with each other "in a manner such that the rights and privileges of the higher castes become causative reasons for the disadvantage and disability for lower castes, particularly the 'untouchables'."[51] Jodhka takes it further and argues that unlike the Dumontian notion of caste, which portrays it as a cultural notion of hierarchy and power with a pure-impure dialectic basis from the Hindu religion, caste is a structural reality where disparities and inequalities are institutionalised.

In the sense of ownership and entitlements, caste is closer to the Marxian concept of 'means of production'.[52] The relationship between caste and class has been concisely summarised by Gail Omvedt: "Caste is a 'material reality' with a 'material base'; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today."[53] Despite this, caste and class, however overlapping, can't be used interchangeably for various reasons. Uma Chakravarti has argued that caste is much more dehumanising than economic exploitation. While it's true that classes from whom the surplus is extracted are most often 'lower castes' or Dalits, caste, in more ways than one, supersedes notions of class. Caste denies subjectivity to Dalits and deprives them of dignity. It also forms the basis for a system where "those who have dominated the means of production have also tried to dominate the means of symbolic production."[54] Another major distinction between caste and class is that the social and political power that upper castes enjoy is not linked to their material condition; social and political capital is gained and sustained through connections to upper-caste fellows in the bureaucracy, judiciary and the legislature.[55]

51. Thorat and Sabharwal, "Caste and Social Exclusion", 8.

52. Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste", 21.

53. Gail Omvedt, "Caste, Class and Land in India: An Introductory Essay," in *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States*, ed. Gail Omvedt (Delhi: Author's Guild Publications, 1982), 14.

54. Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Revised Edition (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2018), 7.

55. Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, 13.

Discrimination and denial are the other roots that produce patterns of disadvantage, which in turn produces deprivation and poverty. The idea of purity and impurity, which is the basis of untouchability, social segregation and isolation in Hindu society, also manifests materially. It denies participation in different spheres of society, culture and the economy.[56] Overrepresentation of Dalits in landlessness and peasantry is because they were not allowed to own and cultivate the land. The effects of discrimination and denial are felt even today. On the one hand absence of assets, such as land, make them more vulnerable, and on the other hand, they also face exclusion from public services like roads, water, temples and public institutions delivering education and health.[57]

Caste apologists in India often argue that 'caste', as we know it, is an invention of British colonialism.[58] While it is true that the English word 'caste' did not exist, the question then is, what accounts for the hierarchised division of society for centuries both before colonialism and decades after independence, whose entire basis is the accident of birth? The idea that caste was invented for and by the British administration lies in the work of Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirk. Cohn makes an assertion that census played a significant role in codifying Jatis and argues that it unified and institutionalised culturally and regionally distant Jatis under a single ritual order. Colonial anthropology, in combination with the need to simplify codification for administrative purposes, transformed caste, which was more of a local social formation, into

56. Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste"; Thorat and Sabharwal, "Caste and Social Exclusion".

57. Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste"; Thorat and Sabharwal, "Caste and Social Exclusion".

58. Sanjoy Chakravorty's work, in my opinion, typifies this logic and sentiment. See: Sanjoy Chakravorty, *The Truth About Us: The Politics of Information from Manu to Modi*, (Hachette India, 2019); Sanjoy Chakravorty, "Did the British invent caste in India? Yes, at least how we see it now," *ThePrint*, June 06, 2019, https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/did-the-british-invent-caste-in-india-yes-at-least-how-we-see-it-now/245615/. For a counter perspective see Ananya Chakravarti, "Caste Wasn't a British Construct – and Anyone Who Studies History Should Know That," *The Wire*, June 30, 2019, https://thewire.in/caste/caste-history-postcolonial-studies.

a rigid institution.[59] Similarly, Dirk argues that caste is not a basic expression of Indian tradition but rather a modern phenomenon resulting from the encounter between India and British colonial rule. Furthermore, he contends that during colonial rule, caste became a single all-encompassing term capable of naming, explaining and describing diverse and highly localised social formations.[60] In my reading, neither Cohn nor Dirk proposes that caste was invented by the British. The intellectual leap from caste going through a change during colonial rule to caste being a British invention is dishonest and indicates an unwillingness to face it and eventually annihilate it. Ananya Chakravarti has summed it up quite succinctly: "Undoubtedly, caste changed under the British – but this is trivially true of every period of Indian history. Caste adapts to changing state technologies and political economy, but remains a total social fact, organising every realm of Indian life: legal, economic and political, religious, aesthetic and cultural."[61] It should be possible to foreground colonialism's malicious nature but, in parallel, acknowledge our own complicity in inventing and perpetuating caste.

The pertinent question, then, is why and how it persists. More than any other scholar, Ambedkar got to the core of its philosophical foundation. He states that organising and regulatory principles of caste-based exclusion derive moral legitimacy and justification from the religion, making its grips even harder.[62] By deconstructing ancient Brahmanical texts such as Manu Smriti, he argued that caste finds its validation in the Hindu sacred texts. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he writes:

> A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue

59. Bernard S. Cohn, "The Census, Social structure and Objectification in South Asia," *Folk* 26, (1984): 25-49.

60. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

61. Ananya Chakravarti, "Caste Wasn't a British Construct."

62. For Ambedkar's astute analysis of Hinduism and caste, see Bhim Rao Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism," in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3 (Bombay: Maharashtra Education Department, 1979), accessed March 12, 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_03.pdf.

> has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy for the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity, but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy, but not for men of other castes.[63]

Reflecting on the persistence of caste, especially 'upper' castes' behaviour vis-à-vis the 'lower' castes, despite the guarantee of constitutional equality and mechanisms for caste-based affirmative actions, both of which were ensured by Ambedkar as the chairperson of the constitution drafting committee, Uma Chakravarty argues that Brahminical texts, despite their contradictions with the constitution, continue to provide validation for caste hierarchy. These texts regulate the behaviour of not only the upper castes but also those at the bottom of the caste ladder because they are perceived as crucial for upholding 'tradition'.[64] Caste has also continued because of its coercive power. Drawing upon Weber's distinctions between coercive power and authority/domination, Jodhka contends that values, customs and institutions have made it possible for caste to function as an established form of domination throughout history. Some aspects of these value systems might have eroded, but there has not been a radical rupture in the caste system. Further, he indicates that in the absence of a comprehensive structural change, caste asserts itself as a coercive power even more due to some weakening of its ideological hold. The increase in caste-based violence and atrocities is testimony to this phenomenon.[65]

63. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 23.
64. Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*.
65. Jodhka, "Engaging with Caste".

If you have to control a person, you have to control his stomach. The whole caste system has evolved by controlling the stomach and thereby the food.[66]

66. Rajyashri Goody, in reference to her project 'Caste and Food', describes how caste and food are intrinsically linked. See Ambika Shaligram, "This is actually food for thought," *The Bridge Chronicle,* April 18, 2019, https://www.thebridgechronicle.com/lifestyle/art-culture/actually-food-thought-34211. Ambedkar writes: "Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food which serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh-eaters. There is another taboo which is against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not. From the point of view of untouchability the first dividing line is of no importance. But the second is. For it completely marks off the Touchables from the Untouchables." See Bhim Rao Ambedkar, "BEEF EATING AS THE ROOT OF UNTOUCHABILITY," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches,* vol. 7, (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), 318-319, accessed March 15, 2023, http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume_07.pdf.

My attempt here has been to study the deep structures, organising principles and socio-economic and political manifestations of the caste system. I do not wish to convey that the caste system has gone unchallenged. On the contrary, Dalits and people from 'lower castes', and occasionally some upper castes, have mobilised and put up a resistance against it throughout its history. From the saints of the bhakti movement, such as Sant Ravidas, Kabir, and Tukaram, to the social reformers and political thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like Jyotirao Phule, Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar, to more recent movements such as the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, which drew inspiration from the Black Panthers of the United States,[67] and the Mandal movement in the 1990s, which sought to expand affirmative action to include other backward castes,[68] there have been innumerable examples of individuals and movements that have challenged the caste system. Despite these efforts making a dent, the caste ideology remains strong in India. Constitutional equality and electoral democracy (for which Ambedkar fought vigorously, receiving much deserved credit) have also meant that the Dalit mobilisation against caste oppression has an ambiguous relationship with the state; it has to simultaneously attack the hidden caste biases of the ruling class (and I would add the state) and make use of the constitutional, legal and democratic means to achieve its goals.[69]

Caste is so dynamic and flexible, with many variations and permutations in terms of structures and manifestations across regions and societies, that it is difficult to label it as a singular system. But if we ask where one falls on the spectrum of power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and

67. For more on Dalit Panthers, see Nico Slate, "The Dalit Panthers: Race, Caste, and Black Power in India," in *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, ed. Nico Slate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 127–43.

68. For a brief historical understanding of the Mandal Movement, see Revathi Krishnan, "30 Years since Mandal Commission Recommendations — How It Began and Its Impact Today," *ThePrint*, August 7, 2020, https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/30-years-since-mandal-commission-recommendations-how-it-began-and-its-impact-today/477260/.

69. Nicolas Jaoul, "The 'Righteous Anger' of the Powerless: Investigating Dalit Outrage over Caste Violence," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2, (2016): 1–32.

degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, and security and anxiety, and also that person's position in the caste ladder, suddenly caste emerges both as a reality and an organising principle of society for much of India.[70] If we sidestep the definitional and historical complexities and focus on what it means for those who live it, we might understand it in radically different terms.

This research centres on Dalits' experiences, but I have chosen the term caste-subaltern, which needs clarification. It has two aspects: the first is more academic, and the second is more pragmatic. Based on the writings of Antonio Gramsci, the notion of subalternity is invoked to denote the inferiority of rank or subordination in terms of class, political capital, or historical representations.[71] Gramsci's concept of subaltern became increasingly conflated with class relations over time, which has come under scrutiny in recent scholarship.[72] There have also been efforts to re-engage with Gramsci and see his ideas not as fixed but as work-in-progress.[73] According to Green, in Gramsci's view, subordination was not limited solely to class relations but conceived as a multifaceted framework such as gender, race, religion etc. In Green's reading of Gramsci, the scope and width of the term 'subaltern' is such that it is not restricted purely to class relations but also examines social and political relations between different groups.[74] In this light, the question is: can we use the

70. Gerald Berreman's use of juxtapositional rhetoric to talk about caste is impressive. I have borrowed it here with slight rephrasing. See Gerald Berreman, "The Brahmanical View of Caste," in *Social Stratification*, ed. Dipankar Gupta (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 88.

71. See: David Arnold, "Gramsci and peasant subalternity in India," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 11, no. 4 (1984): 155-177; Timothy Brennan "Antonio Gramsci and Postcolonial Theory: "Southernism"," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2, (2001): 143-187.

72. Titiksha Shukla, "Understanding Dalit subalternity in the time of change: a case of Mahars in rural Maharashtra; India" (MPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 2017), 8-12, accessed March 05, 2023, http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/72661/1/Shukla%2C%20Titiksha.pdf.

73. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. 1, 2, 3,* ed. and trans. Joseph. A. Buttigieg, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 302.

74. Marcus, E. Green, "Rethinking the subaltern and the question of censorship in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*," *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 4 (2011): 387-404; Marcus E. Green, ed., *Rethinking Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2011).

term subaltern for (and instead of) Dalits and 'lower castes'? Whether we take the Gramscian notion of a subaltern social group as 'on the margins of history'[75] or Ranajit Guha's definition of subalterns as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way"[76], at first glance, it would seem commonsensical that Dalits and 'lower castes' fit the category of subalterns in the South Asian context. It's only partially true and obfuscates nuances and complexities. In his article, "Dalits are not merely subalterns: The need for a different perspective", T. K. Oommen highlights some of the inherent contradictions involved in collapsing these two categories. He argues that the political context for the phenomenon of subalternity and the social category of subalterns in India was colonialism with two distinct views on historiography: elite nationalist historiography (in other words, the history from the top); and the subaltern historiography, which recognised and acknowledged the self-consciousness and resistance offered by various masses – artisans, peasants and landless labourers – to landlords, traders and colonial administrators. While crediting subalternists for recognising subalterns' political participation in anti-colonial struggles, Oommen also asserts that the subalternist perspective is conditioned by coloniality.[77] He makes two important distinctions: "in contrast to subalterns who were deprived mainly economically and politically, the Dalits were also deprived socio-culturally", and "Dalit protests and mobilizations occurred independent of colonialism and pre-dated colonialism."[78]

75. Antonio Gramsci, "Notebook 25 (1934): On the Margins of History (The History of Subaltern Social Groups)," in *Subaltern Social Groups: A Critical Edition of Prison Notebook 25*, eds., Joseph A. Buttigieg and Marcus E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 1-14, https://doi.org/10.7312/gram19038-005.

76. Ranajit Guha, "Preface: On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35, accessed February 10, 2023, https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Guha%20Some%20Aspects.pdf.

77. Tharaileth. K. Oommen, "Dalits are not merely subalterns: The need for a different perspective," in *Dalits, Subalternity and Social Change in India*, eds. Ashok K. Pankaj and Ajit K. Pandey (London: Routledge, 2018), 29-48, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429434501.

78. Oommen, "Dalits are not merely subalterns", 29.

The criticism of subaltern scholarship is that it subsumes differences and enacts a single social category; concomitantly, it has also been charged with focusing too much on the difference. Anand Teltumbde contends that after the initial valiant approach to foreground subaltern histories obliterated by elitist historiography, subalternists, under the influence of postmodernism and cultural studies, started focusing mainly on the textuality of colonialism, defence of indigenous cultural differences and critique of historicism and western epistemologies. He argues that "today, subalternism has become synonymous with celebration of differences among people, leaving no hope for better future for the oppressed."[79]

These debates indicate that using 'subaltern' as an umbrella term to imply caste-based dominations, subordinations and experiences along economic, political and social lines comes with several theoretical and ethical-political challenges. My usage of the term 'caste-subalterns' does not ignore the incomplete synonymy between the two terms. On the contrary, by hyphenating these two terms, I am signalling the need to recognise and maintain that caste is a very specific type of subalternity. At the same time, I do not believe in overstating the differences so much that it hinders any possible solidarities among different subaltern groups. Inherent in the PhD research project and its methodological imaginations were some pragmatic concerns about the selection of terms. The project primarily focuses on but is not limited to Dalit experiences. Moreover, in terms of content and methodology, it has been negotiated through different caste affinities – Dalits, Hindu OBCs and Muslim OBCs, which becomes clear in the films and published articles. Based on my conceptual leanings and pragmatic concerns in choosing a term, I think 'caste-subaltern' best captures the ethos of the project while fully acknowledging that any term that I opt for would be, at best, partial.

79. Anand Teltumbde, "Review of *Subalternism vs Dalitism*, by Manu Bhagavan and Anne Eldhaus," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 52 (2008): 22, accessed January 15, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40278329.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF RICE

In every stage of the production
You have been involved
Even if it’s not your field
Most likely, it’s not your field

You see rice – every day
More grains than you can count
You see freight trains carrying rice – every day
Containers, almost a kilometre long

And for that rice to come back
You need to furnish a certificate –
Prove that you need to eat
You gather your evidence
Still, there is a chance
That you will be denied

At this stage
Metaphors become cruel
Ant eggs register as a metaphor for rice
Only to those who have to eat them

You burn the rice
You grind the rice
You are compelled to write
In black and white –
‘Direct Poetry’

You, here, is not an I

Famine

> Who defines an event as a 'famine' is a question of power relations within and between societies.[80]

During my fieldwork in Midnapore in 2019, I was struck by the definitional and temporal fuzziness coming to the surface when I would ask people about the famine of 1943. Words such as দুর্ভিক্ষ (*durbhikṣa*), ক্ষুধা (*kṣudhā*), অকাল (*akāla*), অন্নকষ্ট (*annakaṣṭa*), ক্ষিদে (*kṣidē*) and মন্বন্তর (*manvantara*) were often used interchangeably to describe and express a range of situations and feelings – from lack of food, hunger, starvation, famine, to the great famine. Furthermore, the temporal slippage was so evident that sometimes I would lose track of the years; it was difficult to assess if they were talking about the famine of 1943 or cyclones in the 1980s or the present. Only much later, while doing literature mapping on different conceptualisations of famine, I came across the work of Bruce Currey, who shares something similar based on his study of famines in Bangladesh. According to Bruce, there are three broad types of famine in the cultural and linguistic landscape of Bangladesh: akāla meaning scarcity (when times are bad); durbhikṣa meaning famine (when alms are scarce) and manvantara meaning nationwide famine (when the epoch changes).[81] In a similar vein, albeit in the context of Africa, Alex de Waal writes:

> In Africa, words for 'famine' are typically the same as words for 'hunger'. In Swahili it is njaa, in Amharic rehab, in Hausa yunwa, etc.: all are used for both 'hunger' and 'famine'. Arabic is the principal exception to this, but even here the word ju', meaning hunger, is also used as a cognate of maja'a, famine. Throughout the continent words for eating and hunger are used to express many differing positive and negative aspects of life. People or

80. Alex de Waal, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

81. Bruce Currey, "The Famine Syndrome: Its Definition for Relief and Rehabilitation in Bangladesh," *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 7, (1978): 87.

> communities which are prosperous, predatory, or powerful are 'eating', those who are poor or powerless are 'hungry', even if they actually have enough food.[82]

In light of this, the most pertinent questions that come to the fore are: what is famine, should we sidestep the definitional challenges, or is there something to be gained from exploring different understandings of famine? A cursory look at the dictionary definitions of famine reveals three broad constituting elements: mortality, mass-scale starvation and food shortage. As per the Cambridge Dictionary, famine is "a situation in which there is not enough food for a great number of people, causing illness and death, or a particular period when this happens."[83] Collins Dictionary defines it as "a situation in which large numbers of people have little or no food, and many of them die"[84], and according to the Macmillan Dictionary, famine is "a serious lack of food that continues for a long time and causes many people in a country to become ill or die."[85] This view of famine as a discrete event triggered by food shortage and eventually resulting in mass death by starvation is rather narrow, and it's not only the dictionaries but also famine analysts who propagated this until recently.[86] Whether it is B. G. Kumar's definition of famine as "virulent manifestations of intense starvation causing substantial loss of life"[87] or John Rivers' (et al.) statement that "starvation is a semantic prerequisite for the definition of famine"[88] or

82. de Waal, *Famine that Kills*, 12.

83. *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Famine," accessed March 15, 2023, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/famine.

84. *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. "Famine," accessed March 15, 2023, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/famine#:~:text=a%20severe%20shortage%20of%20food,violent%20hunger.

85. *Macmillan Dictionary*, s.v. "Famine," accessed March 15, 2023, https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/famine.

86. Stephen Devereux, "Famine in the Twentieth Century," working paper 105, Institute for Development Studies, 2000, 4, accessed February 18, 2023, https://www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=files/dmfile/wp105.pdf.

87. B.G. Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case-Study," in *The Political Economy of Hunger, Volume 2: Famine Prevention*, eds. Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 173.

88. J. Rivers, J. Holt, J. A. Seaman, and M. Bowden, "Lessons for Epidemiology from the Ethiopian Famines," *Annales Société Beige de Médecin Tropicale* 56 (1976): 355.

Mohiuddin Alamgir's insistence that "focus on death seems to be very meaningful since it is the ultimate manifestation of famine"[89], starvation and death seem to be key constituent elements that define famine. Several scholars have challenged this narrow framework. Alex de Waal contends that unlike the conception of famine in Africa and Bangladesh, which grow out of actual experiences, in native English-speaking geographies, there is an insistence on "positivistic criterion of measurable changes in food availability or death rates"[90] and resistance to the idea that famine can occur in the absence of mass scale starvation and deaths. In his analysis, he attributes it to the population theory of Malthus, which links food shortage to famine and see it as a natural check on population growth. He argues that the Malthusian conception of famine marks a crucial shift in thinking; instead of seeing famines as social experiences, it was reconceptualised as a food shortage and mass starvation deaths. Before the Malthusian legacy, the criterion of an event being a famine was defined by those suffering it and understanding it as such. In the wake of the Malthusian debate, the tendency to treat famines as a technical error became widespread; now, the criterion for the famine was a noticeable rise in death rates caused by a reduction in food supply and starvation, as determined by medical professionals.[91]

A host of thinkers and scholars has challenged Malthusian views. Amartya Sen's work on de-linking food shortage and famine is a noticeable contribution in this regard. Using different case studies, in his seminal book *Poverty and Famines*, Sen demonstrated that famine could occur without FAD (food availability decline). Instead, he proposed FEE (failure of exchange entitlement) as a framework to develop a deeper understanding of famines.[92] Sen's work shifted the analytical framework from the Malthusian logic of population growth outstripping food production to people's inability to acquire food. According to Sen, structures of

89. Mohiuddin Alamgir, *Famine in South Asia: The Political Economy of Mass Starvation* (Cambridge, Mass: Oelgeshlager, Gunn and Hain, 1980), 6.

90. de Waal, *Famine that Kills*, 10.

91. de Waal, *Famine that Kills*, 18.

92. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

ownership and entitlement relations within any society are key to understanding starvation. He describes entitlements as "the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces".[93] From this lens, a person can procure food by exchanging his or her endowments (in other words, assets, resources, and labour power that he or she possesses). One can grow (production entitlement), buy (trade-based entitlement), work for (labour entitlement), or receive food (inheritance and transfer entitlement).[94] This framework broadened the understanding of the causality of any famine. Sen's empirical contentions, especially his work on the Bengal famine of 1943 in which he disproved FAD as the cause of the famine, and his general reconceptualisation of famines have been debated and, to some extent, also disputed. Irrespective of these contentions, Sen does get credit for excising FAD from the Malthusian concept of famines; however, he has been criticised for leaving the other part of the Malthusian concept intact, which is the concept of famine as mass death from starvation. Alex de Waal states that Sen tried to sidestep the definitional debate on famine and therefore ended up using a commonsensical usage of the term, which he defined as "a particularly virulent form of [starvation] causing widespread death."[95] Sen, in this sense, retained the idea of ultimate manifestation of famine – mass starvation and death.[96] In a similar vein, Jenny Edkins has contended that while Sen moves away from famine as a failure of food production and availability, he holds on to the idea of a breakdown, collapse or failure, albeit

93. Amartya Sen, *Resources, Values and Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 497.

94. Stephen Devereux, "Sen's Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-critiques," *Oxford Development Studies* 29, no. 3, (2001): 245-263, accessed February 18, 2023, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/FamineMortality.pdf. Devereux, in the footnotes (p. 259), gives an example to illustrate the entitlement approach: "One example: a pastoralist can sell his or her cow for a 50 kg bag of millet. The cow is an endowment, the bag of millet is one entitlement (among many) that the cow can provide; the exchange entitlement mapping includes the livestock/grain price ratio (1 cow = 50 kg of millet). Since famines in rural areas are characterized by collapsing livestock prices and escalating food prices, the livestock/grain price ratio is often used as an indicator of pastoralists' "exchange entitlements" in famine early warning systems."

95. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 40.

96. de Waal, *Famine that Kills*, 11.

that of persons' entitlements. Building on this further, Edkins argues that Sen failed to acknowledge that famines could result from the social or economic system rather than its failure. Once designated as a failure, whether because of a natural or economic system, famine appears as a technical or managerial problem.[97] Sen's entitlement framework, according to Edkins, is divorced from ethical connotations and is more about "entitled to starve"[98] instead of "a concept of the right to food"[99].

Amrita Rangasami also questions Sen's working definition of famine by pointing out that mortality remains central in his framework. She posits that mortality is only a biological culmination and not a necessary condition of famine. Drawing attention to the process instead of fixating on outcomes, she advocates that any famine is a drawn-out politico-social-economic process of oppression that can have various stages, such as dearth, famishment and mortality. She argues that these processes are in play before culminating in disease and death as final outcomes and makes a case for acknowledging that it is still a famine even if the process is stopped before it reaches its worst manifestation.[100] In keeping with the need to broaden our understanding of famines, Jeremy Swift asserts that nutrition must be included in studies of famines. In Swift's opinion, entitlement theory sidelined the nutrition question because it implied that "people do not go hungry until they no longer have the ability to command enough food, and that this then leads to starvation, closely followed by death".[101] This is also eloquently expressed by Mike Davis:

97. Jenny Edkins, "Mass Starvations and the Limitations of Famine Theorising," *IDS Bulletin* 33 no. 4 (2002): 12-18, accessed February 18, 2023, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/8636/IDSB_33_4_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2002.tb00039.x.pdf?sequence=1.

98. Jenny Edkins, "Legality with a vengeance: famines and humanitarian relief in 'complex emergencies'," *Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 550.

99. Jenny Edkins, "Legality with a vengeance", 559.

100. Amrita Rangasami, "'Failure of Exchange Entitlements' Theory of Famine: A Response," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 41 (1985): 1747–1752, accessed February 18, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4374919.

101. Jeremy Swift, "Understanding and Preventing Famine and Famine Mortality," *IDS Bulletin* 24, no. 4 (1993): 2, accessed February 18, 2023, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/9371/IDSB_24_4_10.1111-j.1759-5436.1993.mp24004001.x.pdf.

> even while focusing on "famines that killed" (and killed on a gigantic scale), we must acknowledge that famine is part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it. Each famine is a unique, historically specific epidemiological event, and despite the heroic efforts of demographers, famine and epidemic mortality are not epistemologically distinguishable.[102]

Along with broadening the deliberations on definitional possibilities and challenges, some scholars have also started stressing the importance of politicising famines and considering them as socio-economic and political processes.[103] At the core of this idea is that famines are not just about relationships between persons and commodities, as proposed by entitlement theory, but also between people, which is inextricably linked to power relations.[104] P. Walker concurs with this approach and observes that seeing famines as a socio-economic process allows us to see how it causes the "accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful groups in the community, to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood."[105] Famines are generally caused by many factors such as war, depression, development policies, extreme climate events etc. According to Mike Davis, these factors might activate the worst manifestation of social relations between unequally endowed groups, but the question of inequality remains at the centre.[106]

Another aspect of politicising famines is not to see them as a failure, aberration, or abstraction but rather to see them as acts of

102. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and The Making of the Third World* (London and New York: Verso, 2001): 21.

103. See: Edkins, "Mass Starvations,"14-15; Rangasami, "Failure of Exchange Entitlements' Theory".

104. Edkins, "Mass Starvations and the Limitations of Famine Theorising," 14.

105. Peter Walker, *Famine Early Warning Systems: Victims and Destitution* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1989): 6.

106. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.

omission and commissions by people.[107] This responsibility and accountability framework allows us to define famines not solely with reference to victims but also to perpetrators. Moreover, it makes us ask who the beneficiaries are; any famine is a process in which "benefits accrue to one section of the community while losses flow to the other".[108]

107. Edkins, "Mass Starvations", 15-17.

108. Rangasami, "'Failure of Exchange Entitlements' Theory," 1748.

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

There came a devastating flood…

But where first
Who has a thatched house
And whose house is built on low-lying land

Who has no cultivable land
And whose livelihood is gone
Now that the landlord’s fields are submerged

Who has how many sacks of grains stacked
Enough to last many monsoons

Who will borrow money
And who will lend

Whose children have to return from factories in cities
To look after whatever little is left

Who will usurp the schools and temples as shelters
And who will be barred

Who has access to the officer-in-charge
For rescue boats
And who will decide the route

Who do the NGOs reach
Considering that they dump the relief material
By the roadside
Not knowing who lives where.

Who will get compensated
If the criteria set by the state
Is that compensation will be commensurate to
What you owned prior to the flood[109]

109. In the aftermath of Kosi flood of 2008, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, where I was doing my Masters, mobilised a team of students and teachers to go to the flood-affected area for volunteer and assessment work. For the first time, at least in my lifetime, the devastating scale of the flood had made visible a reality that people from the region live every year, even now. Unlike most of my colleagues, this was not new for me. I come from the Kosi region, and the memory of many floods or flood-like situations has not left my family or me. With varying intensity, flooding is so common that the Kosi is not just a river but a river of sorrow.

I knew floods prior to my visit, but the flood of 2008 changed something. For the first time, I understood why my father had been obsessed with elevating the land on which we have had our house. Our ancestors were brought as farm labourers from another village to the current location by a Bhumihar zamindar (upper caste landlord) to work in his fields. They settled down on a low-lying land. There used to be (and to an extent still is) a direct correlation between caste hierarchy and the elevation of the land. Our house was partially submerged in the 1987 Kosi flood, and its memory ensured that whenever my family could afford it, they would elevate the land. Compared to neighbouring Dalit villages, our village, comprising mostly of OBC (Other Backward Castes) farmers, was much better off (and still is) in terms of the ability to cope and rebuild after the floods.

I can trace my interest in intersectionality of caste and famine to the flood of 2008. I suppose this is where I learned to turn my intuitions and experiences into a questionnaire.

Intersectionality of Caste and Famine

Famine is not an abstraction; it is often rooted in structural inequalities that exist in a society. By the time a famine is recognised or seen as such, it assumes a scale and perpetuates a particular kind of semantics in which the false but very real weight of universal suffering is so high that it can easily obfuscate the uneven impacts caused by differential vulnerabilities caused by caste, class, gender etc. Graded entitlement of rights and access to resources (or the exclusion from these rights and resources) as major features of the caste system mean that caste plays a decisive role in deciding who is impacted by the famine and to what extent. Amartya Sen's entitlement exchange approach, if not for its depoliticised, deterministic economic and technical aspects, can be a good place to start unpacking the uneven impacts of famines. First, we need to ask what determines the entitlements, and the immediate second question should be how big the role of caste is in determining those entitlements.

Except for a few studies that explore the link between caste and famines of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much of the work that explores caste as a factor in compounding vulnerabilities is located in contemporary disaster studies. These studies indicate that caste-based exclusions, which are often enforced – advertently or inadvertently – by the state through its policies, doubly affect Dalits and other 'low caste' groups in the aftermath of a disaster because, in the absence of access to socio-economic and political resources, their abilities to cope and rebuild is severely limited. Pre-existing vulnerabilities make them further vulnerable.[110]

110. For contemporary studies linking caste and disasters, see: Daanish Mustafa, Sara Ahmed, Eva Saroch and Heather Bell, "Pinning down vulnerability: From narratives to numbers," *Disasters* 35, no. 1 (2010): 62–86; Nibedita S. Ray-Bennett, "The influence of caste, class and gender in surviving multiple disasters: A case study from Orissa, India," *Environmental Hazard* 8 no.1 (2009): 5–22; Ramaswami Mahalingam, Srinath Jagannathan, and Patturaja Selvaraj, "Decasticization, Dignity, and 'Dirty Work' at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2019): 213–39; Mahima A. Jain, "Despite being hit hardest by natural disasters, landless Dalits are the last to get relief," *Scroll.in*, August 14, 2019, https://scroll.in/article/933709/despite-being-hit-hardest-by-natural-disasters-landless-dalits-are-the-last-to-get-relief.

Landholding and food security are intertwined in the Indian context but also under-discussed. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), more than 58% of all rural Dalit households in India were landless in 2013.[111] Based on a survey of over 5000 households in Uttar Pradesh, a study found that caste and landholding significantly affect food security; 94% of food-insecure households had zero or only marginal landholding. Furthermore, the survey showed that marginalised castes have a three-to-four times higher probability of being food insecure than their upper castes counterparts.[112] In a largely agrarian society where the major source of earning and food security is land ownership, Dalits, in particular, were prohibited from holding resources, especially land, because of their caste status. For Ambedkar, the material basis of the caste system is the land monopoly of caste Hindus in rural India. Moreover, he saw landholding as not only asset ownership by individuals but also constitutive of economic freedom and social dignity.[113]

Despite some progress made in terms of Dalit rights, land reforms and redistribution, the contemporary reality continues to be concerning. If such is the predicament now, one can only imagine how big of an influence caste-based exclusion had on the impacts of famines in pre-independence India. In the context of the 1866 Famine of Orissa, Bidyut Mohanty describes how people reaching *chhatras* (food relief centres) were called *chhatrakhias*, a new social category considered even lower than 'low castes' in the post-famine period. Mohanty found that Dalits were the lowest even among the already outcaste *chhatrakhias* and faced harsher effects of the famine.[114] Caste-based privileges and discrimination were far too common in the famine relief camps during British rule.

111. Awanish Kumar, "Ambedkar and his idea of the caste of land," *Indian Express*, October 30, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/ambedkar-and-his-idea-of-the-caste-of-land-8237543/.

112. Srinivas Goli, Anu Rammohan & Sri Priya Reddy, "The interaction of household agricultural landholding and *Caste* on food security in rural Uttar Pradesh, India," *Food Security* 13 (2021): 219–237.

113. Awanish Kumar, "Ambedkar and his idea of the caste of land,"; Awanish Kumar, 2020. "B R Ambedkar on Caste and Land Relations in India," *Review of Agrarian Studies* 10 (January-June) no.1 (2020): 37-56.

114. Bidyut Mohnaty, *A Haunting Tragedy: Gender, Caste and Class in the 1866 Famine of Orissa* (Routledge, 2021).

Famine public work or wages, as a measure of relief, was largely dictated by caste. For instance, the Revised Famine Codes of North Western Province in 1896 stated that a necessary background for a supervisor of camps "should ordinarily be a respectable, literate inhabitant of the tahsil, Muhammedan or Brahman, or of other good caste, who is in distressed circumstances, and is glad to do the work at 1 rupee per month."[115] Moreover, cooking in the camps was largely assigned to people from upper castes to accommodate the caste-Hindu sentiments.[116] Pointing to shared understanding between the colonial state and dominant castes, Madhvi Jha locates famine public works (mainly earthworks to construct roads, railways, canals etc.) in the late nineteenth century as an intersection between colonialism, caste, labour and gender. She demonstrates that famine public work was segregated into large departmental, and village works. The latter was considered respectable work by the dominant caste. The dominant castes' demand of respectable work was accommodated by the colonial state, but it meant segregation and reservation of village works for them. Respectable labour was not defined solely in terms of work location but also by co-workers. Jha argues that it reinforced castes in more ways than one – landed and non-landed, labouring and non-labouring. Ruminating on this segregation, she writes:

> In the second half of the nineteenth century, the specific alignment of caste, labour, and property contributed to the process of labour control and subordination in rural India, 'freeing up' labour for the various factories, mines, mills, and plantations. It also reconstituted caste power over economic resources, including labour, within the changing agrarian order.[117]

115. Sohini Chattopadhyay, "Heard of famine wages? How British rulers' thrift policies shaped Indian capitalism," *ThePrint*, September 13, 2022, https://theprint.in/opinion/heard-of-famine-wages-how-british-rulers-thrift-policies-shaped-indian-capitalism/1125353/.

116. Sohini Chattopadhyay, "Heard of famine wages?."

117. Madhavi Jha, "Doing 'Coolie' Work in a 'Gentlemanly' Way: Gender and Caste on the Famine Public Works in Colonial North India," *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 2 (2023): 353.

Caste as a factor barely features in the studies of the Bengal famine of 1943. However, several scholars have contended that, at least in some part, private hoarding and profiteering by the landowning elite exacerbated the famine. Hoarding of rice stocks was not merely done in panic by ordinary people but also by traders and landed rural elites in anticipation of speculative rise in prices.[118] Based on the direct correlation between caste and land, it would not be an intellectual leap to argue that privileged castes tried to profit from a crisis and displayed apathy.

The Bengal famine was also used to consolidate upper and middle-caste Hindus in the name of the religion. Through relief activism, Mahasabha, a Hindu organisation, disseminated communal politics and mobilised the public along communal lines. Understanding the need for caste and class sensitivities, Mahasabha devised relief mechanisms that balanced the social hierarchy and the need to seek aid in the form of food. In contrast to the inadequacy and incompetence of the colonial government in relief work, Mahasabha's efforts appealed to high castes, leading to their consolidation.[119] By stressing the ineptness of the Muslim League[120] in keeping Bengal fed, the organisation used the opportunity to communalise the famine. The chasm that was already there between Hindus and Muslims further widened during the famine years.[121]

118. There is no consensus on the role and extent to which private hoarding played in exacerbating the famine and moreover, the narrative of private hoarding suited the authorities as it diverted the blame from them. Most scholars agree that it played a limited role. See: Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, (London: Hurst, 2015); Muhammad Saiful Islam and Tasnuva Habib Zisan, "Famine of 1943 in Bakarganj and British Colonial Policy," *Studies in People's History* 8, no. 2, (2021): 231–240, https://doi.org/10.1177/23484489211041149; Cormac O'Grada, "'Sufficiency and Sufficiency and Sufficiency'".

119. Abhijit Sarkar, "Fed by Famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's Politics of Religion, Caste, and Relief in Response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944," *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 6 (2020): 2022–2086, doi:10.1017/S0026749X19000192.

120. Since 1943, the Muslim League, with the support of some other parties, led the Bengal government. It's important to note here that pre-partition Bengal was a Muslim-majority province.

121. Abhijit Sarkar, "Fed by Famine".

Definitional firewalls and minute disagreements on the exact historical trajectory aside, based on how caste is constituted and organized by principles of exclusion, discrimination, graded inequality and hierarchy and denial to resources, it's reasonable to argue that its bearings are even more prominent in times of a crisis. This is why famine must be politicised from the perspective of caste. However, at the same time, a cautionary approach is required because famine, by the very virtue of invoking an event and a mass scale starvation leading to deaths, can invisibilise questions of everyday exclusion, inequality, poverty, malnutrition, hunger, and starvation. If seen as processes, both famine and caste are intertwined in the Indian context and this PhD project is guided by this ethos, evidence of which can be found in all the filmic work.

THREE RECIPES

1. Chanya

Dry pieces of beef
from a carcass
in the sun
Cut them into thin strips
called chaanya
Dry them by the fireplace
The smoke will turn them
bright red
Feel proud of the Mahars
when you read
that they smoke pork in the West
in the same way

When the chaanya are dry
cut them into pieces
called todkya
Hold them in reserve
for the bad months
of Shravan and Ashadh[122]

122. Excerpt from the Daya Pawar's poem "Chaanya". The poem first featured in in his autobiography *Balunt*, originally written in Marathi in 1978. See Daya Pawar, "Chanya," in *Baluta*, translated by Jerry Pinto (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2015).

2. Blood Fry

Ingredients:

250 gm goat blood
1 large (or 2 medium) onions
1/2 bunch coriander leaves
1/2 bunch mint leaves
5-10 garlic cloves (or more if that's how you like it)
50 g ginger
Oil, to sauté
1 medium tomato
2-3 green chillies
Red chilli powder, to taste
Coriander powder, to taste
Turmeric, to taste
Garam masala (we love the Shakti Masalas or the chicken masala)
Salt, to taste

Method:

Wash the blood, then cook it for a couple of minutes in boiling water.
Cooking blood is similar to cooking paneer, tofu or kheema. You could crush it with your hand to give it the kheema/ egg bhurji texture or cut it into cubes as you'd with paneer or tofu after taking it out of the water.
Heat oil in a heavy bottomed wok, as you would for cooking any meat.

Add in the onion and fry until they begin to brown. Now add chillies, tomatoes. (My great grand aunt used to add dill at this point, you can too.) But you should add mint and coriander leaves now. Now you add salt, turmeric, chilli powder, garam masala. Mix well to combine.

Finally, add in the blood.

Mix it well, then cover the wok with a lid and allow to cook for 5 minutes.

Uncover and remove from heat. Serve hot.[123]

123. This recipe is by Vinay Kumar. Reflecting on the link between caste and food, he states that this recipe, like Dalits in India, reside on the margins. According to Kumar's mother, Blood Fry was a common dish since meat was unaffordable. Kumar believes that shame attached to poverty is the reason why this dish is slowly fading away from Dalit kitchens. But he also states that community consciousness has kept the dish alive. See Vinay Kumar, "Blood Fry & Other Dalit Recipes from My Childhood," *Goya*, September 22, 2022, https://www.goya.in/blog/blood-fry-other-recipes-from-my-dalit-childhood.

3. Rice-water

Ingredients:

Rice; Water; Salt to taste

Method:

Boil the rice. Drain the water in a utensil.
Add salt. Serve/drink hot.[124]

124. I remember drinking rice-water in my childhood (almost as a soup). It was not for the lack of rice or food in the family. It can perhaps be traced back to a necessity borne out of scarcity in earlier times in the region. During the PhD research I learnt the historical significance of rice-water. Sharanya Deepak captures it quite beautifully: ""Fain," or "rice water," is the most well-documented memory of the Famine." See Sharnya Deepak, "A 'Forgotten Holocaust' Is Missing From Indian Food Stories," *Atlas Obscura,* September 17, 2020, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/indian-food-writing#:~:text=%E2%80%9CFain%2C%E2%80%9D%20or%20%E2%80%9Crice,corners%20of%20Kolkata%20for%20food.

Chapter 2: Ethical and methodological (im)possibilities

> Clearly, the constitution of the subaltern as an external other that is nevertheless knowable as such by the self is a ruse of dominance, a projection of self-confirming otherness. This is not an unfamiliar point, but I mention it because this masquerade of dominance also produces the illusion that the subalternist scholar can accomplish what the elites could not—that is, understand and describe subalternity in itself, in all its externality to power, free of distortions produced by elitism. Thus, the dominant representation of the subaltern as exterior to the constitution of dominance, a minor and inessential part of the authoritative social and political life, insinuates itself into radical scholarship that imagines it can "recover" the hidden history of subaltern positions and knowledges.[125]

> [W]e must recognise that Spivak's work is not intended to implore us to further silencing, and that we must apply her work on the ground towards an ethical engagement with subalternity that rests on a mode of speaking for and about in an anti-foundationalist and hyper-self-reflexive manner. The stakes are too great to ignore: if voice effects (even in part) a dissolution of subaltern status then even a trace of emancipatory promise in hegemony or voice-consciousness must be explored. This is no simple task and, perhaps as Spivak intends, there remains no hard-and-fast response to the possibilities of subaltern voice or voice-consciousness.[126]

The most complex and yet appealing part of this PhD has not been so much about identifying and establishing the fact that caste-subaltern questions and concerns are missing from the studies of the Bengal famine of 1943, but rather what are the ethical and methodological engagements that could open possibilities for attending to that gap. Here I am deliberately using 'attending'

125. Gyan Prakash, "The Impossibility of Subaltern History," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 2 (2000): 288, muse.jhu.edu/article/23894.

126. Mark Griffiths, "For speaking against silence: Spivak's subaltern ethics in the field," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 43, no. 2 (June 2018): 309, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12226.

instead of 'filling' the gap, for the latter assumes a possibility of first recovery and then representation. The subaltern scholarship, with many theoretical revisions of its initial proposal of writing the history from below since its inauguration in the 1980s, cautions us, as evident in Gyan Prakash's assertion (quoted earlier), against this recovery and representation. But in parallel, any interpretation of subaltern scholarship to mean inaction or further silencing of subalterns is a gross mischaracterisation, as alluded to by Mark Griffith (quoted earlier). Away from the (im)possibility of subaltern history as expressed by Prakash or Spivak's initial assertion that subalterns cannot speak (with their own voice, for themselves),[127] or the construction and the constitution of the subaltern as exterior or fully knowable subjects (untouched by the world and operating outside of power), how do we find possible ways to work in and around a very palpable sense of (im)possibility that shadow any subaltern work. This question takes centre stage in this chapter. However, it must be mentioned here that the risk of duplication and repetition is highest here since all the published articles, to a varying degree, explore the ethical and methodological questions and underpinnings. In the first two articles, I have explored the conceptual and artistic manifestations of 'researching in and through cinema', archival interventions as a method to deconstruct the existing films and enact subaltern presence, and the limits of self-reflexivity. The third article describes the methodological processes and underpinnings of creative collaboration with local Patchitra artists and the implications of treating subalterns as creative subjects from the outset. An attempt has been made in this article to investigate the difference between subaltern methodologies (a disciplinary question) and methodologies of the subaltern (for instance, Patchitra) and how the negotiation between these two methods can bypass the seemingly irreducible differences and instead open imaginaries, which might be partial and contingent but generative enough to do at least some critical subaltern work. The fourth article further builds on some of these ethical and

127. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988) 271–313.

methodological questions by explicating and meditating on my collaboration with a Dalit performance artist, originally from Nepal but currently based in Norway. As evident from the cursory summaries, the articles cover much of the ground pertaining to ethical and methodological questions. Therefore, my primary focus in this chapter is to attend to aspects that don't find space in the articles, especially a consolidated exploration of the broader theoretical and conceptual debates within subaltern scholarship that have had an impact on my thinking on the question of motivation, methods and ethics. In this chapter, I will also try to curate a list of methods attempted during the research and my brief reflections on them for coherence purposes.

Knowledge to relations: implications for ethical-methodological injunctions

In 1999, Christine Sylvester famously remarked, "postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating."[128] This remark came up in discussion with a friend a few months prior to my fieldwork-filming in Midnapore. At that time, I was actively reading about subaltern ethics and methodology, and this statement made me dig deeper. I quickly realised I could benefit immensely from the nuanced, difficult, and complex discussions taking place in Human Geography and Development Studies. As a scholar located within Development Studies, Christine Sylvester's primary concern was finding points of convergence within her field and postcolonial studies. Her diagnosis of the problem facing the two fields was that while her discipline does not listen to subalterns, postcolonial studies is too locked in intellectual pursuits and ignores the practical projects of postcolonialism. Of the two disciplines, she emphasises it is Postcolonial Studies which would have the greater radical potential if it could also focus on and attend to praxis.[129]

128. Christine Sylvester, "Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: Disparate Tales of the 'Third World,'" *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1999): 703, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993584.

129. Sylvester, "Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies," 703.

Looking back, this discussion encouraged me to find literature and examples of projects where ethics and praxis were entangled and rehearsed through each other without creating a sense of helplessness or freezing. More than any other scholarly work, I found Mark Griffith's article (titled "For speaking against silence: Spivak's subaltern ethics in the Field") quite useful and kept returning to it.[130] Drawing from subaltern scholarship, especially Spivak's writing on subalternity and representation, and his fieldwork in India, he explicates three ethical injunctions – "an antifoundationalist approach to subalternity", "hyper-self-reflexivity of an investigating subject", and "the imperative to name subalternity."[131] He argues that Spivak's intervention does not imply further silencing of subalterns and that we must put her theory into practice "on the ground towards an ethical engagement with subalternity that rests on a mode of speaking for and about in an antifoundationalist and hyper-self-reflexive manner."[132] My idea is not to communicate that I fully agree with Griffith or to put him on a pedestal; he is among many scholars who have reoriented their work in the wake of Spivak's interjection. I invoke his article here because he summarises the important debates very well. Aside from my minor disagreements on hyper-self-reflexivity, I empathise with his attempt and assertion to negotiate the ethical terms continuously but never negate or withdraw from the necessary work. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly explicate Spivak's interjection and provide Griffith's interpretation and approach, which have greatly influenced my thinking on ethics and methodology.

In the early days of subaltern studies, the two most important concerns were challenging elite historiography and emphasising the need for writing history from below.[133] As an epistemological

130. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 299-311.

131. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 299.

132. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 300.

133. See: Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000); Sahid Amin, *Event Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

position nested within the larger rubric of postcolonial studies, it sought to "cull out the 'non-west' as a sovereign subject of its own history which can be narrated through structures and categories that depart from the established norm of historiography."[134] Starting with the studies of peasant uprisings of the 1800s, it aimed to challenge both colonialist and nationalist historiography of India. It gave prominence to, in Guha's words, the "contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite."[135]

Inherent assumptions pertaining to the possibility of recovery and representation of subaltern voices and subaltern subjectivity being different from the elite were critiqued by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay "Can the subaltern speak?". Her interjections in the form of a rhetorical question still inform many of the debates on ethical and methodological engagements with subalterns. She criticised both the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) as well as the Western theorists (in particular, Deleuze and Foucault). Her criticism of SSG is that, in her view, they saw the subaltern from within a limited Marxist understanding of their historical agency as a self-identified, coherent group that was a 'class' in all but name. Additionally, she criticised the belief that this insurgent historical agency was recuperable and representable, even though, as they argued themselves, the subaltern was often not present in written history. Her criticism of Western theorists was that they present themselves as transparent subjects.[136] As a result, both SSG and Western theorists assumed "the subjectivities of oppressed people a coherent category open for representation."[137]

134. Srilata Sircar, "Between the Highway and the Red Dirt Track: Subaltern Urbanization and Census Towns in India" (PhD diss., Faculty of Social Sciences, Lund University, 2016), 28.

135. Ranjit Guha, "Preface: On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds., Ranjit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 39, accessed February 10, 2023, https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Guha%20Some%20Aspects.pdf.

136. See Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?". For a better understanding of Spivak's criticism of Deleuze, see Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, "Living in Smooth Space: Deleuze, Postcolonialism and the Subaltern," in *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, eds., Simone Bignall and Paul Patton (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 20-40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r20xg.5.

137. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 304.

She contended that the Subaltern Studies Group's initial response and approach meant that "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual."[138] Subaltern-elite difference along the lines of the master-slave dialectic, according to Spivak, recuperates subalterns into an "essentialist and taxonomic" textuality.[139] In reference to an unmediated conversation between Foucault and Deleuze ("Intellectuals and Power", 1972), Spivak argued that these two scholars conflated two distinct ideas of representation – *vertreten* (political representation within the hegemonic power, or in other words, speaking for) and *darstellen* (re-presentation, or in other words, speaking about). According to Spivak, Foucault and Deleuze do so to see the 'other' as a 'shadow of the self' – a transparent subject who can speak for itself, ignoring the power structures and legitimising a withdrawal from any serious engagement with the subaltern.[140] She is also critical of them because she thinks they sidelined the epistemic violence of colonialism and assumed subjectivities that are undetermined (free to become whatever they wish to in a Deleuzian sense) or defined in terms of power or coercion, as invoked by Foucault.[141]

Drawing on the example of the practice of *sati* (widow sacrifice) and the suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, Spivak argues that subalterns occupy an impossible space. For Spivak, these two examples illustrate how the combined violence of colonial and local patriarchy posits subaltern women as victims or silent

138. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 285.

139. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 284-285.

140. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 280.

141. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 271-281. For Deleuze's concept of 'becoming', see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (United Kingdom: Athlone Press, 1988). Also, see the introductory section of Samantha Bankston, *Deleuze and Becoming* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1-12, accessed April 10, 2023, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474233583.0005. For Foucault's analysis of power, see Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984* (London: Penguin UK, 2019).

sufferers, leaving no space to speak for themselves. Based on these two examples, she argues that representation is an act that involves a listener and speaker. Any attempt by subalterns for self-representation is not heard and recognised because it falls outside "the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation."[142] Essentialist, reductionist, utopian and universalist approaches, irrespective of their origin – either directly invoked by the subaltern school or disguised by the Western transparency thesis – present a difficult impasse. What is to be done ethically and methodologically if we acknowledge and agree with Spivak's criticism and her assertion that "the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous."[143]

Spivak has qualified and revised her position since her essay's publication and ensuing debates. She now asserts that it's not a matter of subalterns being incapable of speech but rather the inability of the elite scholar to learn their register. She wrote, "In the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark."[144] Scholarly attention was being paid to the question of ethical engagement with the 'other' prior to Spivak as well, but in the wake of her intervention, figuring out ethical approaches that refuse the claim of "making them present again" or "standing in for them"[145] has gained significant momentum. Whether it is Edward Said's idea of "permission to narrate",[146] Moreton-Robinson's conception of "talking up",[147] Trinh. T.

142. Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Talk," in *The Spivak Reader*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), 306.

143. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 284.

144. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 308. For the trajectory of Spivak's ideas on subalterns, also see Gayatri Spivak, "Gayatri Spivak: The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work," YouTube video, February 8, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZHH4ALRFHw.

145. Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (Columbia University Press: 2010) quoted in Sircar, "Between the Highway," 32.

146. Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): 27–48, https://doi.org/10.2307/2536688.

147. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2002).

Minh-ha's "speaking nearby",[148] or Bell Hooks's notion of "talking back",[149] we see scholars attempting to avoid producing easily consumable ethnographic descriptions of other's experience and moreover, and giving accounts of how subaltern groups are negotiating speech acts for themselves. Inherent in these ideas is an acknowledgement of scholars' limitations and irretrievable heterogeneity of subalterns. In terms of possible affinities and their limits, it is being expressed in different ways – as a shift to relationality in the place of commonality,[150] ethics of incommensurabilities,[151] and barely possible affinities.[152] Moreover, there is an acknowledgement that since subaltern narratives are fragmentary, they might not be able to assemble them coherently and not be able to access and recognise the traces of resistance within these narratives.[153]

Griffith contends that Spivak, in her later writings, unlike Western theorists of post-structural ethics, has explored "the (im)possibility of (more) ethical relations with an anti-foundationalist conceptualisation of postcolonial others."[154] Away from ethics, which is based on sameness or complete difference or unknowable and illegible subjects, Griffith thinks that Spivak's notion of irretrievable heterogeneity is a carefully considered approach that does not replace the "problematic 'sameness' with the problematic 'difference'."[155] Spivak insists on the irreducible unknowability of subalterns as opposed to the "transcoded

148. N.N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (1992): 82-91, https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82.

149. Bell Hooks, "Talking Back," *Discourse* 8 (1986): 123–28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44000276.

150. C. Pedwell, "Weaving Relational Webs: Theorizing Cultural Difference and Embodied Practice," *Feminist Theory* 9 (2008): 88, doi:10.1177/1464700107086365.

151. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 28-36.

152. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 113.

153. Sircar, "Between the Highway," 29-32.

154. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 304.

155. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 304.

anthropological subject/object."[156] This anti-foundationalist conceptualisation of subalternity enacts an ethical shift from "an issue of knowledge to one of relation. From here, there are no presuppositions, for it is the encounter with an Other that holds all inter-relational possibilities."[157]

The second aspect of Spivak's ethics pertains to the interrogation of the investigating subject's position.[158] She is critical of first-world analysts' insistence on letting the subaltern speak for themselves as it veils them as the absent non-representors.[159] The charge against this kind of theoretical transparency is twofold. It hides the colonial histories which still shape the encounter and re-turn and reconstitute the Third World into a resource marked by ethnographic and cultural differences.[160] Spivak is equally critical of postcolonial scholars like herself for what she calls 'insider knowledge', owed primarily to an accident of birth.[161] Her ethical call is to remain vigilant and critical of postcolonial writers' complicity and privileges. Inhabiting, acknowledging and unlearning of privileges is crucial in this pursuit of ethical engagement. Hyper-self-reflexivity, borrowing Ilan Kapoor's term, is the second ethical injunction for Griffith.[162] In the second article, I have reflected on the limits of self-reflexivity. For all its promise, I argue that we have to be vigilant against not only about our complicity and privileges but also our articulation, understanding and performance of self-reflexivity. It runs the risk of quickly turning into navele-gazing and the re-centering of the self. If, in the name of reflexivity, the self gets reconstituted with all the necessary critical credentials and remains uncontaminated by

156. Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 177.

157. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 304.

158. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 304.

159. Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" 292.

160. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 388.

161. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 267.

162. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 305. For the original work, see "Ilan Kapoor, Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World 'Other'," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2004): 627-647, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993737.

what subalterns think about the investigating subject, it defies the ethical call given to us by Spivak.

While Spivak was lauded for recognising the impossibility of subaltern speech, she was also criticised for not paying attention to the process through which voice might be achieved.[163] Griffith shares a different view, with which I agree to a large extent. In his reading, Spivak's use of deconstruction to show the complicity of intellectuals is not a call to retreat but rather to create conditions for turning impossibilities into possibilities.[164] Subalternity must be named if the eventual political goal is for the subalternity to disappear. As she writes, "[W]hat I'm interested in is seeing ourselves as namers of the subaltern. If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more."[165] For this transformative moment to take place, in her recent writings and lectures, she has started emphasising 'learning to learn' from subalterns, building infrastructure for the agency to emerge. By infrastructure, she means an "effort to establish, implement and monitor structures that allow subaltern resistance to be located and heard",[166] and conjoined 'learning to learn from below' is "a suspension of belief that one is indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from thinking that the Third World is in trouble and that one has the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one's world onto the Other."[167]

163. For instance, Vivek Chibber thinks that Spivak has been, at least to an extent, responsible for the decline of class analysis in Southasian studies. He holds the view that Spivak, despite her limited interjections, made Subaltern Studies popular and palatable in the West. Chibber writes, "[It] acted as a stamp of approval to the broader post-Marxist discussions." In my understanding Chibber's charge is that the absence of materialist class analysis negates the subaltern agency. See Vivek Chibber, "Whatever happened to class?" *Himal: Southasaian*, November 21, 2017, https://www.himalmag.com/whatever-happened-to-class/.

164. Griffiths, "For speaking against silence," 305.

165. Gayatri Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (London, UK: Routledge, 1990), 158.

166. Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 483, DOI: 10.1080/13688790500375132.

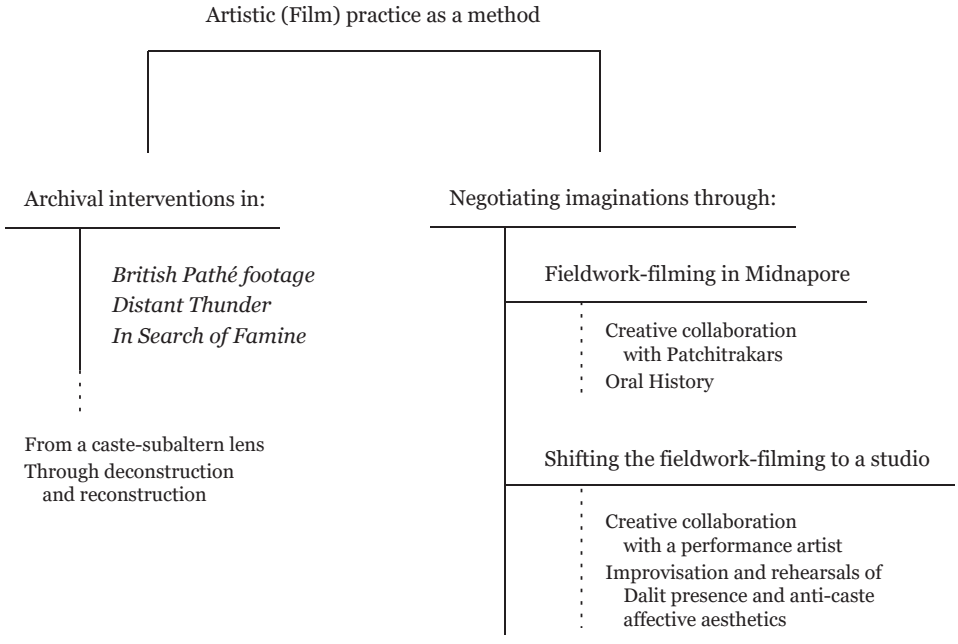
167. Spivak cited in Kapoor, "Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development?", 642. Also, see Gayatri Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 523-581.

In concrete terms, if these ethical injunctions are not rehearsed in and through methods, they will remain at the level of abstraction, reinforcing a politics of inaction. Before I launch into the brief descriptions of the methods attempted, I wish to summarise the guiding principles that shaped them. The list is neither exhaustive nor claims to be successfully adhered to in all instances. The list merely captures partial and incomplete attempts to orient myself in light of the aforementioned discussions and debates.

- Especially from a lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, the history of the Bengal famine is not readily available to be turned into a recuperative historical project.
- Caste-subalterns are not fully knowable; irretrievable heterogeneity must be acknowledged.
- Operating beyond 'sameness', 'complete difference' or 'not knowable at all'.
- Attending to the partial and fragmentary nature of subaltern narratives.
- Treating caste-subalterns as creative subjects from the outset.
- Understanding and appreciating the caste-subaltern as a category is not fully open to representation or projection of the self's shadow.
- Self-reflexivity without turning it into navel-gazing, and letting self-reflexivity be in dialogue with others' view of that reflexivity.
- Rejecting any sense of withdrawal or a call to retreat – necessary risks must be taken for necessary work; turning (im)possibilities into possibilities.
- Building infrastructure to let agencies surface.
- Learning to learn from below.

In Practice: rehearsing ethics through methods and vice-versa

I will keep this section brief since my reflections on methods and methodology are well explicated in the articles and films. However, for coherence purposes, I will summarise myriads elements that, as a whole, constitute the methodology for this PhD project. But first, the schematic representation of the methodology:



One of the key ideas behind a practice-based PhD is that creative practice is the basis through which a contribution is made to knowledge.[168] In other words, the creative medium is also the key

168. Rebecca Lyle Skains, "Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology, Media Practice and Education," *Media Practice and Education* 19, no. 1 (2018): 86, DOI: 10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175.

method through which an attempt is made to know something. Mika Hanula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén contend that "artistic research methodology argues for artistic research as a context-aware and historical process that works inside-in, beginning and ending with acts committed within an artistic practice."[169] I work primarily with the film medium, and in this research, film practice was the key activity and method through which I arrived at and explored the research themes and questions. Film practice, in this research, was thought of and practised not as an illustration or explication of a pre-figured research result, rather the inquiry was shaped and advanced by the methodological affordance of the medium – its tools, languages, contexts, formal concerns, histories etc. I did not set out with any formal intention of translating an idea into the medium of film; rather, the medium was guiding me to nuance, revise and advance my questions and further actions pertaining to conceptual, aesthetical and ethical concerns. That's why I would claim that the film practice was a methodology-in-process. The first set of film actions, archival interventions, resulted from watching existing films on the Bengal famine. Those interventions, then, nuanced my questions and approach for the fieldwork-filming in Midnapore. The fieldwork-filming and my attempts to edit that into a film then inspired me to move the field to a studio and collaborate with a performance artist to investigate the affective-embodied aesthetic approaches to questions of caste, food, famine and representation. Besides being a research tool, a major aspect of film practice as methodology-in-process was the formal considerations – at every stage of the research, I also had to consider how I was going to turn this research into a self-contained viewing experience for an audience who might not be familiar with every aspect of the research and processes involved in it. The formal considerations of how to mobilise film language and tools to exceed the documentation of carefully considered methodological approaches and create a filmic experience put the practice at the centre once again – in a sense, I began with the practice and ended with the practice.

169. See Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang Verlag, 2014). This citation is from the back cover of the book.

The other conceptual proposition of film "medium (as) the method"[170] is that it is more closely aligned with the ethical injunctions discussed earlier. If we take into consideration the irretrievable heterogeneity of caste-subalterns and attune our methods so that the practice becomes iterative, open, and as an infrastructure where agencies can surface, it automatically necessitates seeing the film as an open, constantly evolving and negotiated method instead of merely a medium of communication or documentation.[171] Film has been used in several established fields of scholarship, especially ethnography and anthropology, but, by and large, the medium is still codified and regulated within the disciplinary regulations and protocols.[172] This is not to say that there are no attempts within these disciplines to challenge and expand their understanding and usage of films.[173] In the wake of ethical injunctions given to us by Spivak and other scholars, the film can't remain a tool to turn caste-subalterns into easily reducible, knowable and representable subjects. It has to open itself for inflections, reflections, revisions, and negotiations so that more ethical engagements are imaginable, which, I would argue, is only possible when the film is not merely a medium but also a method.

170. Mark Pedelty and Elja Roy, "Film as Fieldwork," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, accessed April 13, 2023, https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-1308.

171. An interesting example of an open and iterative film practice, especially in the context of artistic research, is Eva la Cour's doctoral project *Geo-Aesthetical Discontent*. Through an iterative live-editing, Cour intervenes into the imaginaries of Svalbard. By shifting away from representational and scientific discourses, her doctoral project mobilises the guide as a figure to move towards mediation, of which affect, sensibility and care are intrinsic qualities. She proposes a more tentative, relational, fragmentary, momentary, and iterative approach to filmmaking to negotiate the role of film in intervening in the imaginaries of the Arctic. See Eva la Cour, "Geo-Aesthetical Discontent: Svalbard, the Guide and Post-Future Essayism," PhD diss., (University of Gothenburg, 2022).

172. Pedelty and Roy, "Film as Fieldwork".

173. Catherine Russel's work captures attempts to expand film practice in the field of ethnography very well. See Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). Also see the work of Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University (https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/).

In terms of its motivations, methods and approaches, this PhD took the view of artistic practice as a transdisciplinary effort and pursued it as such because it lends itself very well to transdisciplinary potentialities. Basarab Nicolescu opines that unlike multidisciplinarity, which incorporates several disciplines but maintains individual frameworks, or interdisciplinarity, where the transfer of methods happens from one discipline to another, affecting each other, but with goals still largely defined by one discipline, transdisciplinarity is "at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines."[174] A. Wendy Russell, Fern Wickson, and Anna L. Carew have summed it up very well:

> Transdisciplinarity has been described as a practice that transgresses and transcends disciplinary boundaries ... and seems to have the most potential to respond to new demands and imperatives. This potential springs from the characteristic features of transdisciplinarity, which include problem focus (research originates from and is contextualized in 'real-world' problems), evolving methodology (the research involves iterative, reflective processes that are responsive to the particular questions, settings, and research groupings) and collaboration (including collaboration between transdisciplinary researchers, disciplinary researchers and external actors with interests in the research).[175]

Transdisciplinarity does not outrightly refuse or exclude the disciplinary contexts, but it tries to de-couple the specific boundaries and languages from their original context so that new methodological possibilities can emerge.[176] This is exemplified in

174. Basarab Nicolescu, "Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Indisciplinarity, and Transdisciplinarity: Similarities and Differences," *RCC Perspectives*, no. 2 (2014): 19, accessed April 13, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26241230.

175. A. Wendy Russell, Fern Wickson, and Anna L. Carew, "Transdisciplinarity: Context, Contradictions and Capacity," *Futures* 40 (2008): 460-461.

176. Pam Burnard, Laura Colucci-Gray, and Pallawi Sinha, "Transdisciplinarity: Letting Arts and Science Teach Together," *Curriculum Perspectives* 41 (2021): 114.

my research as well. It brings together concepts and methods from famine studies, ethnography, oral history, caste studies, and film practice, but in its approach, it is not aimed at accounting for and maintaining the sanctity of each disciplinary thinking. Away from the tight grips of disciplinary pulls, it tries to work between, across and beyond different disciplines to move towards methodological imaginaries that are committed to (im)possibilities of caste-subaltern questions. The choice of working in a transdisciplinary way is also a decolonial question: in seeking to problematise the 'master discourse' assumptions and knowledge-bordering practices of disciplinarity, I am expressing an active desire to escape the rigidity of disciplinary policing.

Within the methodological scheme of this PhD, the first set of actions and activities involved a close reading of the existing films on the Bengal famine and archival footage. My initial thought was to write about these films through a caste-subaltern lens to map the field. After spending some time with the material and in my conversation with my supervisors, I started asking how I can already enact an entanglement of thinking and doing. This was the first transdisciplinary moment. What if cinema studies, caste studies, subaltern studies, and artistic practice (especially a long tradition of archival intervention) came together to create something that could provide my critical reading of the films and treat them as sites of new political and methodological imaginaries? This question became a bit more urgent and doable in light of Trinh T. Minh-ha's statement: "It is necessary for me always to keep in mind that one cannot really theorize about film, but only with film. This is how the field can remain open."[177] I called my interventions in these existing filmic works critical interventions, simply in the sense that critical means reflective thinking and carefully considered evaluation and analysis of a work and intervention, meaning coming in between (or interfering) to change something. To this end, I could arrive at some basic principles which were very helpful:

177. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Film as Translation, Interview conducted by Scott MacDonald, 1989," in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992):122.

- embracing from the outset that knowledge work can be carried out in and through the medium, language and tools of film and that this medium offers unique possibilities to reimagine scholarly forms.
- going beyond a mere translation of written research into film form.
- critiquing to propose an observation or alternative consideration.
- operating from an understanding that intervention is both a process and an outcome and that outcome can be a self-contained piece of filmic work.

I COULD EXIST DIFFERENTLY

WEISS:
You've spoken about the significance of the archive as a space for intervention. What do you find most vital about intervening in history through the use of archival material?

AKOMFRAH:
That is a big question. [laughs] It seems to me that there's something about the existence of footage that suggests that from its inception, it had a role, a purpose, a destiny, and one of those was that it should be seen. The intentions of those who gathered it, organized it, cut it into whatever tale, story, or news report it was, are not always clear. Sometimes it's clear, they simply wanted to say, "That group of people are a problem." The archive, especially the moving image archive, comes to us with a set of Janus-faced possibilities. It says, "I existed at one point and it's possible that I could exist differently." But in order to find that you need something else, which is not in the archive, which is the philosophy of montage. Montage allows the possibility of reengagement, of the return to the image with renewed purpose, a different ambition. So I'm interested in the archive firstly because of that possibility of return but I'm also interested in its indexical time; it feels always as if it is in some ways a fragile, contingent deposit of lost time, of a moment, and I like working with those Proustian

possibilities. But I also like it because if you come from a space, community, or group that isn't represented by all forms, by monuments, one cannot discount the possibility of the archive as a repository of memory. Precisely because one can't discount it, it is always worth investigating.[178]

178. Haley Weiss, "John Akomfrah and the Image as Intervention," *Interview*, June 27, 2016, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/john-akomfrah.

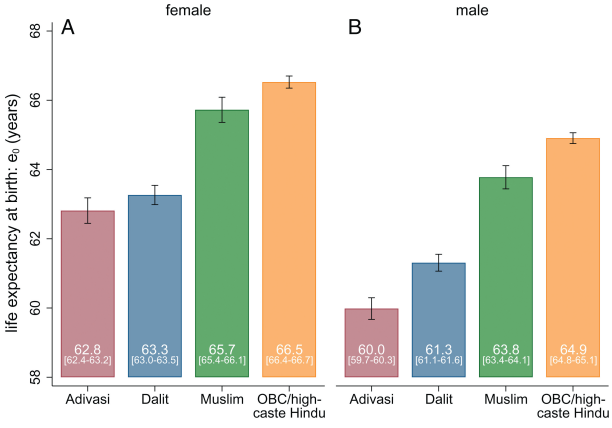
I SPECULATE

I speculate other meanings of the archive
I speculate other lives of the archive

As
I don't want all dead
To press their concerns equally on me
I have seen asymmetries of death

Would we ever know
How many Dalits died
During the famine years

So
I move from
Hunger deaths to hunger living
Hunger living to healthier living



Life expectancy at birth based on an annual health survey (2010-11) of nine Indian states.[179]

179. This graphic chart and data have been sourced from Sangita Vyas, Payal Hathi and Aashish Gupta, "Social Disadvantage, Economic Inequality, and Life Expectancy in Nine Indian States," *PNAS* 119, no. 10 (March 1, 2022):4, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2109226119.

After interventions, I turned my focus to methodological approaches that could foreground caste-subaltern experiences of the famine, with an acknowledgement of problematics concerning claims of recovery and representation. I also wished to consider the ethical injunctions actively. As a starting point, I thought of my project as a way to artistically negotiate caste-subaltern imaginations of the famine because it conceptually enabled me to do the necessary work in and through my film practice, away from recuperative 'objective' historical truth claims and any sense of helplessness or freezing.[180] Negotiating imaginations also meant I could expand the famine's definitional spatial and temporal horizons. I have explored this notion of negotiated imagination in the third article and the *glossary of common knowledge*.[181] I will not explicate the concept in detail here.

Two of the most important aspects of negotiated imagination are seeing the subalterns as creative subjects from the outset and building infrastructure, as Spivak invoked, so that agencies can surface. The methodological praxis behind my fieldwork-filming in Midnapore and my collaboration with Durga Bishwokarma emanated from my notions of negotiated imagination, especially these two aspects. In the first instance, imaginations of the famine were negotiated through different social and artistic affinities;

180. In this regard, my work has a special kinship to Kerstin Hamilton's doctoral project *The Objective Laboratory: Propositions on Documentary Photography*. As a fellow imagemaker and colleague, she has also been deeply interested in figuring out ethical-methodological ways to not get stuck in the impasse emanating from critique of 'objectivity' and 'representation'. Drawing on the feminist science perspectives of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway and imagemakers like Trinh T. Minh-ha, she argues for unsettling the objectivity claim but not abandoning it. Similarly, on the question of engaging with the 'other', she argues that "the act of not photographing – that is, to negate images of certain subjects – out of fear of exoticising can in fact, and in a deeply problematic way, feed categorisation, and the notion of "difference"." Through her artistic and curatorial work within the context of the PhD, she proposes positional truth and a framework of ethical responsibility, wherein ethics manifests "in the attention that artists pay to detail and active delimitations; it also surfaces in relation to consideration, care, and credibility." See Kerstin Hamilton, "The Objective Laboratory: Propositions on Documentary Photography," PhD diss., (University of Gothenburg, 2021), 195-200.

181. Ram Krishna Ranjan, "negotiated imagination," *glossary of common knowledge*, June 2021, https://glossary.mg-lj.si/referential-fields/referential-fields/negotiated-imagination?hide=21.

through a triangulation (Patchitra artists, community members from two Dalit villages and me), relationality was emphasised as opposed to a sense of commonality. Moreover, there was an attempt to pay attention to incommensurabilities and make space for them in the processes and be guided by them.

Both in the fieldwork-filming in Midnapore and the resultant film *Fourth World*, it's evident that an ethos of transdisciplinarity guides them – work is produced in between, across and beyond ethnography (in an expanded sense), oral history, oral tradition (Patchitra) and film practice. It's important to mention here that I had to negotiate the conceptual, artistic and methodological debates, especially on the question of ethnography and art that ensued following two seminal works – *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* and "The Artist as Ethnographer".[182] The 'writing culture' movement of the 1980s signalled a 'crisis of representation' and attempted to re-think the discipline in many ways. The movement, which happened at a moment of literary and postcolonial turn, challenged the historically held assumptions in the field and advocated for seeing ethnography, especially the practice of writing ethnography, as partial truths constructed textually through a subjective writer.[183] In summarising the contributions made by several authors to the volume, James Clifford proposed: "culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations"; "poetic and the political are inseparable"; "science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes"; "academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical."[184] Hal Foster thought that this praiseworthy rethinking set up two distinct envies. On the one

182. See: James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1986), School of American Research Advanced Seminar; Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, eds. George Marcus and Fred Myers (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995), 302-309.

183. Another important contribution towards rethinking anthropology was made in the same year (1986). See George E. Marcus and Michael F. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

184. James Clifford, "*Writing Culture*," 2.

hand, anthropologists developed artist envy as they saw them as a "paragon of formal reflexivity, sensitive to difference and open to chance, a self-aware reader of culture understood as text".[185] On the other hand, some artists were consumed by ethnographer envy in light of revisions in the discipline, namely contextuality, interdisciplinarity and focus on self-critique, as this allowed artists to self-accredit points for the social and historical understanding of cultures and alterities and showing political solidarity, which in turn fulfils the demand of artist to be contextual and eventually gaining respectability. Comparing these envies to "self-idealization", in other words, "a projection of a particular idea ego", Foster cautioned against the pseudoethnographic role set up or assumed for or by the artist.[186] He argued that the ethnographic turn in art was based on certain assumptions:

> First, there is the assumption that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, that this site is always located elsewhere, in the field of the other: in the productivist model, with the social other, the exploited proletariat; in the quasi-anthropological model, with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural. Second, there is the assumption that this other is always outside and, more, that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture. Third, there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity, and, more, that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it.[187]

Moreover, on the site-specific and collaborative nature of ethnographic work, Foster held the view that it could easily happen that artists move away from collaboration to "ethnographic self-fashioning", wherein the 'other' is fashioned

185. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 304.
186. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 304-305.
187. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 302.

in artist guise as opposed to decentering of the artist, essentially, promoting ethnographic authority rather than questioning it.[188] Values shunned by postmodernist art, such as originality, authenticity, and singularity, can easily "return as properties of the site, neighbourhood, or community engaged by the artist", according to Foster.[189]

I saw my fieldwork-filming as a way to mediate the important concerns raised by James Clifford and George Marcus, and Hal Foster. The approach was not so much to collect oral histories and truthfully represent them but rather to engage with the contested nature of memory, its articulation by several stakeholders and the artistic mediation that also involved mechanisms of feedback at each stage. The constant return to the community members with artefacts (either basic sketches, painted scrolls, or finalised scrolls with songs) and the engagements sought were intended as a rail guard against ethnographic self-fashioning. I would argue that the methods in the field were neither guided by the envy of the ethnographer nor the artist. Rather than assuming that artistic transformation is also the site of political transformation, of which the sole credit is due to the 'outsider' artist who is working with the 'ethnographic other', methodological approaches in this PhD already begin with treating subalterns also as creative subjects capable of being an important stakeholder in the entire process and shaping it. However, the question of decentring the artist, especially in terms of neighbouring concepts like authoring, authority, initiating, facilitating and collaborating, is far more complex than proposed by Foster. I explore this after my brief reflections on my collaboration with Durga Bishwokarma and the resultant film *You deny my living and I defy my death*.

My collaboration with Durga Bishwokarma continued my engagement with the revisions and questions Clifford, Marcus, and Foster raised. Collaboration, here, is not geared towards creating a pseudoethnographic set-up or foregrounding alterities for legitimacy claims. The idea was to disturb and destabilise

188. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 306.
189. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 306.

the notions of 'historical truths' of the famine, which can only be gleaned from the ethnographic field. In fact, it asks, what if we shift the field? What if caste-subaltern imaginations are negotiated through methods and ethics of embodied improvisations in a studio? From the outset, this collaboration attended to the contested nature of representations, the impossibility of separation of poetic and political and the importance of being experimental and ethical, as suggested by James Clifford and George Marcus. I would argue that improvisation, the main method in this collaboration, was an automatic check on moving away from collaboration to ethnographic self-fashioning or self-idealisation, a fear expressed by Hal Foster. Since Durga and I were collaborating, as artists with different caste-subaltern affinities and artistic mediums, within a very loosely defined framework with plenty of room for openness and change, it fostered contestations and challenged notions of singular authority.

Authoring without authority?

Both these projects, to a limited degree, are also about negotiating concepts and terms like 'authoring' and 'facilitating'. In its most common use, authoring relates to the idea of giving existence to something – creating something. Conversely, facilitation alludes to initiating, planning, organising, implementing, overseeing and realising a project by working with people. Any claim, whether authoring or facilitating, comes with its own affordances – some enabling and some disabling. Authoring invokes authority, hierarchy and individual autonomy (reminiscent of colonial-modernity/enlightenment logic) but also enables a framework of responsibility. Only a nuanced view of authorship can engender productive discussions, especially when confronted with the reality that subaltern authorship has always been there but not read as such outside. How are we to respond to claims of authorship emerging from subaltern spaces? The desire to control the narrative for the sake of social-political strategies and change implores authorship.

Facilitating (and collaborating) can be seen as a gesture to shift the register from individual to relational and from hierarchical to negotiated. It entails creating and enabling conditions for dispersed authorships, allowing a project to open up, mutate, to become iterative, durational, and be site-responsive. Artist Tania Bruguera, in reference to the project Arte Útil (Useful Art), proposes to replace the terms – author turns into initiator, the spectator becomes user/activator, the artwork takes the shape of a case study, and production is implementation – and for her, these are not just formal gestures but conceptual gestures.[190] Since facilitating is so much about initiating, implementing and activating, there is a lot to be gained from Tania Bruguera's proposal. This conceptual gesture complicates the narrative of the individual/genius artist/author creating autonomous work for the sake of taste, beauty and aesthetics as it explores other political and artistic imaginaries, ones that are geared towards a praxis of change. This gesture has particular relevance in subaltern works as they involve questions of hierarchies in methodologies, authorships and knowledge production. However, unqualified mobilisation of the term 'facilitating' has its own pitfalls. It can obscure inconsistencies, contradictions, incommensurabilities and hierarchies.

The claim to or rejection of the terms 'authoring' and 'facilitating' is quite complex. Regarding these two projects within my PhD, I see it somewhere on the spectrum of refusal and acceptance of these two terms. To an extent, I can claim that I was both an author and a facilitator in the field and the studio, and the process focused on continuous negotiations between facilitating and authoring. The problem arises when one looks at the nature of research, especially PhD research. The process/practice at some stage has to become an 'outcome' (a film, a text, or both). In the unlikely scenario where it does not need to turn into an outcome, one can simply be motivated by making things – as a way to exceed the 'documentation' of the process and as an opportunity

190. Artist Tania Bruguera talks about the Arte Útil archive in an interview with Nick Aikens. See Tania Bruguera, "Nick Aikens interviews Tania Bruguera," YouTube video, November 10, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs5EJmt19K4.

to experiment with, rehearse and practice the craft. What happens to the claim of continuous negotiations and collaboration in such instances? In putting together the films and various texts, neither the community member from the two Dalit villages nor Chitrakars nor Durga was involved.

Claims of authoring or facilitating must be honest, humble and within a framework of responsibility. These two projects have elements of both, and I don't wish to understate or overstate either. My thinking on the question of authorship is animated by a multitude of subalternities operating in this project, owning and performing agencies by different stakeholders and acknowledging that while storytelling is available to all, manifesting it in different forms invokes craft/practice. Since the projects, at least to a degree, invoke different caste-subaltern positions and are activated by them, it becomes crucial for me to avoid blurring or collapsing different authorial positions. Blurring or collapsing, in my view, is akin to escaping responsibility. Moreover, embracing an authorial position allows me to exercise my own agency while respecting the agencies of Durga, the Chitrakars and the community members.

Seen from the lens of craft/practice, the complexities in negotiating 'authoring' and 'facilitating' are even more accentuated. Neither community members in two Dalit villages nor I know how to make scrolls, but the Chitrakars have been honing the craft/practice of making scrolls and narrativising through songs for generations. Since it was not a project where I conducted workshops on filmmaking and then the community made their own films, I came and was seen as such, with my craft/practice of filmmaking, which I have honed for some years. The Chitrakars respected my craft/practice, and I respected theirs. Both Chitrakars and I respected the stories and storytelling the community members did in the two Dalit villages, but both crafts/practices inevitably produced traces of authorial positions. The boundaries between authoring and facilitating remained blurry in the field – I was authoring while facilitating and facilitating while authoring. This holds true for my collaboration with Durga as well.

When it comes to the resultant films, the negotiations are of a very different nature. I am authoring the films based on my collaborations, but collaborators do not become co-authors of the film. One way to think about this incommensurability is to think in terms of the limitations of any work, which, of course, is true in this case. But I also see the films as important sites to perform my agency and authorial positions. The films contain some elements of my negotiations between authoring and facilitating in the field and the studio, but are also sites where I grapple with the question: is it possible to author something that does not invoke authority (of absolute and true knowledge; a totality)?

IN THE SCHOOL

A: It would be nice if you could also be involved in organising this workshop. I think the students will benefit immensely from listening to you.

B: It’s not my place, and I don’t think I have anything to contribute. Besides, you are so good at it, and I am scared that I will make a huge mistake.

A wants to say this to B but does not: This is precisely how white institutions manage their ethical crisis. They are good at unfair distributions of risks. “I don’t want to instrumentalise them”, “It’s not my place”, “I don’t have the experience”, and “Ethically, it’s not right” are just some of the stale but potent expressions that make sure that necessary risks taken for necessary work fall on only certain people. Overplaying ethics often is in service of maintaining the status quo.

A wants to cite Spivak but, at the moment, can’t recall the exact statement.

HOMEWORK

I will have in an undergraduate class, let's say, a young, white, male student, politically-correct, who will say: "I am only a bourgeois white male, I can't speak." In that situation – it's peculiar, because I am in the position of power and their teacher and, on the other hand, I am not a bourgeois white male – I say to them: "Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?" Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very deterministic position – since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak. I call these things, as you know, somewhat derisively, chromatism: basing everything on skin colour – "I am white, I can't speak" – and genitalism: depending on what genitals you have, you can or cannot speak in certain situations.

From this position, then, I say you will of course not speak in the same way about the Third World material, but if you make it your task not only to learn what is going on there through language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same time through a historical critique of your position as the investigating person, then you will see that you have earned the right to criticize, and you will be heard. When you take the position of not doing your homework – "I will not criticize because of my accident of birth, the historical accident" – that is a much more pernicious position.

In one way you take a risk to criticize, of criticizing something which is Other – something which you used to dominate. I say that you have to take a certain risk: to say “I won’t criticize” is salving your conscience, and allowing you not to do any homework. On the other hand, if you criticize having earned the right to do so, then you are indeed taking a risk and you will probably be made welcome, and can hope to be judged with respect.[191]

191. Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 62-63.

NOT SPEAKING

A polite deferment?
An effort to make space for others?

Or

Concealment of resentments?
Now that there are ‘other’ tongues.
And speeches.

Refusal?
Sulking?

Withdrawal?
Now that terms are set by ‘others’.

Accident of birth?
Yours alone?
To invoke “not my place to speak”.

Convenient?

And

What about other accidents?
Where the privilege of withdrawal
Has never been afforded.

Chapter 3: Aesthetic practices of blooming like a gulmohar

Why do not you
Furiously bloom
Like a Gulmohar, against the conspiracy
Of the sun[192]

If I did not have
A pen in my hand,
Then,
It would have been a chisel,
A Sitar,
A flute
Or perhaps a canvas and brush
I would have dug out
With whatever I had
This infinite clamour
From inside the mind[193]

Both these poems by Nagraj Manjule, a prolific Dalit filmmaker from Maharashtra who also dabbles in poetry, captures in them multiple things at once – registering and protesting Dalit conditions caused and sustained by the caste system, a wish to go beyond the 'oppositional' and a spirit of partaking in the joy of blooming, in other words, to live and create beyond 'what is made available'. As a film practitioner, and particularly for this PhD, I, too, in terms of the content and form, have been concerned with acting on multiple desires at once. Needless to say, it's easier said than done. In this chapter, I try to describe and reflect on the prevailing representational and aesthetic background (the conspiracy of the sun) against which attempts

192. Originally written in Marathi in 2010 by Nagraj Manjule, this poem has been translated in English by Yogesh Maitreya and titled "Against the Conspiracy of the Sun". I came across the poem in Yogesh Maitreya's article. See Yogesh Maitreya, "The Birth of the Dalit Protagonist," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 20 (16 May 2020), https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/20/postscript/birth-dalit-protagonist.html?destination=node/156929. Present in many tropical and subtropical countries, Gulmohar is known for red/orange blooms. In English this tree is called Royal Poinciana.

193. This is also originally written in Marathi by Nagraj Manjule in 2010 and translated in English by Yogesh Maitreya. It's titled "If I Did Not Have a Pen in My Hand" in English. See Maitreya, "The Birth of the Dalit Protagonist".

are being made, including mine, to bloom like a Gulmohar. Keeping caste-subalterns' heterogeneity in mind, it is obvious that there is no consensus on the question of aesthetics, so I briefly explore some of those contemporary debates. Lastly, without getting into interpretative hermeneutics of my own films, or in simple words, translating and subordinating the films to written words, I explore the myriad aesthetic modes, devices and strategies considered in the making of the films and their implications in the broader research.

Dalit representation and Indian cinema

Raja Harishchandra, made by Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913, is considered the first silent film of India. The noticeable thing is that the art and technique of cinema reached India quite early after its invention by the Lumiere brothers in 1896. Indian cinema is too diverse and has gone through several changes since its inception and therefore, it's difficult to explicate all its progressions, elements, and qualities in any sweeping manner. In the following paragraphs, my focus will be on briefly presenting how Indian cinema has, by and large, dealt with the question of caste over the years.

By the 1940s, the Indian film industry had established itself and had started making talking films. This coincides with the peak of the nationalist struggle against the British colonial rule. Jyoti Nisha contends that this was also a period of the Swaraj (self-rule) movement, synonymous with Gandhi and his principles. During these tumultuous years, India was also witnessing somewhat of an ideological convergence between cinema and the state.[194] Ira Bhaskar has argued that cinema during the 1930-50s played a significant role in developing the cultural identity of India. In her view, Phalke, the pioneer of Indian cinema, made serious "attempts to establish an Indian film industry as a significant

194. Jyoti Nisha, "Indian Cinema and the Bahujan Spectatorship," *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 20 (16 May, 2020), accessed May 10, 2023, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indian-cinema-and-bahujan-spectatorship.

contribution to the 'swadeshi' movement, and therefore an integral element of the nationalist struggle." [195] Giving the example of *Achhut Kanya* (1936), a film produced by Himanshu Roy and directed by Franz Osten, that dealt with the stark realities of caste, Suraj Yengde makes an astute observation that some films made during this period were in conversation with social reform movements of the time. According to Yengde, both Ambedkar's struggle for the rights of Dalits and Gandhi's vision of caste influenced the cinema in that era. However, as he opines, it changed after Gandhi assumed leadership at a national scale and co-opted the Dalit struggle by launching anti-untouchability programmes.[196] Gandhi's approach to caste profoundly impacted Indian cinema because, as opposed to the annihilation of caste proposed by Ambedkar, Gandhi's liberal framework was geared towards affirming a "humanity within the Indian caste system."[197] To illustrate this point, Yengde gives the example of *Devdas* (1935). The Hindi/Bengali version, directed by Pramathesh Barua, addressed the caste difference and its insurmountability faced by the inter-caste couple. However, later remakes of *Devdas* (1955, 1965, 1979, 1982, 2002, 2010, 2013) elided the caste question, and instead, differences were enacted along class lines.[198]

In the decades after independence, Indian cinema saw its role as a contributor to the Nehruvian nation-building project. Manishita Dass holds the view that these films (such as Raj Kapoor's *Awara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955), Bimal Roy's *Do bigha Zameen* (1953), Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957), Sombhu Mitra's *Jagte Raho* (1956) and Ramesh Saigal's *Phir Subah Hogi* (1958) were influenced by left-liberal populist and modernist political imaginaries and a humanistic concern for the subalterns. These films imagined a somewhat simplistic political space in the sense that conflict was defined solely in terms of the powerless and

195. Ira Bhaskar, "ALLEGORY, NATIONALISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN INDIAN CINEMA: 'SANT TUKARAM'," *Literature and Theology* 12, no. 1 (1998): 52.

196. Suraj Yengde, "Dalit Cinema," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 506, doi: 10.1080/00856401.2018.1471848.

197. Yengde, "Dalit Cinema," 507.

198. Yengde, "Dalit Cinema," 506.

powerful. While celebrating several aspects of the Nehruvian project of state-building and modernity, these films also provided a space for pointing out its shortcomings and failures. Rather than questioning the logic and foundational premise of modernity, these films directed their critique at the fact that it had not been successful.[199] These films orient themselves around what Panizza has phrased as the "notion of the sovereign people as an actor in an antagonistic relation with the established order".[200] Notably, caste as a significant variable in the construction of power (or antagonism against it) is hardly addressed in these films. Moreover, as Yengde argues, the films made after independence partook in celebrating agrarian-oriented society and combined it with loyalty to the nation; thus, seeds of early conservative nationalism were sowed.[201]

By the 1970s, the post-independence euphoria of eradicating poverty had vanished to a large extent. Popular Hindi films of this decade captured this disappointment and anger by giving rise to the 'angry young men' phenomenon, of which Amitabh Bachchan became a torchbearer. A series of films like *Zanzeer* (1973, dir. Prakash Mehra) *Deewar* (1974, dir. Yash Chopra), and *Sholay* (1975, dir. Ramesh Sippy), through masculine heroes, served revenge stories against oppressors of different ilks – corrupt and abusive police officers, government officials, feudal landlords, traders, and politicians. Yengde observes that the films of this era propagated a socialist class-war perspective based on undifferentiated castes. Class subsumed caste.[202] Yogesh Maitreya takes it further and argues that this commoditised anger, made available for the nation, was never against the caste system. He points to the fact that all these characters, played by Amitabh Bachchan, were savarna (meaning varna/caste Hindus) characters

199. Manishita Dass, "Cinetopia: Leftist Street Theatre and the Musical Production of the Metropolis in 1950s Bombay Cinema," *positions: asia critique* 25, no. 1 (2017): 101-124, muse.jhu.edu/article/648452.

200. Francisco Panizza, "Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 4.

201. Yengde, "Dalit Cinema," 505.

202. Yengde, "Dalit Cinema," 513.

but possessed the anger of Dalits and Bahujans.[203] Commenting on this phenomenon, Kuffir Nalgundwar writes:

> So what was the savarna angry young man angry about, anyway? There wasn't much to complain about in the 70s, from his perspective. There weren't any broad, significant challenges to brahminical hegemony, in the economic or social spheres.[204]

Whatever little amount of attention caste was getting in popular Hindi films almost disappeared in the wake of the post-liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s and 2000s. This was also the period when the Hindi film industry started catering to the NRI (non-resident Indians) audience. NRI films are about upholding Indian values, customs and culture, following religion, and showcasing their deep-rooted connections to the motherland.[205] Vikrant Kishore, based on his analysis of several NRI films, argues that these films "are concerned with only the successful upper class and upper caste Indian diaspora in the West, and their limited challenges." [206] Unlike in the past, these films embrace and celebrate the affluence and wealth of the cultured (upper-caste Hindus).[207] Nostalgia, longing for the motherland, and a sense of 'Indianness' is often driven through the upper-caste Hindu traditional ethos, while caste concerns, especially Dalit concerns, are rarely explored in these films.[208]

203. Yogesh Maitreya, "Dalit Panthers (Not Bachchan) Were The Angry Men, The Real Heroes Of 70s India," *SILVERSCREEN INDIA*, April 02, 2020, https://silverscreenindia.com/movies/features/dalit-panthers-not-bachchan-were-the-angry-men-the-real-heroes-of-70s-india/.

204. Kuffir Nalgundwar, "The angry young man wasn't an outcaste," *Round Table India*, August 9, 2011, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/the-angry-young-man-wasnt-an-outcaste/.

205. Amit Ranjan, "Construing the Indian Middle Class Ideology: Changing Ideas of Nation and Nationalism in Hindi Cinema," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 26–27 (2019): 65-72.

206. Vikrant Kishore, "The Caste Blindness of Bollywood NRI Genre Films," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 101, May 2022, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/bollywood/the-caste-blindness-of-bollywood-nri-genre-films/.

207. Kishore, "The Caste Blindness of Bollywood NRI Genre Films".

208. Kishore, "The Caste Blindness of Bollywood NRI Genre Films".

Given this background, it becomes imperative to understand whose imagination and gaze Indian cinema, by and large, portrays and propagates. On the question of caste, there are some concomitant patterns in mainstream Indian cinema – underrepresentation of caste-subalterns, especially Dalits; even when caste is explored, it is mostly through savarna gaze; heroism (saviour complex) of the upper caste characters; class subsuming caste(trope of caste undifferentiated poor); relegating Dalits to obscurity or treating them merely as victims; and rarely celebrating the complex lives of Dalits.

Acchhut Kanya (1936, dir. Franz Osten), *Balayogini* (1936, dir. K. Subramanyam), *Nandnar* (1942, dir. Muruga Dossa), *Sujata* (1959, dir. Bimal Roy), *Ankur* (1974, dir. Shyam Benegal), *Aakrosh* (1980, dir. Govind Nihalani), *Rudraveena* (1988, dir. K. Balachander), *Diksha* (1991, dir. Arun Kaul), *Mukta* (1994, Jabbar Patel), *Kottreshi Kanasu* (1994, dir. Nagathihalli Chandrashekar), *Bandit Queen* (1994, dir. Shekhar Kapur), and *Bawandar* (2000, dir. Jag Mundhra) – are some of the handfuls of films that come up in the discussion of caste representation in Indian cinema. This list is obviously not exhaustive, but the limited number of films dealing with caste indicates how underrepresented caste-subalterns are. Taking this issue of lack of representation further, Kishore argues that Hindi cinema also perpetuates the caste hegemony.[209] This is echoed by Harish Wankhede as well:

> It cunningly avoids itself from indulging in the hard questions of social reality and in most of the cases imposes a structured narrative meant to address the emotive and psychological concerns of the Hindu social elites. Hindi films are written, directed and produced by a dominant set of people that celebrate the tastes and values of upper class-caste sensitivities.[210]

209. Kishore, "The Caste Blindness of Bollywood NRI Genre Films".

210. Harish Wankhede, "Dalit Representation in Bollywood," *Mainstream Weekly* 51, no. 20 (May 4, 2013).

Furthermore, Wankhede contends that it's a Gandhian visualisation of the Harijan that defines the cinematic representation of Dalits and their worldviews and in this scheme of things, Dalits are either dependent (*Sujata*, 1959, dir. Bimal Roy), submissive (*Damul*, 1985, dir. Prakash Jha) or suitable to Brahminical values (*Lagaan*, 2001, dir. Ashutosh Gowariker). There is rarely any space for political Dalits.[211] An urge to find humanity within the Brahminical order has meant positing upper-caste characters as savarna saviours, and the oppression of Dalits are the sites where their heroism can be posited.[212] *Article 15* (2019, dir. Anubhav Sinha) typifies this.[213] The urban saviour, where 'caste has no real meaning', arrives in the hinterland to save the persecuted. The film absolves the urban audience in their complicities in perpetuating the caste system by hinting that caste is a far-away (hinterland) phenomenon.[214] Reflecting on this phenomenon, Yogesh Maitreya states that "in this process, the history of the oppressed is appropriated and manipulated, and they are ousted from their own story, reduced to being mere receivers of justice."[215]

The other glaring gap in the representation of Dalits in films is the denial of "Dalits lives in [their] entirety and subtlety". [216] Other than victimhood, representational regimes rarely portray

211. Wankhede, "Dalit Representation in Bollywood".

212. See: Arti Singh, EP Abdul Azeezb, "Caste in contemporary Bollywood movies: An analysis of the portrayal of characters," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 49, no. 2 (June 2021): 93-100; Prashant Ramprasad Ingole, "Inter (Caste) Love Stories: Experiential Eye (I) in Fandry and Sairat," *Economic and Political Weekly (Engage)* 57, no. 9 (February 26, 2022), https://www.epw.in/engage/article/inter-caste-love-stories-experiential-eye-i-fandry.

213. See Swayamdipta Das, "The Savarna Saviour Syndrome and the Politics of Representation in Article 15," *Film Companion*, June 14, 2021, https://www.filmcompanion.in/readers-articles/article-15-movie-netflix-the-savarna-saviour-syndrome-and-the-politics-of-representation-ayushmann-khurrana-anubhav-sinha.

214. "Cinema and Caste: Examining Marginalised Narratives in Film," *Economic and Political Weekly (Engage)*, August 29, 2019, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/cinema-and-caste-article-15-marginalised-film-fandry-sairat.

215. Maitreya, "The Birth of the Dalit Protagonist".

216. Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (Kolkata: Samya, 2003), vii.

other dimensions of Dalit lives.[217] Singh and Azeez have claimed that Dalits get representation only when the film is socially oriented or has a caste angle.[218] According to Raghvendra, this tendency of Indian cinema that links and frames 'Dalithood' to caste society stems from Brahminical ideology because it makes victimhood the essential condition of the Dalit. He writes that "such essentialisation—although it may be the product of a 'liberal' outlook—is consistent with Brahminism itself, which proceeded by essentialising the jatis as varna categories and placing them within a hierarchy." [219] This has been aptly summarised by Amit Kumar, "there is an 'Absence of Presence' of Dalit experiences beyond upper-caste imaginaries."[220]

On the questions of aesthetics, purpose and the 'right to write'

Most of the theories and examples discussed in this section come from Dalit literature. This is not to say that the question of caste and aesthetics has not been considered in films. In my understanding, since literature preceded films, at least in terms of Dalits' access to the medium, the debates within the literature are nuanced and illuminating. I have given several examples of films in relation to the question of aesthetics in the fourth article and will give more examples in the following section.

Aesthetics, a term originating in the Greek language, simply means the ability to experience sensation, perception, or sensitivity – in

217. MK Raghavendra, "Dalit portrayal in cinema: Brahminical ideology has caused filmmakers to present a limited view of the community," *Firstpost*, December 05, 2018, https://www.firstpost.com/india/dalit-portrayal-in-cinema-brahminical-ideology-has-caused-filmmakers-to-present-a-limited-view-of-the-community-5670771.html.

218. Singh and Azeezb, "Caste in contemporary Bollywood movies".

219. Raghavendra, "Dalit portrayal in cinema".

220. Amit Kumar, "Representation of Dalits in Hindi Cinema After Liberalization," *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221082484.

other words, elementary awareness of stimulation.[221] However, aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, became codified through the works of Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant. The leap from fundamental human attributes available to all societies to the coupling of art with aesthetics within the guiding principle of artistic taste, beauty and judgement, according to Mignolo and Vazquez, is a product of colonial-modernity. It established and projected Europe as the universal benchmark against which everything was judged.[222]

While a critique of the imposition of the Western aesthetic framework is important, we should not assume power and ideology do not play out (or have not played out) locally on the question of the standard setting of taste and beauty. The mainstream aesthetic doctrine in India, according to Limbale, is based on age-old upper-castes' concepts of *satyam* (truth), *shivam* (holy/sacred) and *sundaram* (beauty).[223] Vedic aesthetics promote a Brahminic monologic view, positing "the hegemony of the Brahman as the essence of all metaphysical entities"; it links the locus of beauty, holiness, truth, pleasure, joy, anger, ecstasy, sublimity to this singular source.[224] This 'spiritual' take on aesthetics not only elides discriminations, different social and material conditions, dimensions, and experiences but also rejects dialogical and polyphonic approaches. Limable writes:

> Untruth: . . . Is it truth that Brahman was born from Brahma's mouth and the Shudra from his feet? Is it truth that one is born a Shudra because of sins commited in a

221. Encyclopedia Online, s.v. "Aesthetics," accessed May 5, 2023, https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/aesthetic-0.

222. Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text Online*, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.

223. Sharan Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, trans. with commentary by Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 20-22.

224. Shruti Das, "Dalit Aesthetics: Situating Sharankumar Limbale's Poetics," *Studia Anglica Resoviensia T. 14*, (2017): 20, https://repozytorium.ur.edu.pl/items/c759276e-c81f-4165-b4c6-d3616ec3ae43.

> previous life? Since there is no truth in any of this, satyam (truth) should really be asatyam (untruth).
>
> Unholy: Hindu scriptures have deemed the touch, shadow and speech of the Dalit person as defiling. Food, water and people become impure from the touch of the untouchable. Not only human beings, even God becomes polluted. Separate settlements, riverbanks and cremation grounds have been arranged for untouchables. ... Even today Dalits are tortured by being called Dalit. Injustice and ill treatment are inflicted on Dalit women....
>
> Unbeauty: Dalits should live outside the village; they should take inauspicious names; they should not accumulate property; they should possess only donkeys or dogs, and they should wear clothes meant to dress corpses. They should not learn Sanskrit or read the Vedas, lest by doing so, they become aware of their oppression. ... [if] they did not live mutely according to prescription, provision for serious punishment was made for any breach of injunctions.[225]

Representational regimes of Dalits in films, as discussed in the previous section, exemplify the hegemonic Brahminical hold on the realms of taste, beauty, and perception. As alluded to earlier, just as there is no singular Dalit, similarly, there is no singular Dalit aesthetics. However, Limbale's seminal intervention through his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* captures some broad concerns and elucidates them. Against the monologic and prescriptive ideas of *satyam, shivam* and *sundaram* that propagate art for art's sake and undermine historical and social materialism, he appeals for literature and art that contradicts traditions, foregrounds Dalit experiences (pain, anger, joy, rebellion, discrimination etc.), and prioritise social problem over aesthetic gratification. For him, its basis and language are that of urgency – awakening and enacting Dalit Chetna (Dalit consciousness being an approximate

225. Limbale, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," 20-21.

translation) and searching for freedom from social, material, and political conditions. Its language need not be abstract and romantic. In purposeful violation of the savarna tradition, it can be raw, direct, vulgar and biting.[226]

This insistence on 'purposeful' writing by Limbale[227] must be seen in the context of the charge labelled against Dalit texts by scholars like Balkrishna Kavthekar, Kusumvati Deshpande and N.C. Fadke that they lack aesthetic/literary qualities and innovations.[228] Limbale opposes this unfair, assumed universalist standard that posits Dalit texts either as adulatory (born out of sympathy) or lacking in aesthetic value.[229] Rather than trying to prove savarna critics wrong by showing instances of literary and aesthetic qualities in Dalit texts, Limbale is interested in claiming that there is nothing wrong in emphasising the sociological functions of Dalit texts; in fact, this is what distinguishes them from savarna texts.[230] However, as Limbale emphasises revelatory, evidencing, and chronicling aspects of Dalit texts,[231] it somewhat also binds it to the realist/empiricist mode – often seen as a residue of the logics of colonial-modernity. On the limits of realism in Dalit texts, Nagraj has argued that it "can only, in our context, reflect and accommodate the rationalist and empirical worldviews of the

226. See: Limbale, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," 23-39; Das, "Dalit Aesthetics: Situating Sharankumar Limbale's Poetics,"; Prunima Sharma and Khushboo Batra, "Rewriting the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," *Literature & Aesthetics* 32, no. 1 (2022): 66-79; Priyanka Kumari and Maninder Kapoor, "Understanding Dalit Literature: A Critical Perspective Towards Dalit Aesthetics," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 13, no. 4 (2021): 1-8.

227. In an interview with N.K.Ghosh and S.Rani, Limbale says: "I have and never will write for entertainment. I am a writer of people. How can I forget problems of my people? ... Dalit literature is not the literature of imagination. It is a literature of atrocities inflicted on Dalits by high caste Hindus. Dalit writers must work continuously with their focus on social transformation." See Nibir K. Ghosh & Sunita Rani, "'My Words are my Weapons': A Conversation with Sharan Kumar Limbale, India's Champion of the Downtrodden," *History News Network*, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/157579.

228. Sharma and Batra, "Rewriting the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," 72; Ranjana Nagar, "Defining Dalit Aesthetics," *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 8, no 3 (June 2017): 126-133.

229. See Limbale, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," 110-111.

230. Limbale, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature," 19, 103-121.

231. Limbale, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature,"30-39.

modern middle class." [232] He goes a step further and states that realism, in which Dalit texts are caught up, is an inappropriate mode as it has no space for low-caste cosmologies and other modes of narration, such as folk and oral traditions.[233] However, by giving examples of the usage of oral, folk and performance traditions in G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2010) and Cho. Dharaman's *Koogai : The Owl* (2015), K. Satyanarayana refutes Nagraj's binary supposition and argues that Dalit authors have neither rejected the realist mode of narration nor embraced it in its totality. They have constantly negotiated and revised their approach.[234] He cautions that "any approach that assumes that there is an easy access to the pre-modern culture without being mediated by modernity would end up producing a nativists cultural and literary history." [235] In a similar vein, Gajarawala argues that Dalit texts, while at least to a degree, a part of the lineage of social realism, have constantly modified it and moved away from "the abstract categories of Labour, Nation and the Universal, and towards a language of specification, distinction, non-transferability and exceptionalism."[236] Nicole Thiara also foregrounds the experimental qualities in Dalit texts such as Bama's *Sangati* (1994), Limbale's *Hindu* (2003) and Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2010) to illustrate that enough attention has not been paid to ongoing innovation and experimentation in these texts, especially how they invoke "oral traditions and cultural formations in complex narrative forms that combine fragmented and polyphonic narration, non-linear temporality, and a mixture of genres and local forms that resist linear history or narratives of individual development in favour of more interdependent articulations of community."[237] Dalit literary theory's insistence

232. D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 1993/2010), 229.

233. Nagraj, *The Flaming Feet*, 230.

234. K. Satyanarayana, "The political and aesthetic significance of contemporary Dalit literature," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no 1 (2019): 18-19.

235. Satyanarayana, "The political and aesthetic significance," 23.

236. Toral Jatin Gajarawala, "The Casteized Consciousness: Literary Realism and the Politics of Particularism," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 348-349, doi:10.1215/00267929-1631424.

237. Nicole Thiara, "Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World," *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 47, no. 1-2 (January-April 2016): 276-277.

on prioritising the content, and wilful dismissal of its own formal diversity and experimentation, according to Laura R. Brueck, have a reasonable explanation – it might be to "protect the boundaries of Dalit literature from dissimulation into multiple, individual authorial approaches that, when differentiated and divided, lose their unified political impact."[238]

Dalits' complex relationship to ideas of modernity, I would argue, is not limited to texts alone. Rather, it typifies the contemporary Dalit subjecthood and politics in general – accepting the formal promises of modernity but not embracing them unquestioningly. The fight for equality is often with the state but also fought within the nation-state's framework (principles of constitutional secularism, equality, and citizenship). Any real possibility of the complete annihilation of caste, as wished by Ambedkar, can be mediated only through a framework of modernity, but then simultaneously, there is a growing desire to achieve equality amongst castes without losing the Dalit cultural difference.

Another key debate concerns the 'right to write' or what qualifies as Dalit text. Limbale defined Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness."[239] This view, in equal measures, is held and contested by scholars. Based on the historical and contemporary experiences of caste-based subjugations on the one hand and either complete neglect, savarna gaze or misappropriation of Dalit concerns and literature on the other hand, it is understandable that there is a suspicion of calling any text a Dalit text. Two focal terms, *svanubhuti* (meaning self-perception or personal experience) and *sahanubhuti* (meaning sympathy), are at the centre of this debate.[240] Scholars like Limbale and Kanwal Bharti consider the author's lived experience as a necessity for the text to be qualified as a Dalit text. The fear they express is that when non-Dalit authors write about Dalits, it is often through the lens of 'sahanubhuti' (sympathy).

238. Laura R. Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014): 7.

239. Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, 19.

240. Neelam Yadav, "The Nexus of Politics and Dalit Consciousness: A Critique of Mannu Bhandari's Mahabhoj as a Dalit Literary Text," *Literature & Aesthetics* 32, no. 1 (2022): 205.

Opposing this viewpoint, some scholars like Ratnakumar Sambhariya, Namvar Singh and Purushottam Agrawal argue that imaginative and creative capacities unfurled in and through the act of writing, make it possible to foreground Dalits' point of view, even if the writer is a non-Dalit.[241] As interesting as this debate is, I am far more interested in the latter half of Limbale's statement – "with a Dalit consciousness" (or Dalit Chetna in many Indian languages), because it opens a generative space allowing necessary work to be done, whether it is read and legitimated as Dalit text or not. As a caste-subaltern but non-Dalit filmmaker, I understand Dalit consciousness as a categorical anti-caste stance, a deep commitment to values like liberty, equality (including through affirmative actions), freedom, justice, individual dignity, kinship to Ambedkarite thoughts, an emphasis on foregrounding Dalits experiences and agencies in all their complexities (including, pain, agony, anger but also a celebration of Dalit lives and struggles).

The films that have emerged during this PhD, in terms of both their form and content, have been guided by Dalit consciousness and what Manju Edachira calls anti-caste aesthetics.[242] These films have also negotiated the poetics and politics simultaneously and, to that end, mobilise a multitude of modes – social realist (documentary), performative, essayistic, archival, and autobiographical.[243] I have sporadically explored some of these aspects in the films themselves and in the articles, but in the following section, I will try to briefly but coherently present how I have negotiated questions of aesthetics in my practice during this PhD, especially in light of the aforementioned debates. More than aesthetic evaluation of my own works, I will be explicating my intent and strategies.

241. Yadav, "The Nexus of Politics and Dalit Consciousness," 205-207.

242. Manju Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 38 (September 19, 2020): 47-53.

243. The poetic can be political and vice-versa. I don't see these two terms or propositions as binaries, contradictory or irreconcilable. They can and often overlap. This is exemplified by Kalyani Thakur Charal's poetry, as invoked earlier in this kappa but also in the film *Fourth World*. I am using 'poetic' to loosely suggest instances wherein I have put a bit more emphasis on the careful consideration of formal qualities and experimentation and my usage of the 'political' is to signal stressing of content, idea, or agenda.

TRAVERSING A WIDE RANGE

I keep getting fascinated by Indian classical dance where for instance you may find that within the nine minutes of a performance the dancer has switched twelve characters. You understand because you know the basic story but still the skill and accomplishment of the form is amazing. Not only is the dancer switching between human characters of multiple ages and different genders but is also becoming a bird, a snake, a god, a cloud, a butterfly, etc. Simultaneously, each character is traversing a very wide range of emotions and supposedly conservative audiences are sitting very happily understanding it. When I compare that to film, film offers you so much more that you can do and if you are able to relate to this multiplicity in terms of content then your form will actually evolve in that direction. Then you're able to interlace your image, sound, music, ambience and words in a way that allows different individuals to find different sets of meanings in it. You find that if you have that kind of a sequence your audience starts saying that they want to see the film again.[244]

244. An excerpt from Amar Kanwar's interview with Anne Rutherford. See Anne Rutherford, ""Not Firing Arrows": Multiplicity, Heterogeneity and the Future of Documentary: Interview with Amar Kanwar," *Asian Cinema* (Spring/Summer 2005): 119-120. Indian classical dance, as we have come to know it, is not untouched by principles of caste. In fact, over a period, it has been Sanskritised and appropriated by savarnas to a large extent. However, it's possible to reclaim and repurpose Indian classical dance from a caste-subaltern perspective. For instance, Bharatnatyam was practised by lower-caste women in Tamil Nadu. Known as Devdasis (meaning servants of God), they were educated, had agency over their bodies, and enjoyed social mobility and freedom. They were dedicated to serving the temples and performing dance. Victorian morality standards set by the British during colonial rule, which equated this practice to prostitution and saw it as degrading, produced upper-caste anxieties and responses resulting in savarna appropriation of this form. I would argue that it's necessary and possible to invoke Indian classical dance from a caste-subaltern lens and learn from their intricate and complex aesthetic strategies and form. For a better understanding of how classical dance is inflected by caste, see Nrithya Pillai, "Re-Casteing the Narrative of Bharatanatyam," *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 9 (2022), accessed May 20, 2023, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/re-casteing-narrative-bharatanatyam.

Working between and across different modes: Anti-caste aesthetics and cinema

> [A]nti-caste aesthetics not only resists, but also invites one to be part of its becoming. To put it differently, anti-caste aesthetics is an aspect of "becoming" in India. A becoming which is inevitable in the case of Dalits, where being itself is violated.[245]

While I have absolute admiration for Limbale's efforts to unpack savarna aesthetics and his emphasis on purposeful Dalit writing, I think, ever so slightly, he advocated for 'content' over 'form'. Given the history and unfair criticism of Dalit literature, his oppositional standpoint was very necessary. However, I would argue that oppositional stance and consciousness, while necessary, also produce a bind – it can get tied up with what it is opposing. In order to go beyond what is made available, both an oppositional consciousness as well as a spirit of pursuing new imaginaries should go in tandem. This has been shown by numerous Dalit writers and filmmakers themselves, especially in the last two decades. A host of Dalit filmmakers have displayed deft handling of both poetics and politics. Some prominent films in this regard are Vetrimaraan's *Asuran* (2019) and *Viduthalai – Part 1*(2023), Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015) and *Geeli Puchhi* (2021), Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Karnan* (2021), Nagraj Manjule's, *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016), Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016), *Kaala* (2018), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Sarpatta Parambarai* (2021). Analysing the work of Manjule and Ranjith, Manju Edachira argues that instead of a Dalit rejection of aesthetics, as proposed by Limbale, these filmmakers explore the "possibilities of an anti-caste aesthetics as affect – expression and celebration – beyond the narratives of "pain" and "humiliation."[246] Drawing on the work of these filmmakers, she argues that it's possible to pursue anti-caste work while also celebrating and

245. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 48.

246. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 49.

recognising the beauty and joy in life and struggle.[247] Edachira also brings forth some other key propositions which resonate with my artistic practice, and in some sense, traces of these propositions are present in all the films made during this PhD. Most of these propositions and my reflections have been elucidated in the fourth article. However, in summary, Edachira proposes – from representation towards critical presence, from 'talking back' to 'talking with', from resistance to engagement and a simultaneous effort towards narratives that are at once particular (singular) and universal (immanent).[248] These propositions are not to be misunderstood as simple linear journeys and at the cost of another. Rather the ethos here is that of revision, nuance and complicating the existing paradigms of Dalit portrayals in cinema.

Edachira observes that the dominant representational regimes in and through cinema affect Dalits but not the other way around.[249] However, according to her, Dalit responses to 'talking down' (invisibility, negation, misrepresentation, essentialisation, savarna gaze etc.) are often 'talking at' or 'talking to' but never 'with'. Therefore, she argues for the need to understand and deconstruct the politics of representation but simultaneously also emphasises going beyond it.[250] Invoking and building further on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, for whom "representation is what determines itself by its own limits", Edachira adds that "presence is to be born,

247. Invoking Cornel West's address to the class of 2019, Harvard Divinity School, where West appeals to find joy in struggle, Edachira writes in the notes section, "an anti-caste aesthetics should entail an invocation of such a joyful struggle of love, life, freedom, equality, humility, and justice, even in the face of death." See: Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52; Cornel West, "There Is Joy in Struggle," Harvard Divinity School, May 31, 2019, accessed May 17, 2023, https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2019/05/31/cornel-west-there-joy-struggle.

248. This is my interpretation of Edachira's arguments from two different articles: Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 47-53 and Manju Edachira, "Artists and Critical Presence: Beyond Dalit as a Representation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 9 (2022), accessed May 17, 2023, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/artists-and-critical-presence-beyond-dalit.

249. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 48.

250. Edachira, "Artists and Critical Presence."

a verb which is always in action."[251] For her presence is about transforming all determinations. To this end, Edachira states the importance of expressive and affective registers to generate Dalit presence, as she succinctly puts, "bringing into presence a previously absent entity to a sensory reality."[252]

Edachira also believes in going beyond resistance and towards engagement. As significant as the oppositional gaze is, for her, it's equally important to enact "a "look" which cares" – "an affective gaze".[253] This is what she means by 'talking with'. Unpacking the song *Naan Yaar* from Mari Selvaraj's film *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), she argues that it's successful in rupturing what was possible in Tamil cinema because it uses affective registers (such as symbolic and metaphorical visuals of the black dog and venomous creatures like scorpions and snakes, wall murals etc.) to do the critical anti-caste work. The song presents an oppositional gaze that resists but also cares, inviting one to be part of its becoming through affect.[254] Similarly, I would add Mari Selvaraj's next film *Karnan* (2021), to this list. In this film, Selvaraj's invocation and attention to sensorial qualities of images and sound and experimentation with symbols and metaphors register not only an oppositional gaze that disrupts the dominant representational regime but also produces an affect through which Dalit presence is foregrounded.[255]

251. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52. For the original text of Nancy, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Holmes and others (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1-4.

252. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52.

253. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 48.

254. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 50. The video song is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxYdH58_0P0.

255. For an extensive understanding of how Selvaraj fuses *Karnan* with symbolism, see Sowmya Rajendran, "Karnan: Unpacking the myths and metaphors in Mari Selvaraj's film," *The News Minute*, May 18, 2021, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/karnan-unpacking-myths-and-metaphors-mari-selvarajs-film-149064.

Expanding this further, in reference to Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016) and Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018), Edachira asserts that these films go beyond autobiographical narratives of Dalit lives.[256] This assertion needs to be read in the context of Dalit literary history, where autobiography is one of the common modes to foreground violence, discrimination, disenfranchisement, injustices, and inequalities. However, for some scholars, especially Gopal Guru, it produces a bind. Guru thinks this insistence on registering lived experiences (the local, the particular and the empirical) hinders a theoretical representation of Dalits. He argues that "moving away from the empirical mode to the theoretical one has become a social necessity for Dalits, Adivsasi and OBCs."[257] Toral Jatin Gajarawala partially concurs with Guru and contends that since subaltern literature, as a revisionist cultural project, has been focused on reclaiming the past and illuminating the present in an unadulterated manner, it is confined to the empirical real. But Gajarawala also thinks Guru's understanding of what constitutes theoretical knowledge is limited.[258] For instance, Guru holds a somewhat untenable view that poetry "has no conceptual capacity to universalize the particular and particularize the universe; it does not have that dialectical power."[259] Just like Gajarawala, I also only partially agree with Guru. Why can't a particular work simultaneously traverse theoretical (universal) and biographical (particular) presentations of Dalits? Why can't poetry be considered a theory? Edachira, through the analysis of Manjule

256. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52.

257. See Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (2002): 5007. This becomes clearer with his opening statement on the first page (5003) of the article: "Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras."

258. Toral Jatin Gajarawala, "The Postman and the Tramp: Cynicism, Commitment, and the Aesthetics of Subaltern Futurity," *Cultural Critique* 108 (2020): 58-60, doi:10.1353/cul.2020.0021.

259. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.

and Ranajith's films, illustrates that it's possible to traverse both the universal and the particular. According to her, these films are not letting the autobiographical register restrict the possibilities of aesthetics. Experimentation with the form converts lived autobiographical narratives into a cinematic experience, making it more than empirical – in other words, "that is at once local and universal, yet singular and immanent."[260]

Before I move to aesthetics strategies and modes that I have mobilised and experimented with, it might be prudent to quickly list the aesthetic aspirations that I have had during this PhD. This, of course, is based on understanding and aspirational aspects of my own film practice and doctoral research, but it is also a result of deep engagement with contemporary Dalit films and critical thinking. This list is neither exhaustive nor do I make any claims that I have been entirely successful in achieving them.

- Dalit consciousness and anti-caste aesthetics as the central framework.
- While deconstructing representation, also focusing on the critical presence of Dalits.
- Working between and across the particular and the universal to tease out the tensions between the empirical and the theoretical.
- Pursuing affective register to rupture the unconscious of caste and engage with the audience.
- Constructing the films in a way that does not posit Dalit subjectivities, lived experiences and worlding for easy carnivalesque kind of consumption by the non-subaltern viewer with an assumed ethical-political distance.
- Evidencing but in parallel working with the limitations of evidencing.
- Since a great deal of focus during the PhD has been on methods, sharing the documentation of the process,

260. Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema," 52.

> but also an attempt to exceed the documentation so that it becomes an affective cinematic experience.

During this PhD, I have worked with a notion of cinema that can loosely be called a hybrid or a remix style in the sense that they work/switch between and across different modes – 'essayistic,' 'archival', '(auto)biographical', 'performative', 'poetic' to name a few. In my working with these modes, I have used film tools, forms, genre conventions, languages, etc., not with a desire to reinvent them but rather to bring them into a new configuration so that I can come closer to the theoretical, methodological, and aesthetic aspirations of this research.

Since all the films made during the PhD are either interventions in existing films or based on some sense of fieldwork, they can loosely qualify as 'archival' or 'documentary' practices for the sake of categorisation. I have already elucidated and engaged with conceptual and artistic strategies behind archival interventions in the articles, so I will keep it brief here. Found-footage film tradition, or Catherine Russel's notion of 'archiveology,' essentially indicates a film practice that reuses, recycles, reappropriates and reimagines archival material to emancipate it from its "usual chronological relationship with the archive in order to develop an alternative temporality – a heretical one, of the *futur antérieur*, most capable of displaying an imaginative future of what did not happen or of what could have been the images' futures at the time."[261] For Russel, more than whether or not it is read as a

261. Found-footage film tradition cuts across artistic and film practices. The idea of appropriating, manipulating and rearranging existing archival footage has been explored by artists and filmmakers for decades. Bruce Conner's experimental collage film *A Movie* (1958), Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), *Between Darkness and Light (After William Blake)* (1997), *Feature Film* (1999), and *Play Dead; Real Time* (2003), Anri Sala's *Intervista (Finding the Words)* and Tracey Moffatt's *Other* (2009) are just some of the prominent examples of this tradition/mode/style. In 2012, the Eye Film Museum in the Netherlands held an exhibition titled *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed* dedicated to this practice. See "Found Footage Cinema Exposed." *e-flux*, accessed May 17, 2023, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34366/found-footage-cinema-exposed/. The direct quotation is from Marie-Pierre Burquier, "Review: Catherine Russell, Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices," *Frames Cinema Journal* 17 (2020), https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v0i17.2061, and for Russel's definition of 'archiveology', see Catherine Russel, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 1.

genre, archiveology's main proposition is its artistic and critical approach based on Walter Benjamin's invocation of criticism that would "consist entirely of quotations".[262] Russel's interpretation of Benjamin here alludes to analysis and criticism of films from the films themselves. In reference to Benjamin's rhetoric of 'blasting open', 'awakening', and 'the dialectical', Russell takes them to mean "that the only way to subvert or challenge the world of images that we inhabit is from within that world."[263] Reworking the images to critique and reimagine alternate futures has meant that many filmmakers inhabiting subaltern spaces have embraced this style or mode of filmmaking.[264]

262. Walter Benjamin quoted in Russel, *Archiveology, 3*.

263. Russell, *Archiveology*, 4.

264. Catherine Russel gives numerous examples of films that can be classified as 'archiveology' in her book. Some notable mentions, especially from a feminist lens, are Peggy Ahwesh's *The Color of Love* (1994), Sue Friedrich's films *The Ties That Bind* (1985), *Sink or Swim* (1990) and Agnès Varda's *The Beaches of Agnes*. Another notable mention in Russel's book is Kamal Aljafari's work *Recollection* (2015), in which he reconstructs the town of Jaffa in Palestine to 'recover' the community and town before it was destroyed by colonisation and settlements. To undertake this cinematic reconstruction, he has used excerpts from many different Israeli and American films.

I HESITATE

A script from the film *Fourth World.*

VO: With a lot of hesitation, I include this (British Pathé footage on the Bengal Famine of 1943).

I hesitate not because I am scared of images or that I have a phobia of the archive.

My fear is that I am too keen to match these shots from my own archive - not that I planned it during my fieldwork but because I operate in a terrain where the past and the present are inseparable. Reading the past through the present and the present through the past can't be merely an exercise in juxtaposition. In any case, what is there to be gained from this? Can it bring me any closer to the subjective truths of those who dwelled in the margins during the famine years?

When a suffering is of this scale, it gets reduced to an abstraction. And it's only by abstraction that we all become equal. My body wants to break open this archive so that it can expand and tell us about particularities. Maybe it is when the archive is in distress that it truly reveals why it's so good at hiding differentials.

Till this filmed evidence exceeds its own limits… how would we ever know how many of them were Dalits? It's an impossible story to tell, and I want to amplify the impossibility of its telling. But the present is always knocking at the door to be a proxy of the past.

Not far from Russel's notion of 'archiveology', in my interventions in the existing works on the Bengal famine, the attempt was to reimagine them as spaces for caste-subaltern dialogue through re-montage (recutting) and playing with spatial (screen arrangement) and temporal (time arrangement) elements. The history of the famine, the instability of famine as a viable conceptual category, and the intersectionality of caste, famine and its representations are renegotiated in my interventions through tools afforded by the film medium. By recutting and rearranging the existing films or inflecting them with subaltern narratives and poetry, the idea was neither simply a juxtaposition of the past-present and subaltern-elite nor filling the historical and representational gap, rather treating archives as interpretative and generative spaces where the caste question is dealt with ethically-politically and affectively. There is no zeal to resolve it through the Gandhian humanist framework, Nehurvian statist, or Marxist class perspective. In fact, interventions are geared towards destabilising these frameworks. Whether it's through extending cinematic space afforded to Moti, the only Dalit character in Satyajit Ray's film, or bringing in the fable *Rat* into Mrinal Sen's film or decoupling the image and sound and accentuating the textual to foreground colonial imaginaries in the British Pathé video, in each of these three interventions, ultimately, the guiding force has been actively and affectively enacting subaltern presence(s).

Fourth World and *You deny my living and I defy my death* both have their genesis in the documentation of artistic methodological processes undertaken during this PhD, but they also capture the spirit of testing the limits of documentation (evidencing the process and evidence in general) and constantly reconfiguring themselves to exceed the documentation. Interestingly, in the nineteenth century, the term documentary arises as an adjective referring to documentation, in some sense connoting evidence.[265] From Grierson's conception of "creative treatment of actuality"[266] to Bill Nichols' tentative, basic working definition of documentary

265. Phillip Rosen, "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (London: Routledge, 1993): 6.

266. John Grierson, cited in Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Third Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017): 5.

as something that connotes reality, real people and real events, theorising documentary films in terms of conceptual, definitional and aesthetic underpinnings has eluded any kind of fixity.[267] Despite his attempts to find a common definitional working ground, Nichols himself has observed, "Documentary as a concept or practice occupies no fixed territory. It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques, addresses no set number of issues, and adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles, or modes."[268] Moreover, for him, there is no guaranteed absolute separation between 'fiction' and 'documentary'.[269] Notions of documentary as a scientific and ethnographic endeavour towards "indexically representing a real world, mimetically reproducing pictures of reality with a view to providing knowledge" and its truth claims have long been debated and challenged.[270] Over time, complex relationships between the author, the film, and the world, have been negotiated with a diverse range of modes in documentary practices. Moreover, both the theoretical position as well as the narrative strategies have constantly changed, making it difficult to identify clear demarcations between those changes. However, Jayasankar and Monteiro contend that while acknowledging a linear or exhaustive set of positions might be difficult, understanding authorial positions can still be very generative.[271] Bill Nichols' conception of modes – expository,

267. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 5-7.

268. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12.

269. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, xi-xvi.

270. K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro, "Documentary and Ethnographic Film," in *Elsevier Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, (2001): 3821.

271. Jayasankar and Monteiro list eight authorial positions: "The Author as Reconstructing the Authentic Other" (Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, 1922); "The Author as Social Educator" (of which Grierson was an avid advocate and Basil Wright's *Night Mail*, 1936, is an example); "The Author as Reflexive Roving Eye" (Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929); "The Author as Propagandist" (Leni Riefesntahl's *Triumph of the Will*, 1935); "The Author as a Fly on the Wall – Direct Cinema" (Frederick Wiseman's *The Titicut Follies*, 1969); "The Author as a 'Fly in the Soup' – Cinema Verité" (Jean Rouch's *Moi, un Noir*, 1959); "The Postcolonial 'Other' as the Author" (for instance, the work of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino in Argentina in *Hour of Furnaces*, 1968; the work of Anand Patwardhan in India, *Father, Son and Holy War*, 1998); and "The Reflexive Author" (Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, 1982; Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, 1989; Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989 as some prominent examples) See Jayasankar and Monteiro, "Documentary and Ethnographic Film," 3823-3825.

poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative, and interactive – is closely associated with the notion of authorial positions. These modes indicate approaches towards filmmaking, sort of basic principles behind gathering and organising of the material, which arise out of the perceived limitations of other modes, technological affordances, institutional constraints, changing social context and audience expectations.[272]

Considering this PhD research, my artistic and conceptual leanings, and my geo-political and socio-epistemic location, I am particularly interested in the postcolonial and reflexive authorial positions as invoked by Jayasankar and Monteiro and within that configuring and reconfiguring modes (mixing and matching) to explore the complex ethical-political-methodological-aesthetical terrains of caste-subalternities, food and famines, and its 'utterances'. The history of subaltern and resistance cinema is decades-old, and the content-form debate is similar to that of Dalit literature. Third Cinema, coined by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to denote a revolutionary existence and approach to filmmaking outside of the First Cinema (Hollywood) and Second Cinema (European auteur cinema) or, for that matter, oppositional and political cinema in India, of which Anand Patwardhan is a key example, foreground documentary realism and emphasise change by first investigating and then exposing the social and material conditions. Reflecting on Griersonian influence in Indian political films, Paromita Vohra argues that it has meant realism over creativity and experimentation or the filmmaker as the messianic figure. This is no coincidence because, according to Vohra, Grierson himself hugely undermined the creative part of his overall statement – "creative treatment of actuality".[273]

I truly appreciate the work of the Third Cinema movement and the films of Anand Patwardhan for their social and political commitment, but within the postcolonial subaltern space, I am

272. For definitions of each of these modes, see Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 22-23.

273. Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra, "On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation," *BioScope* 3, no. 1 (2012): 7-20.

closer to the practices of Amar Kanwar (*A Season Outside*, 1997; *A Night of Prophecy*, 2002), Trinh T. Minh-ha, (*Re-assemblage*, 1982; *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989; *What About China*? 2022), Tracey Moffatt (*Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*, 1990), Kumar Shahani (*Bhavantarana*, 1991), Paromita Vohra (*Unlimited* Girls, 2002; *Morality TV and the Loving Jehad: Ek Manohar Kahani*, 2007), Nishtha Jain (*City of Photos*, 2004), Mani Kaul (*Siddheshwari*, 1989), David MacDougall (*The Doon School Quintet*, 1997-2000) Suneil Sanzgiri (*Letter From Your Far-Off Country*, 2020; *Golden Jubilee*, 2021), Kidlat Tahimik (*Perfumed Nightmare*, 1977; *Why Is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?*, 1994), and the Dalit filmmakers whom I have listed earlier. These filmmakers practice cinema in an expanded sense, a cinema-in-between and across different genre conventions and modes towards intersubjectivities. Moreover, they are at once poetic and political because they also emphasise formal experimentation. In these films, heterogenous subjectivities of the subjects and the filmmakers, including the affect of the very act of filmmaking on those subjectivities, are constantly explored and expressed. Moreover, they display a keen interest in questioning the "conception of the documentarist as the scrutinizer of truth, exercising an authoritative and validating gaze."[274] Away from a totalising quest for absolute truths and meanings or constructing the 'other' as fully knowable subjects, these filmmakers engage with the world through their film practice from a more contemplative and indeterminate place. This is not to say that they abandon all conceptions of reality; rather, they explore it from an understanding that reality is shaped by fluid social dynamics, the author's situatedness and that it is often partial and fragmented. Each with its own image-text-sound operations and authorial positions and modes, these films are invested not only in the chosen themes but also in the film medium itself, either through directly ruminating on them or indirectly testing and expanding the notion of cinema by experimentation. From Trinh T. Minh-ha's mixing of poetry, archival footage, folk songs

274. Aparna Sharma has used this phrase in relation to the works of David MacDougall, Desire Machine Collective and Kumar Shahani. I strongly think this holds true for most of the filmmakers I have listed here. See Aparna Sharma, *Documentary Films in India: Critical Aesthetics at Work*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 4.

and essayistic voice-over in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) and *What About China?* (2022) to Kanwar's usage of contemplative voice-over and attention to symbolism and allegory in *A Season Outside* (1997) to Vohara and Tahimik's blending of performative fiction with documentary in *Cosmopolis: Two Tales Of A City* (2004) and *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) respectively, all these films and filmmakers have had a great impact on my practice, especially during the PhD.

REMEMBERING AND LIVING

A script from the film *Fourth World.*

What if a commission of inquiry were to be set up to investigate if memory operates in the shadow of time or time operates in the shadow of memory? Should not that commission also deliberate upon the perversions of the film medium and filmmakers?

When caste has been your most intimate enemy and hunger its manifestation, the important thing is to stay alive. To argue that all temporalities collapse in the vacuum created by hunger, the important thing is to stay alive. To argue that the act of living in itself is the highest form of resistance, the important thing is to stay alive. To defy the logic of the cycle of birth and death, the important thing is to stay alive. Upon death, how does one register in its memory the many famines that have occurred since then?

When remembering and living are in inseparable relation, it produces many sketches, and it is through these sketches that we refute erasure. But then, how does one imagine a life without the ability to forget and to forgive? On second thought - how unfair is this question – it presupposes a life.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN: FAMINE AND FILM

A script from the film *Fourth World.*

VO: Dying from hunger is such a slow process. There is nothing spectacular about it. It defies time, measurement, and representation. If we trust only our vision, by the time we notice it… it's already too late.

But if we trust the gut, we would know. There is no sensation like this—the subjective construction of hunger functions at the level of the gut.

I often wonder if the film medium can come to our rescue in solving the time problem. After all, it possesses time-lapse- a technology that allows us to speed up the time that passes to such an extent that we can illustrate something that would not normally be noticeable. But then, how do you speed up the occurrence itself? Bodies know how to resist death. The film medium will always fall short. Filmmaking never is more than a shadow of itself, what it could have been. But I also know I would rather operate in the shadows than fall into nothingness.

Why am I employing this close narration? Is it to evade or collapse all distinctions? Or am I just trying to negotiate what can never be fully resolved? I can test the limits of the medium and its conventions, but how can I withdraw from it? When you have lived with the suspicion of

images, you inadvertently also build an intimate relationship with them and keep asking… what could have been?

DUAL MOVEMENTS

In order for the film projects to become a space of appearance there has to be room for the unexpected, unpredictable and unplanned. A film project where the choreography, gestures and verbal communication are predetermined in detail, can thus not become a space of appearance. While I have stressed the importance of the uncontrollable, I have also argued for the significance of the political and ideological focus of the film projects; that the encounters between the actors occur on the basis of political aims. The notion of film projects as a space for political action must therefore be founded on a dialectical relationship between the political and the personal, between the structured and the spontaneous, between the planned and the unplanned, between the ideological and the indefinable, between the expected and the unexpected. Arendt argues that it is precisely between what is and what can be that there is a possibility for new action and a chance to change direction. I thus believe that the political potential of film lies in its dual movements, which also comprise the one between the historical and the imaginary. This applies to structure, aesthetics, content and to a certain degree even screening.[275]

275. Invoking Hannah Arendt, Petra Bauer in her artistic research PhD, takes 'space of appearance' to mean the political space that emerges when one relates to the other through speech and action. Through her films and thesis, Bauer asks if film can be pursued as a political action in an Arendtian sense. I have particularly benefited from her thinking on how to mediate the different dialectal pulls she alludes to in the quoted passage. See Petra Bauer, "Sisters! Making Films, Doing Politics," PhD diss., (Lund University and Konstfack, 2016), 161.

The film *Fourth World* presents selected conversations with community members from two Dalit villages and Chitrakars and processes of triangulated artistic negotiations, thus invoking a sense of documentary in a 'social-realist' mode. But I argue that it exceeds its own documentation because it constantly returns to the mediated, delicate, and unstable processes of meaning-making and memory. It blends spoken and unspoken poetry and (auto) biographical moments, includes speculative essayistic rumination on the research and film practice in general, and focuses on affect through foregrounding sensorial aspects of images and experimentation with sounds and silences. In order to attempt anti-caste affective aesthetics in this film, images, sounds and texts are pursued with a sense of indeterminacy. Moreover, this film explores and accentuates the materiality and associative possibilities of all three elements (images, texts, and sounds). In working with layered and complex collages which operate in different modes, I would argue that I have been able to pursue an active anti-caste aesthetic strategy. I say this because this way of working has allowed me to foreground polyvocality, especially caste-subaltern heterogeneities, and negotiated imaginations of the famine.

As alluded to earlier in the kappa and explored in detail in the fourth article, *You deny my living and I defy my death* has its genesis in destabilising the 'ethnographic field'. Away from 'empiricism' and 'natural settings' ordinarily assumed in ethnographic films, this performative film produces a constructed environment with a layered soundtrack to challenge the existing socio-cultural and aesthetic representation of Dalit subjectivities and to imagine new possibilities. Starting with the performative-collaborative workshop and its documentation and later in editing the film, it's guided by a spirit of exploring and expressing the epistemological and ontological complexities inherent in the questions of nutrition, hunger, starvation, food, famine, film and caste-subalternities and their representations. Through close-up images, bodily gestures, and repetitions of some sequences and sounds, this film is constructed to close the gap between

the viewer and the viewed.[276] Both the collaborative workshop and the editing of its documentation into a film generated awareness about the affordances of the sensorial aspects of anti-caste work. Since caste also operates in and through sensorial regimes, this work has opened up a further inquiry if affective and sensory engagement with the caste questions allows it to be understood and tackled in way that hitherto has not been entirely possible through 'logical' and 'theoretical' anti-caste explanation and resistance.

All the films made during the PhD point to iterative film practice and encapsulate multiplicity in both the content and the form.[277] This ethos of multiplicity and heterogeneity allows the films to sidestep several debates – 'content versus form', 'universal versus particular', and 'realist versus aesthetic experimentation'. Both *Fourth World* and *You deny my living and I defy my death*, are attuned to limits and tensions of these disparate desires, but neither fully accept nor reject them. They contain in them a spirit of being many things at once and, to that end, embrace inconsistencies, contradictions, and fragmentations.

Despite their inherent multiplicities and heterogeneities, caste-subalternities and famine are material realities but also unstable conceptual categories. These two, when brought into the domain of cinematic exploration and expression, throw up several ethical-methodological-aesthetical challenges and dilemmas. Since cinema has affected Dalits and not the other way round, it is crucial to have an oppositional consciousness and bring to fore invisibilities, misrepresentations and savarna gaze. However,

276. Anne Rutherford, in her analysis of Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside*, states that associative qualities of images coupled with attention to colour, texture and movement of images create a sense of indeterminacy. This mimetic sensitivity, according to Rutherford, closes the gap between the viewer and viewed. I have also attempted to achieve something similar in my films. See Anne Rutherford, "The Poetics of a Potato: Documentary that Gets Under the Skin," *Metro: Media & Education Magazine*, no. 137 (2003): 126-131.

277. In an interview with Anne Rutherford, Amar Kanwar states, "[Y]ou cannot have multiplicity in form if you don't have multiplicity in content. They feed each other. [...] You have to able to relate to reality in its many-dimensional way since the reality you are trying to talk about itself is filled with many dimensions." See Rutherford, ""Not Firing Arrows,"" 119.

to "furiously bloom like a Gulmohar, against the conspiracy of the sun", I would argue against being caught up completely by representation-misrepresentation debate and rather focus on what Edachira calls 'Dalit Presence'. In and through making the films during this PhD, I have truly come to appreciate the creative potential of working between and across multiple modes as they allow both – talking about the conspiracy of the sun and blooming like a Gulmohar.

EXISTING OUTSIDE OF WHAT IS MADE AVAILABLE

A script from the film *Fourth World.*

VO: Is it possible that the archive of a film lies in the film itself? What do I think of the archive that I created with so many people? Can it even be categorised as a film on Dalits' experiences of the Bengal Famine of 1943? Perhaps not. How does one remain dedicated to the particularities of a famine when the pulls of the past, present and future are so strong? How can one pursue this task with a singular focus on filling the historical gap? A gap would seem to indicate… a thing that is an anomaly, an error, an aberration, a historical glitch… A gap would also seem to indicate a certain possibility or a certain impossibility. How does one bypass this dialectic? What if it's not a gap? What if it's the very foundation that creates and sustains the caste structures? What if we acknowledged that caste hierarchy is always already signified? What if one wishes to exist outside of what is already made available?

When you work at the limits of representation but are haunted by making your presence felt… you hesitate…

I don't know what I think about sharing the scrolls with you… not because I fear your judgement on the efficacy of the scrolls in filling the historical gap… rather I am unsure if you will appreciate the ethos of disclosing them

without reducing them to a fixed description. I wish to deny you the cinematic payoff, but I am not yet cynical of storytelling. Between possibilities and impossibilities, how can I let go of being and becoming through making? After all, being and becoming is also an exercise in imagining existing outside of what is already made available.

Chapter 4: Closing notes

It's quite challenging to conclude research like this because the very nature and focus of the research sometimes can resist any final conclusion. Therefore, my emphasis here would be on tracing back the processes and contingencies and summarily synthesising the research tasks, key propositions, reflections, and finally, what future avenues this research opens.

Considering the gap in exploring the intersectionality of caste-related subalternities and famine in general and, more specifically, the Bengal famine of 1943, quite early in the research, I realised that the focus must shift from 'filling the historical gap' to 'attending to that gap'. The immediate concern with 'filling the historical gap' is that it signals a possible recovery and representation. Even from the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? In view of interjections and revisions offered by scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Gyan Prakash to the initial subaltern studies approach that signalled the need and possibility of recovering and writing the history from below, this research acknowledges the (im)possibilities associated with any such task. However, this research, in keeping with the ethos of Spivak's and Parkash's assertions, does not take this sense of (im)possibility to mean inaction or freezing.[278] Away from the notions of recovery of subalterns' histories, subalterns as a homogenous group, subalterns as exterior or fully knowable and representable subjects, this research is invested in 'attending to the gap', or in words, exploring ethical-methodological and aesthetical imaginaries to find possible ways to work in and around a very palpable sense of (im)possibility that shadow any subaltern work.

At the outset of this research, I was focused on asking how film practice can be mobilised to foreground caste-subaltern experiences of the Bengal famine of 1943. I had an intuitive understanding of the import of caste as an organising principle

278. Third chapter explores this in detail and has synthesized key arguments from different articles and books by Gayatri Spivak and Gyan Prakash. However, the following two references are the most crucial in this context: Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" and Prakash, "The Impossibility of Subaltern History."

of exclusion, discrimination, graded inequality, hierarchy, and denial of resources in the processes and outcomes of a famine. However, as the research progressed, it became evident that I had to address the temporal, definitional and conceptual instability of a term like 'famine' itself. Even with a clear emphasis on the caste question, relegating the famine of 1943 to an event of the past would have meant historicising the famine at the cost of not politicising it from a contemporary lens. My engagement with communities in Midnapore, and famine studies scholarship clearly indicated the need to unsettle the Malthusian understanding of famine that links it to mass starvation and death. One important manifestation of politicising famine from a contemporary lens is that while it unpacks how famine was (and continues to be) a colonial instrument, it also acknowledges and analyses the failure of postcolonial states. Moreover, it affords the possibility to study the question of food and its availability from a multifaceted approach. It centres a wide range of questions such as – hunger, malnutrition, chronic starvation without necessarily resulting in death, and socio-economic structures that dictate one's ability to cope in a time of uncertainty and crisis. Most importantly, it shifts the focus away from outcomes to processes that continue to produce inequalities and precarity. This understanding had a direct and tangible impact on how I saw my research. I realised that while rooted in the Bengal famine of 1943, I could also take it as an entry point to broaden the horizon of my research. That's why this research treats the 'main research question' – how can film practice, both as methodology and outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore negotiated imaginations of the Bengal famine from a caste-subaltern perspective? – as only a starting question. At times it zooms in on the specificities of the Bengal famine of 1943, but it also continuously attempts to zoom out of it.

This research is deeply invested in the question of ethical-methodological imaginaries, and I would argue that this is perhaps the most significant contribution of this research. Away from any sense of unreal, by the term 'imaginaries', I mean an entanglement of thinking-doing that can possibly produce different conditions to experience and engage with the world. I see it as not an exercise in inventing something radically new. Rather a sense of tentative

experimentation and exploration guides it to revise, nuance and reconfigure what already exists. The radical proposition here is not of discovery. In fact, it's contrary to that. For instance, I have not invented oral history, collaborative artist practice, and Patchitra. I am putting these in slightly new configurations to test its possibilities for subaltern work.

Drawing from subaltern scholarship, especially Spivak's writing on subalternity and representation, this research, in terms of ethical injunctions, has shifted the focus from knowledge to relations. It has meant an anti-essentialist approach to subalternity, self-reflexivity without reconstituting and recentring the self through navel-gazing, and an imperative to engage with and name subalternities. This research insists on the heterogeneities and the irreducible unknowability of caste-subalterns and problematises easily consumable accounting of their experiences. However, what must be foregrounded here is an ethos here is that of unsettling and nuancing subaltern projects and not abandoning them, for it is a necessary task even if it comes with ethical dilemmas, inconsistencies, and contradictions. With regards to ethical-methodological engagement with caste-subalterns, the emphasis throughout this research was on operating beyond 'sameness', 'complete difference' or 'not knowable at all'. I have argued and demonstrated in this research that if ethical injunctions are not rehearsed in and through methods, they will remain at the level of abstraction, reinforcing a politics of inaction.

In this iterative, exploratory, and transdisciplinary research, film practice is both the medium and the primary method. Most of the research activities undertaken during this PhD centre film practice. It is not pursued as an illustration or explication of a pre-figured research result. Rather, the inquiry has been shaped and advanced by the methodological affordance of the medium – its tools, languages, contexts, formal concerns, histories etc. The first set of film actions – archival interventions – resulted from watching existing films on the Bengal famine. Those interventions, then, nuanced my questions and approach for the fieldwork-filming in Midnapore. The fieldwork-filming and my attempts to edit that into a film then inspired me to move the field to a

studio and collaborate with a performance artist to investigate the affective-embodied approaches to questions of caste, food, famine, and representation. In terms of transdisciplinarity, this research brings together concepts and methods from famine studies, ethnography, oral history, caste studies, and film practice, but in its approach, it is not aimed at accounting for and maintaining the sanctity of each disciplinary thinking. Away from the tight grips of disciplinary pulls, it tries to work between, across and beyond different disciplines. I would argue that this notion of transdisciplinary practice-based research lends itself very well to subaltern work. Rather than outrightly refusing or excluding the disciplinary contexts, in its attempt to decouple the specific boundaries and languages from their original context, it has the possibility to throw up methodological imaginaries, which would not otherwise be possible from a single disciplinary source. Exploring these transdisciplinary methodological imaginaries assumes greater significance in light of seemingly (im)possible subaltern work.

In this research, I have proposed 'negotiated imaginations' instead of 'recovery' and 'representation' of caste-subaltern experiences of the famine. At its core, negotiated imaginations entail continuous dialogical efforts towards non-appropriative encounters and engagements with caste-subalterns and storying the world in a way that is intersubjective and polyvocal (both in content and form), and work at the limits of 'evidencing' and 'objectivity'. Imagination invokes creative acts that are never entirely separable from 'real' nor fully confluent with 'unreal'; it is not entirely transparent and can't be grasped totally or assimilated so easily. Negotiation encapsulates a spirit of horizontal exchange and mediation between different participants. I would argue that negotiation is not necessarily an exercise in consensus building or resolving a difficult situation. More than focusing on outcomes, it foregrounds the processes through which action can be initiated even when it's not fully resolved and is fraught with incommensurabilities, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Negotiated imagination, which served as a conceptual basis for ethical-methodological praxis in this research, is manifested through two fundamental principles – regarding subaltern

subjects as creative subjects from the outset and agentic and participatory storytelling.

I would contend that subalterns are often seen as either the dormant 'other' or political subjects and rarely as creative subjects. In the absence of acknowledging the creative subjectivities of subalterns and creative acts undertaken by them as legitimate forms of knowledge and expression, we will continue to co-opt and subsume subalterns and their methodologies as a minor case study in an expanded Western epistemology that takes a comparative turn but not challenged by subaltern ways of knowing and giving form to that knowing. Working from the outset with the understanding that subalterns are creative subjects allows us to move slightly away from the impasse of 'representation' and 'crisis of representation'. I am not stating that it solves the 'representation' predicament entirely, but by placing subaltern worldling (methodologies of subalterns such as Patchitra) in parallel to non-subaltern worlding (subaltern methodologies such as oral history, at least in terms of its generally perceived epistemic location and framework), it creates an ethos of inflection and negotiation that might throw up unique possibilities. To this end, articulating and foregrounding the processes of negotiations are as important as the negotiations themselves. Without this articulation, the risk of metaphorising subalterns is very high. The mere inclusion of subaltern stories says little about the processes and conditions under which they are collected, or about whom the inclusion serves.

Focus on storytelling is another crucial aspect of negotiated imagination. As alluded to earlier, the immense significance of historical evidence and inclusion of caste-subalterns' experiences of the famine can't be denied. However, turning this into a recuperative and representational project has its own pitfalls. I would contend that storytelling, which is an extension of imagination, can unlock some of the dead-ends in this regard. Stories and storytelling are not about validating, evidencing, or ascertaining historical truths. Similarly, it's neither entirely individual nor fully collective. Stories emerge in negotiations – they are not static. They shift, they change, and they involve

both listening and telling. Constant reconfiguration and retelling are embedded in the very act, which stops it from becoming an 'absolute truth'. It allows a non-linear connection of fragmented memories of the past and its bearings on the present and the future and constructions of identities. Perhaps the most radical proposition of storytelling, once established and claimed as knowledge work, is that it becomes available to all. It breaks open the narrow corridor of elite historiography; treats it as another story which can co-exist with others but without a hierarchy.

This notion of negotiated imagination has guided the ethical-methodological conception and design of this research. Whether it's re-imagining other lives of existing films by intervening in them or the triangular approach during the fieldwork in Midnapore (storytelling and its negotiations between me, Chitrakars, and members from two Dalit villages) or my collaboration with Durga Bishwokarma, a Dalit performance artist, to test out the affective, embodied, and performative approaches to questions of caste, food, famine and representation, in all these efforts I have attempted to engage with caste-subaltern imaginations of the famine. This sense of negotiated imagination and subaltern polyvocality has been pursued not only in generating the 'content' through a range of storytellers and interlocutors but also in terms of different forms of storytelling such as oral tradition, poetry etc.

In this research, film practice is not only a key method but also a medium in which it is expressed. Formal considerations at every stage of the research (in terms of mobilising film language and tools to turn this research into a self-contained viewing experience, in other words, how to exceed the documentation of its own making and methods) has meant engaging with the question of aesthetics seriously. This assumed even greater significance since cinema in India has propagated caste ideology for a long time. Mainstream Indian cinema is typified by the underrepresentation of caste-subalterns, especially Dalits; even when caste is explored, it is mostly through savarna gaze; heroism (saviour complex) of the upper caste characters; class subsuming caste; relegating Dalits to obscurity or treating them merely as

victims; rarely celebrating the complex lives of Dalits. Such a background dictates an oppositional response that is aimed first at unravelling the lack of representation or the tendency towards misrepresentation, and correcting these. However, to "furiously bloom like a Gulmohar, against the conspiracy of the sun",[279] I would argue against being caught up entirely by representation-misrepresentation debate and instead focus on what Edachira calls 'critical presence'.[280]

It can't be said with any certainty how the viewer will produce the readings of my films, but it's possible to share the desired encounter and, to that end, what intents and strategies are at play. Dalit consciousness and anti-caste aesthetics have been two of the most critical frameworks, shaping all the films made during this research. While acknowledging the importance of social-realist and autobiographical modes to evidence Dalit conditions, attempts have also been made to work with affective registers and between and across multiple modes (social-realist, essayistic, archival, (auto)biographical, performative, and poetic, to name a few), to test the limits of the film medium and evidencing through it, and to unsettle notions of recovery and representation of caste-subaltern experiences of the famine. Working with postcolonial and reflexive authorial positions, heterogenous subjectivities of the subjects and the filmmaker, including the affect of the very act of filmmaking on those subjectivities, are constantly explored and expressed. Moreover, these films try to avoid the totalising quest for absolute truths and meaning, constructing caste-subalterns as fully knowable subjects, and positing caste-subaltern subjectivities, lived experiences and worlding for an easy carnivalesque kind of consumption by the non-subaltern viewer with assumed ethical-political distance. Films made

279. Chapter four starts with an excerpt from the poem titled "Against the Conspiracy of the Sun" by Nagraj Manjule. Originally written in Marathi in 2010, this poem has been translated into English by Yogesh Maitreya. I am invoking this passage from the poem to invoke the importance of partaking in the joy of creating outside of what is made available in dominant representational regimes. See Maitreya, "The Birth of the Dalit Protagonist."

280. Again, this is explored in detail in chapter four. See Edachira, "Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema" and Edachira, "Artists and Critical Presence: Beyond Dalit as a Representation."

during this research are not simply telling a historical reality or listing out the facts. Reality is not abandoned; instead, it is approached from a contemplative and indeterminate place that posits it as partial, inconsistent, and fragmentary. In these films, formal experimentation and opacity, not to be confused with obscurity, are practised in both the content and the form with the hope that the audience does not settle into an easy and distant viewership and that they are constantly asked to do the critical work of rupturing their caste consciousness. Additionally, working with, between, and across different modes affords the possibility to reflect the heterogeneities of caste-subalterns' experiences. I would contend that this hybrid or remix approach, especially in the case of *Fourth World*, lends itself very well to caste-subaltern work because it can make space for multiple and yet contradicting desires. When it needs to, it can be poetic or political, or simultaneously both. It can enable empirical and biographical but also affective and theoretical presentations of caste-subalterns.

Behind shifting the 'field' to a studio and collaborating with a performance artist, and working with affective and embodied registers in *You deny my living and I defy my death* was the idea that the basis of any caste-subaltern position is experiential – not only in terms of graded inequality and hierarchy but also in a visceral and sensorial way. Similarly, away from a narrow definitional framework of famine, food and hunger also operate in an affective way – at the gut level. Whether it's through acts of cleaning the floor, rubbing the dirt off feet, loud screams, blown-up images, interactions with inanimate film objects in the studio, or testing the limits of representations through movements and gestures, I wanted to ask if the sensorial regime of caste can be unsettled through sensory approaches to cinema. I must admit that this research has opened up this question, which currently remains unresolved. It has generated awareness about the affordances of the sensorial and affective engagement with caste-subalternities that does something other than, or exceeds, the 'logical' and 'theoretical' anti-caste explanation and resistance.

At the core of this iterative and transdisciplinary artistic research was exploring ethical, methodological, and aesthetical approaches

that take the inherent dilemma and (im)possibility of 'recovery' and 'representation' of caste-subaltern experiences of the famine seriously without being frozen by it. It is possible to overstate the dilemma and (im)possibilities. Since I am not producing entirely from within, how is it not 'representing'? These questions can be posed as a failure to dismantle the dominant historiography or as a crucial but necessary partial de-centring of that historiography. I would argue that if we have to avoid these seemingly irreconcilable ethical dead-ends and find ways to do the critical work while addressing the problems involved, we have to favour the iterative and exploratory processes over the outcome.

Epilogue

MEMO NO - 22

date - 6-5-08

Between

What is

The cheaply printed contents of a caste certificate, which are needed as proof to avail of caste-based reservation in university admissions, get erased because of the heat from the laminator.

And

What can be

The burden of proof does not dissipate, but it is possible, even momentarily, to imagine filling it with something else.

प्रखण्ड विकास पदाधिकारी एवं अंचल अधिकारी

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Image credits

Images on pages 44-49 are screenshots from the artistic intervention *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*. Original images are screenshots from Satyajit Ray's film *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)*, 1973.

Images on pages 50-57 are screenshots from the artistic intervention *Where We Rats Lurk*. Overlaid images on pages 50, 51 and 55 are originally from two films – Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhaney (In Search of Famine)*, 1981, and Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar's *Kahankar : Ahankar*, 1996. Images on pages 53 and 56-57 are screenshots from Sen's film. The image on page 54 is the result of overlaying an image from my fieldwork onto a screenshot from Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar's film.

All other unreferenced images are mine or screenshots taken from films made during this PhD.

Svensk sammanfattning

Relationen mellan befintliga ojämlikheter och de negativa effekterna av kriser eller katastrofer verkar uppenbar, men denna aspekt är ändå lite studerad. Svältkatastrofen i Bengalen 1943, då nästan tre miljoner människor dog, är inget undantag. En mängd faktorer ledde till svältkatastrofen, bland annat brittisk kolonialpolitik, krig, hamstring och vinstdrivande verksamhet av lokala eliter och företag samt existerande konfliktlinjer baserade på kast-, klass-, och könstillhörighet. Trots att forskare på senare år har börjat granska svältkatastrofen ur ett antikolonialt perspektiv, finns det fortfarande en lucka när det gäller att utforska intersektionen mellan kastrelaterade subalterniteter och svältkatastrof. Det omedelbara problemet med att fylla denna lucka är dock etisk-metodologisk: även om man utgår från ett medvetande om kast och subalternitet, hur kommer man fram till och delar berättelser om svältkatastrofen, och kan de någonsin ”återupptäckas” (be recovered) och ”representeras”? Med tanke på de inlägg och revideringar som forskare som Gayatri Spivak och Gyan Prakash har gjort av den ursprungliga subalternstudies-ansatsen, som signalerade behovet och möjligheten att återupptäcka och skriva historien underifrån, erkänner denna forskning de (o)möjligheter som är förknippade med en sådan uppgift. Men i linje med Spivaks och Parkashs påståenden tar denna forskning inte denna känsla av (o)möjlighet

som intäkt för passivitet eller låsning. Bortom föreställningarna om att återupptäcka subalternernas historia, subalterner som en homogen grupp, subalterner som yttre eller fullt vetbara och representerbara subjekt, är denna forskning investerad i att ”ägna sig åt gapet”, eller med andra ord, utforska etisk-metodologiska och estetiska föreställningar för att hitta möjliga sätt att arbeta med och kring en mycket påtaglig känsla av (o)möjlighet som skuggar allt subalternt arbete.

När jag inledde det här forskningsprojektet var jag inriktad på frågan om hur filmmediet kan mobiliseras för att lyfta fram kast-subalternernas erfarenheter av svältkatastrofen i Bengalen 1943. Jag hade en intuitiv förståelse för kastens betydelse som en organiserande princip för uteslutning, diskriminering, graderad ojämlikhet, hierarki och förnekande av resurser i processerna och resultaten av en svältkatastrof. Men allteftersom forskningen fortskred blev det uppenbart att jag var tvungen att ta itu med den tidsmässiga, definitionsmässiga och begreppsmässiga instabiliteten inneboende i termen ”svältkatastrof” i sig. Även med en tydlig betoning på kastfrågan skulle det ha inneburit en historisering av svälten 1943 om den hade förpassats till det förflutna, vilket i sin tur skulle förhindra en politisering av den ur ett samtida perspektiv. Forskningen om svältkatastrofer visar tydligt på behovet av att utmana den malthusianska förståelsen av svältkatastrof som kopplar den till massvält och massdöd. En viktig manifestation av att svältkatastrofen politiseras utifrån ett samtida perspektiv är att samtidigt erkänna hur den var (och fortsätter att vara) ett kolonialt instrument, liksom analysera det som de postkoloniala staternas misslyckande. Dessutom ger det möjlighet att studera frågan om mat och dess tillgänglighet utifrån ett mångfacetterat synsätt. Det handlar om ett brett spektrum av frågor som hunger, undernäring, kronisk svält som inte nödvändigtvis leder till döden och socioekonomiska strukturer som dikterar en människas förmåga att klara sig i en tid av osäkerhet och kris. Viktigast av allt är att fokus flyttas från resultat till processer som fortsätter att skapa ojämlikhet och otrygghet. Denna förståelse hade en direkt och påtaglig inverkan på denna forskning. Jag insåg att även om jag hade mitt fokus på svälten i

Bengalen 1943 kunde jag också använda den som en utgångspunkt för att vidga horisonten för min forskning. Det är därför denna forskning behandlar den ”huvudsakliga forskningsfrågan” - hur kan filmpraxis, både som metod och resultat av undersökningen, mobiliseras för att utforska förhandlade föreställningar om svältkatastrofen i Bengalen ur ett kast-subaltern-perspektiv? - som enbart en startfråga. Ibland zoomar den in på det specifika med svälten i Bengalen 1943, men den försöker också kontinuerligt zooma ut från den.

Denna forskning är djupt engagerad i frågan om etisk-metodologiska föreställningar, och jag skulle vilja hävda att detta kanske är det mest betydelsefulla bidraget med avhandlingen. Med utgångspunkt i subalternforskning, särskilt Spivaks texter om subalternitet och representation, har denna forskning, i termer av etiska uppmaningar, flyttat fokus från kunskap till relationer. Det har inneburit en anti-essentialistisk ingång till subalternitet och självreflexivitet utan att återkonstituera och centrera jaget genom navelskådning, och en nödvändighet att engagera sig i och namnge subalterniteter.

I denna iterativa, utforskande och tvärvetenskapliga forskning är film både mediet och den primära metoden. De flesta av de forskningsaktiviteter som genomförs under denna doktorsavhandling handlar om filmpraktik. Det handlar inte om att illustrera eller förklara ett i förväg fastställt forskningsresultat, utan undersökningen har snarare formats och utvecklats genom de metodologiska möjligheterna som filmmediet erbjuder - dess verktyg, språk, sammanhang, formella överväganden, historia etc. Den första uppsättningen filmaktioner, arkivinterventioner, var resultatet av att jag studerade befintliga filmer om svältkatastrofen i Bengalen. Dessa interventioner nyanserade sedan mina frågor och mitt tillvägagångssätt för fältarbetet i Midnapore. Fältarbetet och mina försök att redigera det till en film inspirerade mig sedan att flytta fältarbetet till en studio och samarbeta med en performancekonstnär för att undersöka de affektiva och kroppsliga förhållningssätten till frågor om kast, mat, svält och representation. När det gäller tvärvetenskaplighet sammanför

denna forskning begrepp och metoder från svältstudier, etnografi, muntlig historia, kaststudier och filmpraktik, men i sitt tillvägagångssätt syftar den inte till att redogöra för eller upprätthålla det ”heliga” i varje disciplinärt tänkande. I stället försöker jag arbeta mellan, över och bortom olika discipliner. Jag skulle vilja hävda att denna uppfattning om tvärvetenskaplig praktikbaserad forskning lämpar sig mycket väl för subalternt arbete. I stället för att direkt avvisa eller utesluta de disciplinära sammanhangen i sitt försök att frikoppla de specifika gränserna och språken från deras ursprungliga sammanhang, har den möjlighet att utmana metodologiska föreställningar som annars inte skulle vara möjliga från endast en disciplinär källa. Att utforska dessa tvärvetenskapliga metodologiska föreställningar får större betydelse i ljuset av det till synes (o)möjliga subalterna arbetet.

I denna forskning har jag föreslagit ”förhandlade föreställningar” i stället för ”återupptäcka” och ”representation” av kast-subalternas erfarenheter av svältkatastrofer. I grunden innebär förhandlade föreställningar en kontinuerlig dialogisk strävan mot icke-appropriativa möten och engagemang med kastsubalterner. Det innefattar även att berätta om världen på ett sätt som är intersubjektivt och polyvokalt (både till innehåll och form), och att arbeta på gränserna för ”bevisföring” och ”objektivitet”. Fantasin väcker kreativa handlingar som aldrig är helt avskiljbara från det ”verkliga” eller helt sammanflätade med det ”overkliga”; den är inte helt transparent och kan inte förstås helt eller assimileras lätt. Förhandling inrymmer en anda av horisontellt utbyte och medling mellan olika deltagare. Jag skulle vilja hävda att förhandling inte nödvändigtvis är en övning i att skapa samförstånd eller lösa en svår situation. Snarare än att fokusera på resultat framhävs de processer genom vilka handling kan initieras även när situationen inte är helt löst och är fylld av inkommensurabilitet, inkonsekvenser och motsägelser. Förhandlad fantasi, som fungerade som en konceptuell grund för etisk-metodologisk praxis i denna forskning, manifesteras genom två grundläggande principer - att betrakta subalterna subjekt som kreativa subjekt från början och ett agentbaserat och deltagande berättande.

Denna uppfattning om förhandlad fantasi har väglett den etisk-metodologiska utformningen och designen av denna forskning. Oavsett om det handlar om att återskapa andra liv i befintliga filmer genom att ingripa i dem eller det triangulära ansatsen under fältarbetet i Midnapore (berättande och dess förhandlingar mellan mig, Chitrakars och medlemmar från två dalitbyar) eller mitt samarbete med Durga Bishwokarma, en dalit-performanceartist, för att testa de affektiva, kroppsliga och performativa tillvägagångssätten för frågor om kast, mat, svält och representation, i alla dessa ansträngningar har jag försökt att ta del av kast-subalterna föreställningar om svältkatastrofen. Denna känsla av förhandlad fantasi och subaltern polyvokalitet har eftersträvats inte bara i skapandet av ”innehållet” genom en rad berättare och samtalspartners, utan också genom olika former av berättande såsom muntlig tradition, poesi etc.

Formella överväganden i varje steg av forskningen när det gäller att mobilisera filmspråk och verktyg för att göra denna forskning till en självständig visuell upplevelse, med andra ord, hur man kan överskrida dokumentationen av sitt eget skapande och sina metoder, innebar att man på allvar engagerade sig i frågan om estetik. Detta fick ännu större betydelse eftersom indisk film under lång tid har propagerat för kastideologi. Huvuddragen i indisk mainstreamfilm kännetecknas av underrepresentation av kastsubalterner, särskilt daliter; även när kast utforskas är det oftast genom savarnas blick; heroism (räddarkomplex) hos karaktärer från den övre kasten; klass underordnar sig kast; daliter förpassas till glömska eller behandlas enbart som offer; sällan hyllas daliternas komplexa liv. En sådan bakgrund dikterar ett oppositionellt svar som syftar till att först reda ut bristen på representation eller felrepresentation och korrigera den. Jag skulle dock vilja hävda att man inte ska låta sig fångas helt av debatten om representation och missrepresentation, utan i stället fokusera på att skapa bortom det som görs tillgängligt. Med andra ord, att ta del av glädjen i att skapa och iscensätta kritisk dalitnärvaro genom att undvika representationsdebatten när det är möjligt.

Dalitmedvetande och anti-kast-estetik har varit två av de mest kritiska ramverken som har format alla filmer som gjorts under denna forskning. Samtidigt som betydelsen av socialrealistiska och självbiografiska metoder för att visa på daliternas villkor erkänns, har försök också gjorts att arbeta med affektiva register och mellan olika metoder (socialrealistisk, essäistisk, arkivmässig, (auto) biografisk, performativ och poetisk, för att nämna några), att testa gränserna för filmmediet och bevisföringen genom det och att ifrågasätta föreställningar om återhämtning och representation av kast-subalterna erfarenheter av svältkatastrofen. Genom att arbeta med postkoloniala och reflexiva författarpositioner utforskas och uttrycks ständigt heterogena subjektiviteter hos subjekten och filmskaparen, inklusive den påverkan som själva filmskapandet har på dessa subjektiviteter. Dessutom försöker dessa filmer undvika den totaliserande strävan efter absoluta sanningar och mening, genom att konstruera kast-subalterner som fullt vetbara subjekt, och genom att inte framställa kast-subalternernas subjektiviteter, levda erfarenheter och världsuppfattning för enkel och avlägsen konsumtion av den icke-subalternerade tittaren med förmodad etisk-politisk distans. Filmer som gjorts under denna forskning berättar inte bara en historisk verklighet eller listar fakta. Verkligheten överges inte, utan närmas i stället från en eftertänksam och obestämd plats där den betraktas som partiell, inkonsekvent och fragmentarisk. I dessa filmer praktiseras formella experiment och opacitet, som inte ska förväxlas med dunkelhet, i både innehåll och form, med förhoppningen att publiken inte ska slå sig till ro som en enkel och distanserad tittare utan ständigt uppmanas att göra det kritiska arbetet med att bryta upp sitt kastmedvetande. Att arbeta med, mellan och över olika former ger dessutom möjlighet att återspegla heterogeniteten i kastsubalternas erfarenheter. Jag vill hävda att denna hybrid- eller remixmetod, särskilt i fallet med Fjärde världen, lämpar sig mycket väl för kast- och subalternarbete eftersom den kan ge utrymme för flera och ändå motsägelsefulla önskningar. När det behövs kan det vara poetiskt eller politiskt, eller samtidigt bådadera. Den kan möjliggöra empiriska och biografiska, men också affektiva och teoretiska presentationer av kast-subalterner.

Bakom förflyttningen av ”fältet” till en studio och samarbetet med en performancekonstnär samt arbetet med affektiva och kroppsliga register i You deny my living and I defy my death låg tanken att grunden för alla kast-subalternpositioner är erfarenhetsbaserad - inte bara i form av graderad ojämlikhet och hierarki utan också på ett visceralt och sensoriskt plan. På samma sätt, bortom en snäv definition av svältkatastrof, fungerar mat och hunger också på ett affektivt sätt - på magnivå. Oavsett om det handlar om att städa golvet, gnugga bort smuts från fötterna, skrika högt, förstora bilder, interagera med livlösa filmföremål i studion eller testa gränserna för representationer genom rörelser och gester, ville jag fråga om kastens sensoriska regim kan destabiliseras genom sensoriska förhållningssätt till film. Jag måste erkänna att denna forskning har öppnat upp för denna fråga, men för närvarande inte löst den. Den har dock skapat medvetenhet om möjligheterna med ett sensoriskt och affektivt engagemang i kast-subalterniteter som gör något annat än eller överskrider den ”logiska” och ”teoretiska” förklaringen och motståndet mot kast.

Kärnan i denna iterativa och tvärvetenskapliga konstnärliga forskning var att utforska etiska, metodologiska och estetiska tillvägagångssätt som tar det inneboende dilemmat och (o)möjligheten till ”återupptäckande” och ”representation” av kast-subalternas erfarenheter av svälten på allvar, men som inte låter sig låsas av det. Det är möjligt att överdriva dilemmat och (o)möjligheterna. Eftersom jag inte producerar helt inifrån, hur kan det då inte vara ”representation”? Dessa frågor kan ställas som ett misslyckande med att avveckla den dominerande historieskrivningen eller som en avgörande men nödvändig partiell decentrering av denna historieskrivning. Jag vill hävda att om vi måste undvika dessa till synes oförenliga etiska återvändsgränder och hitta sätt att göra det kritiska arbetet samtidigt som vi tar itu med de problem som finns, måste vi gynna de iterativa och undersökande processerna framför resultatet.

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Appendix: Published articles

Article 1

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CONTRACTS OF MAKING, VIEWING AND LISTENING: RESEARCHING IN AND THROUGH FILMS

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Abstract

This paper tells the story of *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*, a 17-minute film that has emerged as part of my ongoing doctoral study in Artistic Research in Film. Taking the Bengal Famine of 1943 as a site-event, the doctoral research focuses on investigating and experimenting with epistemologies and ontologies of expressions emanating from a space of subalternity, especially Dalits. *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* can be seen as an artistic intervention into Satyajit Ray's *Distant Thunder* – made in 1973, the film tells the story of effects of the Famine in rural Bengal through the eyes of a Brahmin couple. The artistic intervention was geared towards both critically reading the film from the lens of Dalit consciousness, and to explore ways of writing that critique in the language of the film itself. By retracing the journey of *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*, this paper focuses on how research is performed in and through the medium of film in this intervention, its multiple conceptual/material contingencies, and ultimately what it proposes in the context of artistic research.

Keywords: The Bengal Famine of 1943, Subaltern, Dalit, Visual intervention, Artistic research in films.

Introduction

> If I am questioned; if anyone wonders (as happens quite peremptorily) what I 'wanted to say' in a certain poem, I reply that I did not want to say, but wanted to make, and that it was the intention of making which wanted what I said. (Paul Valèry quoted in Gibson, 2015, p.177)

> To create is to understand and to understand is to re-create. (Minh-ha, 1991, p.194)

> But what happens when written scholarly utterances in our disciplines are used merely to supplement, comment on, or verbally summarise research performed in the same medium or mode as the subject of the research, that is – in the case of film, television, audiovisual artworks, or internet videos – audiovisually? Indeed, what if the creative production of audiovisual material centrally constitutes the research into audiovisuality? (Grant, 2016)

Artistic research, often further categorized as practice-based research or practice-led research, is yet to reach a settled status; its definition, discourse and framework vary significantly (Candy and Edmonds, 2016). This unsettlement becomes even more obvious when one gets into the quagmire of definitional and differentiation challenges inherent in mobilizing terms such as 'practice-based' and 'practice-led'. As someone who is currently a doctoral candidate in Artistic Research in Film and works at the intersection of pedagogy, theory and practice, I have personally felt a lot more liberated when I have moved away from narrow lanes of definitions and differentiations and embraced some broad and general tenets of artistic research. Here I wish to outline some of these tenets as it will situate and set the parameters for the discussion of my film *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* in the context of artistic research. At the core of artistic research, as articulated by Candy and Edmonds (2016), is the idea that research and practice should be conceived as interdependent and complementary processes; to what extent primacy is given to practice differs from place to place and project to project. Essentially, artistic research proposes that practice can be both a method and an outcome and moreover, "practice can not know or perceive its outcome" (Bolt, 2004). I would add here that in artistic research, thinking and making are intertwined, or in other words, hyphenated; an extension of this formulation means that it does not propose any fixed chronology or hierarchy between thinking and making. Much of the strength of artistic research (and what makes it exciting), I would argue, comes from this inbetween, ambiguous, fragmented yet composite, and open-ended nature.

Critical scholarship on artistic research in films is still in a nascent stage, but in my understanding the aforementioned tenets remain useful as a starting point. The focus here is research on/about/for/in/thorough film. Even when cross-disciplinary research strategies are mobilized to advance our understandings on any given research topic, the fulcrum of artistic research in film, for me, is the medium of film as a means of investigation. On a cautionary note, this does not automatically imply that methods from other research traditions can't be mobilized. Having said that, what makes artistic research **in** film exciting for me is the possibility of carrying out the research **through** film. This particular framing of **in** and **through** is very well articulated by The Netherlands Film Academy on their website:

> Artistic research in and through cinema means thinking through images and sounds. It means starting from the practice, knowledge and perspectives of filmmaking, and using its accompanying concepts and language. Thus, researching 'in and through' cinema refers to research through the frame, notions and paradigm of the filmmaking practice. The research 'in' revolves around questions of the cinema

> practice itself – spectatorship, perception, storytelling, modes of production, ethics et cetera – while, in addition, research 'through' relates to the use of cinematic conditions and concepts to explore topics and fields beyond cinema – topics such as memory, trauma, archival practices, human relations or identity for example. (Netherlands Film Academy, n.d.)

It is in this context I wish to tell you the story of my film *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*. This 17-minute-long film has emerged during my ongoing doctoral study in Artistic Research that focuses on the Bengal Famine of 1943. Before I elaborate upon how in *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* research is performed in and through the medium of film, its multiple conceptual/material contingencies, and ultimately what it proposes in the context of artistic research, the setting under which the work has emerged needs to be spelt out.

Situating the broader research

Taking the Bengal Famine of 1943 as a site-event, my doctoral research aims to further and experiment with epistemologies and ontologies of expressions that emerge from the space of subalternity, and investigate the possibilities and limits of it in film practices. The main research question that underpins this research is: how do we move images (specifically filmmaking practice) towards subaltern epistemologies and ontologies?

The Bengal Famine of 1943-44, which resulted in nearly five million deaths, is almost universally considered one of the most catastrophic and murderous instances of British colonial rule in India (Sen, 1981; Sengupta, 2016). The colonial government's policy of diverting agricultural land from food crop to cash crops and prioritising food supplies to its troops at the expense of the general public, contributed significantly to the making of this crisis. Fearing a Japanese invasion of Bengal through Burma, the government further exacerbated the matter by removing surplus stocks of paddy and curtailing boat transport lines in eastern and coastal Bengal. The general scarcity and panic also induced private hoarding and profiteering by some Bengali elites. Even at the height of the famine, the Churchill government continued to prevent food imports. The net result was mass starvation, displacement, death, and chronic disease (Sen, 1981; Sengupta, 2016).

The famine and the crisis ridden years of the 1940s gave rise to much compelling literature and art in Bengal. This response, however, was tinged with anticipation of a post- independence utopia where hunger, suffering, and class conflict would be eradicated. The inequities and complexities of caste, class, and gender in victimization by the famine were overtaken by a generalized and increasingly fervent nationalist sentiment and a renewed anti-colonial agenda. The 'bhadralok' (Bengali elite) were empathetic towards the suffering of the subalterns but only from an intellectual distance. The resulting art and literature didn't fully capture the profound sub-narratives and fault lines of caste, class, and gender that the famine had so brutally exposed (Kaur, 2014).

It is in this context that my research begins with the acknowledgement that any serious engagement with the complexities of the Bengal Famine warrant a reconsideration: analysis and artistic representation of the famine can't stem only from colonial critique; a shift towards situating the famine in terms of subalternity (caste, class, gender, rural-urban divide etc.) must occur. Against this backdrop, my research attempts to advance and engage with the complexities of using subalternity as a framework for understanding the famine.

This artistic research is concerned with subaltern epistemologies and ontologies but a delineation must be made that it's not a project of anthropology, ethnography, oral

history, subaltern or Dalit[1] historiography, postcolonial studies or famine studies. Theories and methods from aforementioned fields inform it but practice is a key method of inquiry. Therefore, along with investigation of the Bengal Famine from a subaltern theoretical framework, questions of representation, artistic mediation and image-making are central to the research.

In light of the general omission of subaltern questions, especially Dalits, in the literary and artistic representation of the Bengal Famine, and since my practice is filmmaking, I engaged with existing cinematic works on the Bengal Famine to investigate how the subaltern questions have manifested in these films. If one falls back on conventional paradigms of various stages of a doctoral study, this would qualify as part of 'mapping the field'. However, my aim was not only to provide a close reading of the films but also make critical visual interventions in them to understand how, as a film practitioner, one can reimagine or offer possibilities for different ways of 'mapping the field'. How can I perform research in and through the medium of film itself? I was particularly inspired by Grant's (2016) proposition that performing research through the medium of filmmaking should not be an afterthought. It's not an exercise in discursive translation of existing or new research. Grant (2014) asks "should we be aiming to "translate" the (often unspoken) norms and traditions of written film studies into audiovisual versions, or should we embrace from the outset the idea that we are creating ontologically new scholarly forms?" Accompanying written work can certainly help in situating it in wider research contexts but we should see the film/video as "self-contained performative acts" (Grant, 2016).

Cast(e)ing shadows on *Distant Thunder*

Two most prominent films made on the Bengal Famine are Satyjit Ray's *Distant Thunder* (1973) and Mrinal Sen's *In Search of Famine* (1981). I have engaged with both of the films and made artistic interventions in them to advance my research. For the purpose of this paper, I am focusing only on my intervention into *Distant Thunder*, which has been titled *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*.

Set in the villages of Bengal, Satyajit Ray's film *Distant Thunder*, based on a short story by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, examines the effect of the Great Famine of 1943. The film centers on the subjective experiences of a Brahmin[2] couple – Gangacharan and his wife Ananga, showing their cheerful lives progressively disrupted and affected by the famine. Gangacharan and Ananga have recently moved to a 'low caste' village. Being the only Brahmin in the village, Gangacharan works the honor and respect given to him because of his Brahmin status and enterprisingly assumes the role of a priest, teacher, and a doctor. As the film unfolds, we see the effects of famine – a slight dilution of caste and gender norms observed in the village; worsening of Gangacharan's material situation forcing him to reconsider some of his moral positions; and ultimately the establishment of human values in the face of such a crisis.

The film opens with panoramic shots of the village, lush green paddy fields, a pond with water lilies and silhouetted trees. A particular kind of idealized and romantic notion of the rural is generated from the beginning and the identification of the women with nature is implied on numerous occasions (Pathiraja and Hanan, 2006). The decision to shoot

1 Literally 'ground down' or 'oppressed'; the term was popularized by B.R. Ambedkar and in contemporary India it refers to the preferred political self-identification of social groups belonging to 'ex-untouchable castes'. As per the Hindu caste structure, they were considered to be excluded from the four varnas and therefore the 'lowest castes'. The Indian state, through its constitutional framework, refers to Dalits as the 'Scheduled Castes'. Dalits constitute 17 per cent of the national population.

2 Brahmins belong to the highest caste or varna in Hinduism.

the film in colour, to point out the contrast between nature's vivacity and people starving to death elicited surprise as the expectation was that a story of famine will be told in black and white (Robinson, 1989). Atanu Pal of Third Eye, a photography group, writes "...Ray felt that he could establish the aridity of famine more starkly in colour, leaving nothing to the imagination" (Banerjee, 2017). Ray, in his interview with Cineaste magazine, alludes that the famine occurred despite a good harvest and as for his use of colour, he says, "it came straight from author's description - that nature was very lush, that everything was physically beautiful, and, yet, people were dying of hunger" (Gupta and Ray, 1982). If one begins with the understanding that famine occurred despite good harvest it is natural to then enquire the reasons behind the terrible reality of starvation and death of close to five million people. Ray in *Distant Thunder* does not delve substantially into how the existing inequalities at the time made it worse for people at the margins. *Distant Thunder* is not an isolated case when it comes to Ray's oeuvre. Long regarded as a humanist director, Ray, in his works, tends to privilege establishment of human values over social critique (Pathiraja and Hanan, 2006). One of the charges levelled against Ray is that he was "less interested in expressing ideas than in communicating emotional experience" (Wood, 1971 as cited in Cooper, 2000, p.2). Ray's humanism was geared towards achieving a universal cinematic language, one that emanates from a particular geography but is made keeping in mind the global audience. Ray himself remarked once that "if you are able to portray universal feelings, universal relations, emotions and character, you can cross certain barriers and reach out to others, even non-Bengalis" (Gupta and Ray, 1982). The lure of constructing universality and humanism often meant that emphasis was on character nuances and character development and not so much on structural contexts. This is also true of *Distant Thunder*. The naturalistic treatment of famine in the film, Pathiraja and Hanan (2006, p.109) argue, "redirects its political engagement from the structural to phenomenological and toward a construction of Indian humanism." Robinson (1989) has argued that the real theme of *Distant Thunder* is not the famine or starvation, rather human failures and moral awakening through adversity. The film is primarily invested in a Brahmin's moral journey and his subjectivity in the wake of the famine.

The conflict-ridden and oppressive nature of the caste system does not really find any substantive place in the narrative. Even when revealing some of the anomalies of the caste system becomes inevitable for Ray, it never arrives at a critical juncture.The question of the caste system is represented as a moral conundrum for Gangacharan and not as a harsh reality lived by so many. In Ray's imagination, all oppressed castes inhabit the village equally (Pathiraja and Hanan, 2006). Ray attempts to generate a sympathetic reading by according humanity to both the oppressor and the oppressed. With regards to the question of caste, the film suggests a moral adjustment instead of complete annihilation. Any reading of caste from the prism of humanism is bound to produce an understanding that is insufficiently contextualized.

In Ray's *Distant Thunder*, the only Dalit woman the audience meets is Moti who appears in brief spurts to highlight the humanity of the Brahmin protagonists and to testify to the restrictions of caste that these protagonists are meant to transgress by way of consummating their humanity. Moti is accorded a mere fraction of the total screen time and spoken parts within the film and is promptly relegated to the background when the narrative purpose of her appearance is met. Moti appears twice in the film. The first time we see her is when she visits Ananga; this sequence in the film is purposed with disclosing the class and caste difference, and informing the audience that the famine has started affecting the lives of people in some other parts of the region. The relationship between Ananga and Moti is marked by caste difference. Ray indicates it but is interested more in highlighting the 'feminine' bond. Caste is conveyed as a minor glitch, or inconvenience; a 'feminine' bond can allow for surpassing of marked

caste-differences. The second time we see Moti is towards the end of the film. Moti comes to see Ananga in a desperate search for food at the end of her life. Ananga offers her food but famine induced starvation has made her so weak that she dies. Now lying in the open, the burden of cremating Ananga's untouchable friend is on Gangacharan - performing this task would mean polluting himself. Herein lies Gangachran's first act of redemption but curiously we never see it in the film. In the final shots, we see Gangacharan leaving his home to cremate Moti and then the film cuts to a famine-stricken Brahmin family of ten approaching the village. Adding to his redemption, the film shows Gangacharan's openness to accept the family despite his own worsening material situation. With regards to supporting ten additional individuals, Ananga corrects Gangacharan saying 'not ten, but eleven'. "Gangacharan's fatherhood is celebrated emblematically as well as domestically. He will father a stranger's family as well his own" (Cooper, 2000, p. 152). Story of the cycle of rebirth via Moti's death and the announcement of the expected baby seems to compound the erasure of Moti / the Dalit experience – not only is she there to prove Gangacharan's humanity, but she has to die in order for a 'higher' life to be (re)born. Ray's handling of Moti's character is emblematic of Brahmanical ideology; she is confined within a discourse of 'sympathy' and 'compassion'; she is a mute spectator; has no agency; is never angry with injustices; and above all is in service of rendering humanity to a Brahmin.

In reading this film I was particularly drawn to postcolonial-subaltern hermeneutics as it "provides with a critical apparatus and a register with which to best trace the liminal positions that Dalits occupy in India even today, as being both the past-in-the-present and the present-in-the-past of Indian historicity" (Haider, 2016, pp. 195-196). The postcolonial project of subaltern studies has enabled us to engage with the complexities of epistemological and ontological alterity and imagine a historiography that centers the alternative histories of subaltern resistance and consciousness. It has also enabled us to ask questions like how the agency, resistance, and consciousness of subalterns are presented and dealt with; who speaks; are subalterns just mute spectators; how is alterity performed; how is the radical heterogeneity of lived experiences of subalterns mediated; and most importantly who is standing in for whom? These questions assume even greater significance in light of how Nishat Haider has characterized Indian cinema. He argues that "In the Indian cinema, the inherent, dominant Brahminical ideology has helped preserve the power of the upper-caste Hindus, which sanctions them to secure the "free acceptance" of subjection via the interpellation of its "subjects"" (Haider, 2015, p. 199). The task, then, is to deploy subaltern analytical and creative agency to interrogate and destabilize dominant ideas and this destabilization is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for instating alternative, subaltern ways of being and knowing.

Contracts of making, viewing and listening

Contracts of making, viewing and listening treats Satyjit Ray's *Distant Thunder* as an archival site and is informed by a quest for reenactment of the archive to arrive at renegotiated and remediated readings, and ultimately to imagine new futures. It pulls its conceptual framework from Homi Bhabha's minority discourse that calls for intervention in the sovereignty of hegemonic discourses, responsible for nation's self-generation (Bhabha, 1990). For Bhabha, minority discourse is about putting forth contestatory narratives that reconstitute the nation as a social space that is "internally marked by cultural difference, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations" (Bhabha, 1990, p.299). Once the performative spaces of multiple contending histories, especially subaltern histories, have intervened in the nation and its narration, the official (or dominant) archive reveals itself to be a repository of power. This intervention might not inscribe a history of the people, as Bhabha puts it, or create political solidarities but it certainly does not "celebrate the monumentality of historicist memory,

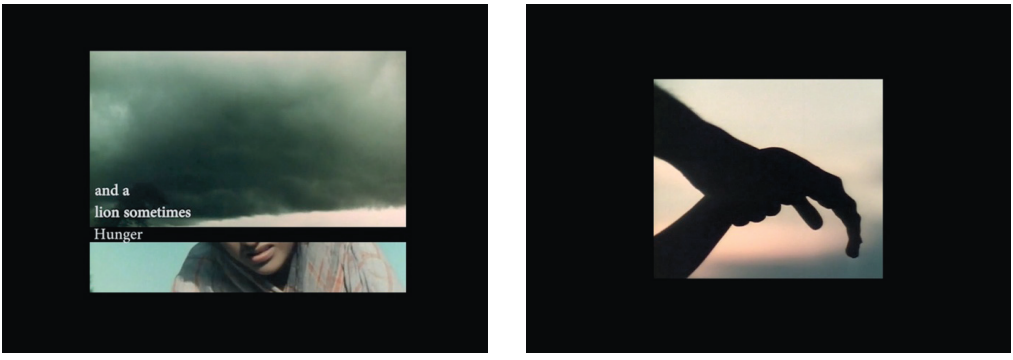

Fig. 1/2 Screenshot from Contracts of making, viewing and listening, 2019
(Weblink: https://vimeo.com/465384524 Password: contracts)

the sociological totality of society, or the homogeneity of cultural experience" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 225). Intervention, as articulated by Bhabha (2004), is a practice of enunciation (articulation, voicing, and emergence of discourse), inspired by the laudatory zeal of putting marginal – which often are contrapuntal, anachronistic, and antisystematic – narratives next to the dominant ones. In reference to, and as an extension of, Bhabha's usage of the term 'intervention', Haider (2015, p. 228) argues that "meaningful cinematic interventions offer an enabling method of the enunciation of the liminal status of the marginalized other in such a way that the "other half' of communication can enter the picture on an equal footing". In the spirit of enunciating the liminal status of the marginalized other, in *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*, which essentially is an intervention into *Distant Thunder*, I was motivated, at times, by finding traces of counter-memories in the film and building on them, and at other times, by putting them in dialogue with narratives emerging from marginal spaces to enable a renegotiated history of the famine. I was particularly inspired by Jong's (2016) formulation that re-enactment of the archive is needed to question the conditions of possibility of its own making. Furthermore, he argues that archives can be sites for performative reappropriations; by animating the archives we can not only displace the original logics of it but also perform alternative futures. In my intervention, I follow a range of strategies. Despite a myriad of theoretical influences and artistic strategies employed in my intervention, at the core, the desire is to pursue a double gesture of subalternity as both a theoretical paradigm (thinking) and a methodological stance (making) in film practices.

In the intervention, there is an attempt to let Dalit discourse inflect nation's Brahmanical self-generation. By generating readings of the famine from Dalit perspectives, the intervention seeks to make the narrative of the nation exceed its own boundaries. *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* acknowledges that the experience of the Famine as a totality is an unknowable and uncontainable multiplicity; even from the lens of Dalit consciousness there is no authentically 'true' story of the Famine. Despite this acknowledgement, without inserting the contestatory narratives arising from subaltern spaces it's unimaginable to destabilize the Brahminical ideology. The intervention is aimed at exploring – how that Dalit experience is erased or elided in existing representations and how to see the Famine through Dalit consciousness. As for the title of this intervention, by Contracts of making, viewing and listening, I mean epistemological and ontological conditions that allow a certain kind of representation of Dalits

(question of making) and interpellation of spectators (question of modality of viewing and listening). The title suggests both the present condition and future imaginaries.

Moti's sub-narrative in *Distant Thunder* affected me deeply. She appears only twice in the film and has limited screen time and spoken parts. I began with locating and extracting the sequences where she has a narrative purpose. These clips were the first things on the editing timeline. I suppose I was responding to a very basic creative and analytical desire of asking what will happen if I prolong Moti's sub-narrative within the film by claiming the space and time that the original filmmaker did not deign to accord. This, in a way, became the first pre-determination for a transformative re-working of *Distant Thunder*. Parallelly, for the purpose of my larger research on the Bengal Famine, I had also been searching Dalit poetry on the subject. A friend of mine suggested *Hunger* – a poem written in Marathi by Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal. Even though the poem is not directly about the Bengal Famine and written almost four decades later, but as the name suggests, it encapsulates so much about Dalit suffering and struggle. Unlike Ray's handling of Moti's character, the poem, while realistic, never evokes sympathy. The poem serves as a site of counter-memory and counter-archive; it is motivated by re-inscribing histories of Dalit worlds; and most importantly, realism invoked is already opening up the possibility of transformative politics. Moreover, the poem functions as a reminder of the perils of relegating the famine as an event from the past so as to avoid the moral conscience that it demands from us in the present. The poem had a profound impact on me and stayed with me. For the first few days of editing I was constantly thinking about creative and critical possibilities the poem will afford, and eventually I took the decision that working with poetry will be my second pre-determination.

Within this context I ended up with another poem titled *Portrait of My Village* by Tamil Dalit poet Sukirtharani. *Distant Thunder* alludes to caste realities but is not invested in critically exploring it, furthermore, the film generates an idealized and romantic notion of the rural. I wanted to unsettle this notion and was looking for Dalit poetry that specifically talks about Indian villages. I came across Sukritharini's poem in an academic article by Pramod K. Nayar (2015) where he mentions this poem in the context of Dalit poetry and traumatic materialism. Nayar (2015, p. 4) writes "She centres the body of the lower caste through visually evocative realist description, the realism conveying the material and corporeal harshness of everyday Dalit lives. This is the traumatic realism of the poem." *Portrait of My Village*, for its Dalit traumatic materialism, became a relevant text that I wanted to be in conversation with Ray's Humanism.

In *Distant Thunder*, Gangacharan's 'suffering' is either equated to or exemplified through the Dalit suffering of Moti. In foregrounding his Brahmin protagonists, Ray lets them stand in for the primary witnesses. In the film, Gangacharan is standing in for Moti and that means "erasing the crucial difference that is the very structure of their suffering-their experience, unique to them" (Haider, 2015, p. 213). I thought, this 'standing in' can be disrupted through these two poems as they name and contextualize the disavowal of faultlines of caste and moreover, represent a resistance against the opportunistic appropriation of Dalit experiences by upper-caste authors.

Since all three activities (reading, writing and making) were going parallelly and inflecting each other in a rhizomatic fashion, I cannot fathom charting out a chronological line – there were many detours, expected and unexpected encounters with materials, thinking, references etc. As a result, I ended up with some more texts and began experimenting with combining Dalit poetry, direct quotation from Ray, narrative commentary, and audiovisual quotation from Ray's film itself – in an effort to arrive at something artistically that provides a renegotiated reading of *Distant Thunder* but more importantly already contains/proposes, even if it's very tentative, a different epistemological, ontological and aesthetical imaginary.

I wanted to place texts and images in proximity but was acutely aware of not establishing a hierarchy between the two. Based on my experience in filmmaking and my interest in poetry I have come to appreciate the plasticity between text and image – text can easily slide into the realm of image and image can easily slide into the realm of text, in other words, it's possible to write in/with/on/about/for/through images and create images in/with/on/about/for/through writing. Therefore, in making *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*, text and image were seen as non-dual onscreen acts that seek to perform research in and through cinema.

Part of the argument of performing research in and through cinema is also that it can't be a mere illustration of research (Grant, 2016) – it has to invest in both poetics (the question of form) and critical analysis (the question of content) so that it can stand on its own as a research expression. In light of this, in my intervention into *Distant Thunder*, I treated every onscreen act as montage creation where content and form are intrinsically hyphenated. I was constantly asking the question Carter (2004, p. xi) poses in the context of material thinking: "What is the material of thought?" I took it to mean that how is the research expressed on the screen. Based on my experience of making *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* I would argue that it's difficult to engage with material thinking without embracing the idea that it can only be arrived at tentatively and experimentally. Its only in and though rehearsals, errors, chance encounters, accidents, and repetitions that I could pursue thinking-making and making-thinking.

In this transformative reworking of *Distant Thunder,* I chose to perform both internal and external montage. By recutting and rearranging certain portions from the film and putting them in conversation with materials that existed outside of it, I am simultaneously decontextualizing and recontextualizing *Distant Thunder*. Moti's sub-narrative needed to be decontextualized, distorted, and stretched in terms of screen time and space to enable a reading outside of humanism and to repurpose it with Dalit epistemologies and ontologies. In terms of its construction, especially the form my insights take in, *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* is geared towards, to borrow López and Martin's (2017) phrase, "setting the experience of simultaneity but leaving room for seemingly chance interactions between the screens to occur". This is achieved through a very careful consideration and choreography of onscreen acts taking place in and across texts, sounds, and images.

The desire to perform research in and though cinema meant engaging very meaningfully with the question of form. In *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* it has manifested through the fragmentation of the frame along vertical and horizontal lines, through various configurations of these fragmentations, through working at the borders of these fragmentations, through vast black portions of the frame, through experimentation with freezing, expanding, accelerating, and slowing screen space and time, through careful repetitions of some sounds, texts, and images, through unsettling the boundaries between titles and subtitles, poetry and commentary, utterances by the author in and outside of the film, through complete and incomplete articulations, and through planned and unplanned silences between those articulations. Also, the idea behind these formal strategies in my intervention was to, in a limited sense, reveal its own making – with the hope that it will bring the spectator closer to the performativity of research on the screen.

Since I was mobilizing a significant amout of text in my intervention, I had to be careful about 'doubling/mirroring'. López and Martin (2017), pointing to its pitfalls, warn us " one of the problems we see in much contemporary work is an obsession with doubling, to the point of sheer redundancy: what is said or written on screen, and what is shown via montage from the works being analysed, enter into a mirroring relation marked by a strict equivalency. The conventional primacy and authority accorded to 'the word' is thereby inevitably reinforced." This is why the image-text operations in my intervention is

Fig. 3 Screenshot from Contracts of making, viewing and listening, 2019

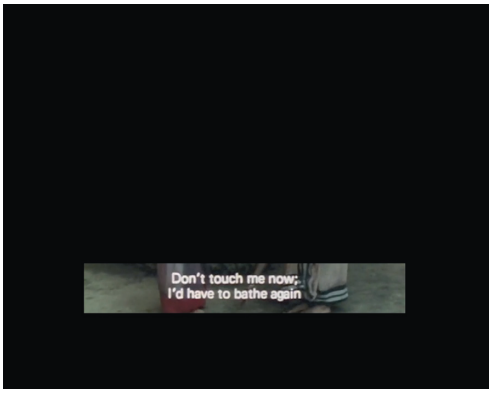

Fig. 4 Screenshot from Contracts of making, viewing and listening, 2019

geared towards juxtapositions, associations, disassociations, comparisons and assemblages. The attempt is to create an interplay between texts and images so that they emerge already inflected by each other and constantly exceed their individual expectations and meanings.

In line with the aim of my boarder research, which is to, by means of critical/practical exercises, move images towards subaltern epistemologies and ontologies, I had to be careful with regards to what my intervention into *Distant Thunder* proposes. As alluded earlier, whilst we might wish to understand a Dalit experience of the Famine, or to see the Famine through Dalit consciousness, we should resist the temptation of creating authentically 'true' stories of the famine. The claim of subaltern intervention is not to "truly and fully 'represent' the subaltern either in the sense of 'making them present again' or 'standing in for them'" (Chaterjee, 2010, as cited in Sircar, 2016, p. 32). The idea, rather, is to recognize subaltern narratives, like any other narrative, occur and operate in multiple registers and are often fragmentary. The aforementioned array of narrative strategies, especially forms, were deployed to engage with and facilitate this fragmentary nature. I wanted my intervention to make a genuine attempt to do what it says it wishes to do.

Final Considerations

Through the making of *Contracts of making, viewing and listening*, and generally from the "perspective" of a filmmaker, I would argue that if we wish to establish artistic research in film as a field of study, methodology, or a scholarly form, we have to put the practice of film at the centre. Practice of film, with regards to research, is both a process and an outcome – it is a language through which the inquiry is both pursued and expressed. Film language provides us with the opportunity to make any research expression more than its written equivalent. Furthermore, a thoughtful consideration and mobilization of film language can enable these research expressions to be experienced, in its own right, as standalone/self-contained scholarships. It's difficult for me to evaluate the extent to which *Contracts of making, viewing and listening* echoes López and Martin's (2017) formulation but it certainly summarizes its aspirations, interests, and motivations: "If we ask of a good written text that its construction is rich both in the insights it offers and in the form it takes, we must be ready to ask the same of audiovisual essays: that they exhibit and explore a genuinely audiovisual form."

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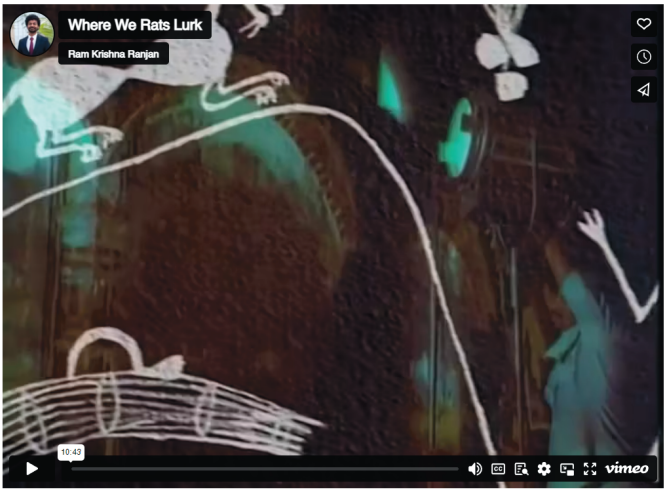
Article 2

Where We Rats Lurk



Author: Ram Krishna Ranjan
Format: Video
Duration: 10:43
Published: June 2023
https://doi.org/10.37186/swrks/13.1/8
A descriptive transcript can be accessed at https://screenworks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Where-we-Rats-Lurk_Descriptive-Transcript_RK-Ranjan.pdf.

Research statement

Criteria

The Bengal Famine of 1943, which resulted in nearly five million deaths, is considered one of the most catastrophic and murderous instances of British colonial rule in India (Sen 1981; Sengupta 2016). While the Famine has been

studied extensively from an anti-colonial perspective (Mukerjee 2010; Tharoor 2017), adequate attention has not been paid to the subaltern questions, even more so in literary and visual representations of the Famine (Kaur 2014). In this context, my doctoral research in artistic practice asks – how can the film practice, both as a method and an outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore epistemological and ontological understandings of the Bengal Famine from a subaltern perspective. Also, how can the film practice be moved closer to subaltern epistemologies and ontologies?

Since my doctoral research is practice-based research in film, practice is both a mode of inquiry and an outcome. My research involves creating 'new' filmic work based on fieldwork research and/or studio experiments, but an integral part of my research also is to engage with existing films on the Bengal Famine critically. In the early stages of my PhD, instead of simply reviewing and writing about the films, which in a conventional sense will be called mapping the field, I wanted to cast a critical subaltern eye on the existing films by way of reflective intervention in and through the craft and practice of film itself. Moreover, these interventions were also exercises in understanding my research better and rehearsing the dilemmas, paradoxes, and imaginaries of my own efforts to make films on the Bengal Famine. The video work *Where we rats lurk* has emerged in this context and can be seen as an intervention in Mrinal Sen's film *Akaler Sandhane*, one of the most prominent films on the Bengal Famine.

Research questions

What are the limits of self-reflexivity and auto-critique in Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* and can they be unsettled without undermining their critical potential in filmmaking practices? Is it possible to pursue this unsettlement through inflecting Sen's film with a fable, that emanates from a space of subalternity? Moreover, can this unsettlement be enacted in and through the practice of film itself?

Context

Using the strategy of a film within a film, *Akaler Sandhane* deals with both the famine and an urban filmmaker's efforts to make a film about the famine, using as their location a village that the famine had seriously affected. Long influenced by Brechtian and reflexive filmmakers from Europe such as Godard and Fellini, Sen's self-reflexivity and critique in this film is aimed not only at revealing the filmic process but also at interrogating the capacities and incapacities of an urban filmmaker's attempt to 'authentically' represent the rural and the (im) possibility of such a film (Pathiraja & Hanan 2006). *Akaler Sandhane* contains

> "his most profound meditations on issues that have preoccupied him all his life: the nature of film; realism in film; the problematic nature of film; the political and moral function of the filmmaker; the question of commitment; and the crisis of conscience faced by the bourgeois left-wing filmmaker" (Ganguly 2000, p. 56).

This is best captured in one of the scenes where the prices of essential commodities in the village have soared up because of the film crew and a local man observes, ‘‘They came to film a famine and sparked off another one.’’ (*Akaler Sandhane,* 1981).

While establishing the connection between colonial rule and the Famine, the search is as much within for Sen. Using interpenetration - letting the film being made in the film to interpenetrate his film, Sen, on several occasions, blurs the line between past and present. We are not certain whether we are watching Sen’s film or viewing takes from the film about 1943 famine being shot by the crew. This, then, becomes a device a to make sure that the event of Bengal famine is not relegated to a distant past. Sen is interested in implicating the post-independence Indian state and society for failing to obliterate starvation and poverty. *Akaler Sandhane’s* radical political imaginaries come from its consistent focus on working against the far-too-common impulse of “invest(ing) in the past since it makes fewer demands on one’s conscience” (ibid, pp. 56-57) in the present. The scene which brings out this the most is toward the end of the film when there is a complete breakdown in relations between the villagers and the film crew. With regards to a village girl playing a prostitute, a schoolteacher from the area points out that the villagers are objecting to it not because the film crew has roped in a local girl to play the role of a prostitute but because the film exposes the exploitative behaviour of landowners in the village at the time of the famine. By the end, the relations between the

film crew and the villagers have worsened to the extent that the film within the film cannot be finished there, and the only solution for Sen's director is to recreate the famine in the confined studios of Calcutta. Sen gives the same name to both his film and the film being made in his film and therefore, what we watch is Sen's finished film, and yet at the same time, there is a sense of incompletion. In a way, *Akaler Sandhane*, "suggests that the only way such a film can be made is by pointing out how it cannot be made" (Ganguly 2000, p. 58).

The scene which exemplifies the self-reflexivity and auto-critique in *Akaler Sandhane* the most involves a guessing game on a rainy day when the director and actors within Sen's film look at images of famine and try to guess the year they were taken. This explicates the problematics of lens reducing the famine to a mere photographed reality. Sen underlines the dissonance and dissatisfaction emerging out of the film medium itself. However, the question that I was most intrigued by – if *Akaler Sandhane* was Sen's attempt at self-reflexivity and auto-critique then is it possible to submit this "critique to examination in a way that might either allow us to strengthen its methods and rhetoric, or to find new modes of (…) work that might be blind spots of critique's style of thinking" (Selisker 2016)? Modernist self-reflexive cinema, which *Akaler Sandhane* is known for, is, in a way, an extension of internalist critique tradition where unmasking the self-narrative of incapacities is an integral part of its project, but the problem is that it still operates with 'self' as the centre of the narrative. Sen is moving between stories

that he has created; the filmmaker is in a dialogue with himself. What happens when this dialogue is inflected by or is in conversation with subaltern narratives? Is it possible to subject Sen's film to the same scrutiny he subjects his fictional filmmaker and crew to? This was an interesting proposition that served as a motivation for my intervention in Sen's film.

I first encountered the fable Rat in *Kahankar: Ahankar* (*Story Maker : Story Taker*), a film by K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro. This film juxtaposes outsiders' accounts of the *Warli* community (an indigenous community from western India) with accounts of how the community views outsiders. For instance, in one of the stories the community has for the outsiders, a rat with a thorn in his tail shows up in a village asking for help. Without realising his intentions, an Adivasi (indigenous) woman decides to help him. Through a series of manipulative tricks, the rat with a thorn in his tail becomes the rat with a few baskets, the rat with many pots, the rat with lots of vegetables, the rat with a big bullock and eventually, the rat with the Adivasi's wife. This fable operates in and as a repository of collective memory that responds to their views of outsiders – it works as an allegory of exploitation by outsiders.

By reappropriating Sen's film and combining that with the fable and footage from my fieldwork-filming in Midnapore, Bengal, I am striving to inflect filmmakers' (both Sen and I) consciousness with subaltern consciousness.
In the first draft of this video work, I had not included

myself, but after I came back from the fieldwork-filming, it became clear to me that I had to implicate myself in this intervention as it would be disingenuous on my part to stay outside of the ethical, political and creative dilemmas. Also, it became obvious to me during the fieldwork-filming that irrespective of the intentions of the 'outsider' filmmaker to bridge the power differential or to be critically reflective about it, the distinction between the filmmaker's consciousness and subaltern consciousness can't be collapsed. The same is true of Sen's film – while it highlights the incapacities of films and filmmakers and renumerates the exploitative nature of filmmaking, it's not quite the same as subaltern consciousness. Subaltern consciousness is about awareness, on the part of subalterns, of ideologies and structures that make and keep them on the margins and exercising agency against those structures to imagine and enact a better future, even if it's partial or fragmentary (Sircar, 2016). While it might seem on the surface that the subaltern consciousness and consciousness shown by Sen are the same, I would argue that it is not. For instance, in its enunciation of exploitation, the fable Rat operates at a different register than how it is constructed and presented in *Akaler Sandhane.*

After Spivak's (1988) emphatic pronouncement that the subalterns cannot speak, the idea that every expression by elites on subalterns is necessarily a version of self-expression gained a lot of currency (Sabin 2008). The best they can do is render visible the workings of power (ibid). In her later lectures and essays, Spivak clarifies

that her critique of subaltern school was based on the inability of the elites to either learn or speak the register of the subaltern. Her later deliberations indicate that the silencing she invoked in her essay is neither absolute nor permanent. In the wake of these formulations, subaltern scholars, in recent years, have reoriented their work towards questions of mishearing – as opposed to the question of whether subalterns can speak or not, the more pressing question is whether the elites can remedy their deliberate mishearing and learn to listen attentively (de Jong & Muscat 2016; Byrd & Rothburg 2011). In very concrete terms, the shift from speaking to listening means paying close attention to subaltern epistemologies and ontologies and developing a better understanding of subaltern consciousness and resistance. The video work *Where we rats lurk* captures my attempt to enact this shift. In its essence, my intervention is geared towards engaging with the complex question of exchange between the subaltern and a film practitioner like Sen (or I) when there is such inescapable socio-cultural-economic incommensurability. The video work is not animated by the theoretical skepticism that every subaltern work is doomed to fail or produce subalternities in the process of engaging with the 'other'. I am not interested in dismissing the subaltern work completely. Even if it fails, it's worthy of pursuing because it produces an analysis of power and foregrounds the ambition of radical change. In fact, I started from an admiration for Sen's imaginative capacity to question the problematic nature of filmmaking practice and a filmmaker's moral and ethical function. Only upon a close reading of the film I realised that

something interesting might emerge if I complicate the self-reflexivity and auto-critique in Sen's film by way of critical intervention in and through the medium of the film itself. The fable *Rat* became a narrative device for me to anchor my intervention as I found the fable to operate in and as a repository of collective memory that responds to their views of outsiders. Moreover, the fable and inherent resistance in it are also indicative of subaltern consciousness.

Self-reflexivity and auto-critique in filmmaking practices have come to mean displaying self-awareness in terms of power relations. Through my intervention, I am trying to argue that by letting subaltern narratives inflect our own 'self-reflexive' positions and methods of critique, we can submit these positions and methods to examination in a way that it strengthens its rhetoric and method. But more than that, it opens a search for the limits of internalist auto-critique; it contaminates and unsettles the determinant indeterminacy of self-reflexivity.

Methods

Trinh T. Minh-ha's (1991, p. 194) formulation "to create is to understand and to understand is to re-create" has influenced the methodological underpinning of this work substantially. As stated earlier, I see this work as a critical intervention in an existing film. In other words, offering and expressing reflection by reworking-recreating the film as source material. I also drew from the tradition of moving-image appropriation, which has had a long history in avant-grade and experimental traditions (Baron

2014; Wees 1993). In my reworking-recreating of *Akaler Sandhane*, I have appropriated the content, put it in conversation with another work and experimented with the form to understand and unsettle ethical, definitional, methodological and aesthetic assumptions about reflexivity, auto-critique, subalternity and film practice. While this work is an intervention in an existing work, I wanted to make it a self-contained filmic work in its own right; a special emphasis was put on constructing the intervention to allow the work to stand on its own outside of the original film/context.

Dissemination

This work is part of the larger body of my practice-based doctoral research. This submission is the first dissemination of this work outside the University of Gothenburg, where I am currently doing my PhD. I teach a week-long intensive titled *Critical Interventions in and through Film* in the MA film program, and I have shown this work as an example in the intensive. I intend to submit this work for festivals and conferences dedicated to research-based film practices.

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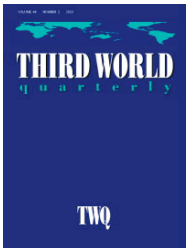
Article 3



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Negotiating caste-subaltern imaginations of the 1943 Bengal famine: methodological underpinnings of a creative-collaborative practice

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Negotiating caste-subaltern imaginations of the 1943 Bengal famine: methodological underpinnings of a creative-collaborative practice

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ABSTRACT
The Bengal famine of 1943 is one of the most catastrophic and violent outcomes of British colonial rule in India. Recently, there has been a surge in understanding the famine from an anti-colonial perspective. However, the relation between the impact of the famine and caste-based subalternities has not received adequate attention. The immediate concerns that arise with the task of filling this gap are ethical-methodological and narrative: even from the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? This paper narrates the story of fieldwork-filming, carried out as part of ongoing research in artistic practice, which attempts to understand and engage with caste-subaltern (especially Dalit) experiences of the Bengal famine of 1943 and to explore methodologically how these experiences can be creatively and collaboratively imagined and negotiated. The paper proposes that there is a need to shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of the 'authentic' caste-subaltern experiences of the famine and towards negotiated imagination. To illustrate and make a case for this shift, this paper provides a detailed description and analysis of methodological processes and their implications that emerged during the fieldwork-filming.

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Introduction

The connection between existing inequalities and adverse effects of any crisis or calamity seems obvious, and yet this aspect is remarkably little studied. The Bengal famine of 1943, in which close to three million people died,[1] is not an exception in that regard. Scholarly work has been carried out on peasant movements and struggles during the famine years (Greenough 1980; Bose 1990; Chatterjee 1986; Dutta 2021), but the question of caste-subalterns, especially that of Dalits,[2] is largely unaddressed. Whatever limited attention the connection between caste and the impact of famine has received is mainly in the realm of the analysis of relief work and literary representation.[3] While there exists work on the famine from the perspective of class, it is difficult to find academic literature that directly engages

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with the social, political and economic aspects of caste and its bearing on the differentiated outcomes of famine. Foregrounding the relation between the impact of the famine and caste-based subalternities thus becomes an important and urgent task. However, this task has an ethical-methodological and narrative concern: even through the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? This paper has emerged from ongoing research in artistic practice that centres creative-collaborative practice as an ethical-methodological mode. Moreover, it engages with caste-subalterns, specifically Dalits, and their experiences of the Bengal famine of 1943, and how that can be creatively imagined and negotiated with the community. While acknowledging that Indigenous communities and other marginalised groups were also disproportionately affected, based on gender, sexuality, disability, age, etc., all of which remain understudied, this paper limits its scope primarily to caste-subalterns', specifically Dalits', experiences of the famine.

I draw, in particular, from the fieldwork-filming I conducted in the West Midnapore district in the year 2019. Two local practitioners of Patchitra tradition (scroll paintings accompanied with songs), Manu Chitrakar and Sonali Chitrakar, were my creative collaborators during the fieldwork-filming. I argue for the need to foreground caste-subaltern experiences of the famine but concomitantly propose that there is a need to shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of subalterns' 'authentic' experiences of the famine and towards 'negotiated imagination'. Furthermore, I propose that creative-collaborative practices, as a methodological approach, have much to offer to famine studies.

The Bengal famine of 1943: causality and artistic responses

In recent years, many scholars have turned their focus to understanding the role of the colonial state, and especially British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in engendering the famine (see Mukerjee 2010; Islam and Zisan 2021; Tharoor 2017). Recording how colonial policies and negligence and, more importantly, Churchill's racial worldview and Malthusian ideas caused the Bengal famine, is an important addition to the famine scholarship. However, according to Janam Mukherjee (2016), focusing solely on this kind of nationalist historiography can elide certain complexities of the Bengal famine. He claims that

> '[the Bengal famine] is not simply the story of one bigoted and arrogant colonial potentate starving a population of rustic brown folks into submission. It is rather a deep historical story involving complex chronologies of inequality, power and impunity'.

It is in this context that he proposes four axes – colonialism, war, capitalist profiteering and existing inequalities – by which to study the Bengal famine. Since the thrust of this paper is to foreground caste-subalterns' experiences of the famine, it is worthwhile to explore the fourth axis – existing inequalities.

Sen (1981) demonstrated that famine stems not from agrarian crises but rather economic, social and political crises. 'Entitlement relations', according to Sen, should be the central consideration in studying the reasons behind why any particular group or individual suffers from starvation or not. There are reports of acute hardship and even starvation in rural areas since 1934, and this primarily had to do with entitlement relations. The conditions of sharecroppers and landless labourers were worsening because, by the end of the 1940s, many small tenants had lost their lands to Bengali moneylenders (Mukherjee 2016). To meet basic

needs and to buy essential supplies for farming, people on the lowest rung of the society would often take loans from informal credit markets. In the absence of any protection by law and custom, peasants with small land holdings and landless labourers were then forced to forfeit their assets to wealthy Bengalis when they could not repay their loans. The pauperisation of peasants and landless labourers, and rigid structures of caste and class in rural Bengal that preceded the famine, meant that some people were more vulnerable than others because of their social, economic and political standing in society. Those with the least endowments suffered the most. The famine brutally exposed the fault lines of caste, class and gender in Bengal, but neither the 'bhadralok' (Bengali elite) nor the leaders of the nationalist movement paid enough attention to these fault lines (Kaur 2014).

The famine and the crisis-ridden years of the 1940s gave rise to a vast amount of compelling art in Bengal. Visual artists, such as Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915–1978), Zainul Abedin (1917–1976), Govardhan Ash (1907–1996), Somnath Hore (1921–2006), Sunil Janah (1918–2012) and Gopal Ghose (1930–1980), are known for their visual representations of the appalling ground-reality of Bengal in the wake of the famine. Influenced by Marxist-communist ideology, these visual artists were interested in generating socially responsive content. Some of these artists were directly or indirectly involved with the Communist Party; moreover, they published sketches and photographs regularly in the Communist Party's periodicals, *Janayuddha* and *People's War* (Majumdar n.d.).

These artists departed from the nationalist fervour and Bengal School Gharana (tradition), which were more interested in the project of revitalisation of Indian cultural history and spirituality. Moreover, in the Bengal School, the protest against colonialism, if it was present at all, had more of an academic and aesthetic nature than a political one.[4] Contrary to the Bengal School, artists like Chittoprasad, Zainul and Somnath privileged the 'socially concerned and politically charged 'documenting' function of art over […] Bengal School gharana'. Their artistic practice was rooted in the desire to record the working-class Bengali's suffering; for them, the function of art was to capture the exploitation and coercions by both the colonial state and the elite Bengalis (Majumdar n.d.). *Hungry Bengal* written as a textual and visual record of Chittoprasad's travel through the famine-stricken district of Midnapore, captures this sentiment quite well.

Together with Chittoprasad, Zainul Abedin also invoked critical realism in his sketches. Majumdar (n.d.) writes: 'Zainul Abedin in his harsh images of the urban destitute visualized in the most rudimentary starkness of black ink employed by dry-brush technique successfully did away with tonal softness usually associated with romantic view of life'. Zainul's series of drawings depicting what he witnessed on the streets of Calcutta still serve as an archive of the event; moreover, they are evidence of an artist's attempt to document the horrors of the famine in a way that expunged art of its mythic, classicised and lyrical qualities (Malik 2011). Along with Zainul and Chittoprasad, Sunil Janah's photographic work on the famine also provides detailed studies on dislocated and suffering families. Several communist newspapers across the world republished his photographs, which informed the rest of the world about the true scale of the famine.

Contrary to works in literature which were either motivated by the exigencies of the nationalist politics of the time or, in some cases, ambivalent about choosing between peasant suffering and resistance and nationalist discourse (Kaur 2014), left-leaning visual artists like Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Zainul Abedin and Sunil Janah were producing a different kind of artistic mode, which was foregrounding the sufferings of the people on the margins. These

artists saw their art as resistance to the existing structures of inequality and deprivation, irrespective of their source – colonial or domestic (Majumdar n.d.). However praiseworthy their efforts were, the question of caste does not find space in their work. While there are overlaps between caste and class, the two cannot be equated. The division of labour resulting from the 'caste system' is not based on economic divisions. Rather, it is a rigid hierarchy based on the dogma of predestination and is rooted in Hinduism.[5] My other concern regarding the responses of these artists has to do with the methodological question. These artists responded based on what they witnessed and their interpretation of the events; the process was non-dialogical. I do not argue for all artistic work to be community-based and dialogical. However, a case can be made that if they had been caste-subaltern artists or if the process had been dialogical, the caste question would have featured more prominently in their work.

Situating fieldwork-filming: Midnapore, West Bengal as place

The paradox that defines West Bengal is that it is one of the few states in India where leftist political parties, led primarily by the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPM), formed the government for seven consecutive terms (1977–2011). Furthermore, the state has also produced many prominent subaltern scholars yet, despite this, it has seen a virtual absence of caste-based subaltern politics. Guha (2017, 27–28) argues that

> under the impact of an exceptionally long Left regime, the field of political contestation was structured and configured in a manner that the dominant paradigm of class suppressed all community affiliations, giving the appearance that the caste question had already been resolved in post-colonial West Bengal.

Bandyopadhyay (2014) argues that under the Left regime, caste was subsumed by class because of the twin success, however limited, of land reforms and implementing local governance in West Bengal. Despite the party line of the Left regime on the matter of caste, many studies have shown that there is an overrepresentation of Dalits as landless farmers, and that the caste-based division of labour and discrimination persists (Roy 2012).

My decision to carry out my fieldwork in the Pingla Block of West Midnapore district in West Bengal was a function of my familiarity with the language, area and local people who could help me in my research. It also had to do with the fact that West Midnapore was one of the most affected areas during the famine years. Moreover, the district has a long history of oral tradition in the form of Patchitra and Patua songs. The word 'Pat' means cloth, and 'Chitra' refers to painting. The Patchitra tradition is carried forth by Chitrakars, also known as Patuas. Hindu mythological stories and folklore from the region are painted on long scrolls, and the performance involves the simultaneous singing/recitation and scrolling of the images to narrate a story. The songs that accompany these scrolls are called *Pater Gaan*, and they are generally passed down orally to subsequent generations. Practising Chitrakars is perceived to be somewhere between religions (Hauser 2002). On the one hand, they depict Hindu mythological and religious stories in their paintings and performances, celebrate Hindu festivities, and on occasions also worship some Hindu gods. On the other hand, they believe in Islam and identify themselves as Muslims. It is also common for these Chitrakars to have Hindu names; in the same family, people can have Hindu or Muslim names. In some districts they are recognised as Dalits, and in others they are considered people belonging to Muslim OBCs (Other Backward Classes).[6] In my interactions with Chitrakars in Naya Gaon (a village

comprising mostly Chitrakars, in the Pingla block of West Midnapore district), some indicated that their ancestors had converted to Islam four or five centuries back to escape the atrocities of the caste system. Islam does not recognise castes, but it has been observed and discussed by scholars that concepts of purity, pollution and segregation, integral to the logic of the Hindu caste system, do exist among Muslim groups (Mines 1972; Ahmad and Chakravarti 1981). It is in this context that some state governments in India have started categorising Muslims along caste lines. Unlike some other places where Chitrakars or Patuas are considered Dalits, Chitrakars in Naya Gaon are categorised as OBC Muslims by the state government.

Methodology in the fieldwork filming

The double gesture of collaborative-action research leading to transformative change – for instance, the production of co-generative knowledge – is central to subaltern methodologies, and I drew heavily from this formulation in my fieldwork-filming. Ó Laoire (2014, 738) writes that

> rather than being the passive collaborator in action research, the participant as social actor can appropriate the research agenda, steer it in novel and unforeseen directions and demonstrate agency and ownership. A careful consideration of subalternity in action research, therefore, has the potential to ensure a more dialectic, truthful, and transformative process of interaction and exchange between researcher(s) and participant(s).

There are inherent contradictions, incommensurabilities and dilemmas involved in an approach like this, which I discuss later in this paper, but its strengths lie in the fact that it calls for a creation of sites, even if it is contestatory, where subaltern agency is acknowledged and acted upon to co-construct subjective truths. The method adopted in the fieldwork-filming reflected this approach.[7] Working closely with Manu and Sonali Chitrakar, practitioners of the Patchitra tradition, and the community during the fieldwork-filming was my way of staging an attempt to collaborate and co-create. My initial impulse was to cover as many Dalit villages as possible to collect oral history narratives on the famine. After a few visits to Dalit villages in the surrounding area and in my discussions with Manu Chitrakar and Sonali Chitrakar, it became clear that it was better to focus on two Dalit villages. They suggested the names of two Dalit villages based on their familiarity with people inhabiting these villages and geographical proximity to Naya Gaon. Considering that my research is motivated more by artistic and methodological explorations, as opposed to being an expansive oral history project, the decision to focus on just two villages afforded me with the opportunity to have a careful and nuanced engagement with the communities, Chitrakars and methodologies. Below is a step-by-step description of the process that was followed during the fieldwork-filming.

The first step was visits by me and one Chitrakar to a Dalit village to have unstructured conversations on, amongst many other topics, the famine and its memories, their worldviews, Dalit politics and mobilisations, and how they assess their past, present and future in relation to the experience of either the famine of 1943 or other famine-like situations that have occurred in the region post-independence. After this, there were discussions between me and the Chitrakar, with a focus on sharing our notes from the visits and our interpretations of the conversations that unfolded during our visits, negotiating and arriving at a storyline to be sketched (10–12 frames) by the Chitrakar. This was followed by going back to the village with the Chitrakar, where we showed the sketches to the villagers and sought their

feedback. After returning from the villages, the next task was to incorporate the suggestions given by the community members, colour the sketches and write an accompanying song (finalising them as Patchitra) by the Chitrakar. The final step involved going back to the village, where the Chitrakar performed.

All three occasions (the collection of stories, seeking feedback on sketches and the final performance) extended beyond their intended purpose, in the sense that they almost became prompts for multi-directional conversations between the Chitrakars, the community members and me. With regard to engagement with the community members, the focus was not on gathering individual life histories. Creating collective moments, in the form of unstructured group conversations, on all three occasions was one way of managing the time constraints (of both the researchers and the community members). But more than that, it allowed multiple registers of Dalit experiences of both the famine and their current predicaments to emerge.

I also did life history interviews with both Manu Chitrakar and Sonali Chitrakar. In these interviews, I focused on how they see their practice; how they view their own subalternity in general and also in relation to Dalits; what they think of the research I am undertaking; and how they perceive their role in this research. Life story interviews with both Chitrakars enabled meditation on questions of subalternity, co-generative knowledge production, artistic negotiation and questions of representation.

Working closely with Manu Chitrakar and Sonali Chitrakar and a particular insistence on storytelling and its processes was, to a degree, inspired by Sium and Ritskes' (2013) idea that storytelling, if conceived as agentic and participatory, has immense subversive potential. They argue that storytellers, especially in Indigenous communities, have always been a resisting and subversive force against colonial violence and that they have maintained and sustained their ways of being and knowing through participatory mediums. They write that 'the role of the storyteller is central to the exercise of agency and renewal. Stories are not only agentic and individual, but they are communal sharings that bind communities together spiritually and relationally' (Sium and Ritskes 2013, v). I also had to pay special attention to visuals in my fieldwork-filming, given their importance in the Patchitra tradition and my broader research.

There are several examples of methodological innovations and imaginaries in the fields of ethnography and anthropology that mobilise images and image-making practices, as a method and a prompt, to understand and explore ideas, culture, phenomena, events, etc. (Marlow and Dunlop 2021; Walter and Albrecht 2019). However, there are few examples of visual collaborative methods in the study of disasters. Drawing on some examples of how collaborative visual methodologies (photo-elicitation, graphic novels, films) have been used in the study of disasters, Jauhola (2022) argues that when the visual is seen not merely as a product but also as a knowledge process, it can foreground different ontologies, ways of knowing and theorising. Furthermore, she argues that focusing on the process enables the emergence of multiple narratives and an ethos of active and continuous negotiation with those narratives. The approach I adopted in my fieldwork-filming reflects this thinking.

Scenes from fieldwork-filming

> Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. (Sontag 2013, 21)

As alluded to earlier, more than the recuperative caste-subaltern history undertaking, this project is essentially about methodological explorations of knowing that history. Here I present some scenes from fieldwork-filming that I think illustrate, or at least give a sense of, the processes, the nature of conversations and the creative-collaborative negotiations that took place. As much as these scenes illustrate the methodological processes and negotiation, and inherent complexities and contradictions within them, they also contain narratives about the famine. I also make a conscious choice not to engage in systematic narrative analysis (thematic coding, interpreting and analysing the narratives). I take cognisance of the fact that narrative analysis is a very useful method for understanding subjective constructions of identities, memory, oral history, and past, present and future. However, in keeping with the aim and limitations of the paper, I present some selected scenes 'as they are' to illustrate the methodological processes. Later, I offer a consolidated analysis of the methodological implications. To invoke Sontag, I allow the scenes to work for themselves.

We must tread carefully

During my fieldwork-filming, I stayed in the same village where Manu Chitrakar (M.C.) and Sonali Chitrakar (S.C.) live. Here is a glimpse of our conversation, where we are discussing how to conduct the fieldwork-filming:

> Me: My idea was for the three of us to visit some Dalit villages together. We can talk to the people there about the famine, and it is possible that this leads us into some other topics as well. If we conduct these conversations together … and we listen to their stories … then maybe we can work on those stories once we come back. Is this something you have done before, or would be interested in doing?
>
> M.C. and S.C.: I have never really composed a scroll on the Bengal famine. But I did compose one on the starvation deaths in Kalahandi in Odisha. I have done other social scrolls too. If we find some stories from the elderly people of the villages, then I will add my own imagination to those stories and create a narrative. Then we can compose a song out of it and divide it into scenes which will be drawn as the scroll. So, it can be done.
>
> Me: There is one thing that I have had on my mind …. The research we are doing is about the Dalit experience of the famine. But I am not Dalit myself. I am from the OBCs. I don't know about you …
>
> M.C. and S.C.: We are also from the OBCs.
>
> Me: Do you think we will be able to do justice to their stories? I do hesitate … because I don't have that lived experience. I have other experiences, but not the same as them. So, I feel that we need to be careful. What do you feel about this?
>
> M.C. and S.C.: Yes, that's definitely something we have to bear in mind. Since we are OBCs and not Dalits, we have not lived the same life. To do something like this, we must tread carefully. That's why we need to return to them with our scrolls. Once we have heard their stories, we must take them back to them.

The story that we heard from you will be turned into a scroll

I had gone with Manu Chitrakar to Hari Para, a Dalit village, to have unstructured conversations with community members. Here is an excerpt of Manu Chitrakar (M.C.)'s conversation with Kusum Ari (K.A.) and Gautam Ghorai (G.G.), who are residents of the village:

M.C.: Since you didn't have any land, where did you get food from?

K.A.: We worked for the landowners and the rich folks. We worked hard in their houses. That's how we got our food. We would eat rice and vegetables [points to wild plants nearby].

Other community members: It's these vegetables she's speaking of … which grow in the wild. The ones that you see growing there. They ate this part of the root here.

K.A.: We would clean these and boil these.

M.C.: How long do you think your community can sustain a famine-like situation if it were to happen now?

G.G: When it comes to people like us … let's say I have 10 Katha [7200 square feet] land, three separate crops grow there. All three crops combined, roughly 12 quintals of paddy would grow there. That is all we have as earning for the whole family, for the whole year. But the landlord community has 5–10 Bigha [72,000–144,000 square feet] of land owned by their families. Similarly, they have stock as well. If they don't grow anything in the next five years, they can manage; if there is a calamity like a drought or flood, it wouldn't matter to them. Or at least, they have jobs, so they can always have a steady flow of cash. So, they can manage.

M.C.: Is there an awareness of Dalit as a term of self-assertion and political mobilisation?

G.G.: There were no TVs before. But now there are, and we are able to see the news. There seems to be an assault on our caste. We have come to know of caste-based violence … I am not naming any political parties … but in Mumbai, there was an attack on Dalits … we are also Dalits. Many of our own kids don't know this vocabulary of 'Dalits'. We know of it because we are part of an organisation.

M.C.: So, not everyone in the community is aware of this?

G.G.: No, they don't know this vocabulary of 'Dalit'. But there is an assault on the community. When it happened in Mumbai, Maharashtra [2018], there was nobody to stand in protest. The only people who protested were the Left Front. They organised a march from Delhi to Mumbai. To stage a protest. These days, there is so much talk of cow protection. For me, this is a caste issue. I should be the one to decide what I will eat. It should be up to my taste. But there are some people who want to use the law to ban my food habits. They want to dictate what I can eat and how I practise my religion. My caste is 'hari'. My job is to dispose of carcasses. This is what my parents do. Your caste is 'chitrakar', so it is your job to make scrolls. Others might be Muslim, and they need to live by their own religion. In today's political climate, there is an attempt to divide us based on communities.

Here is an excerpt from Sonali Chitrakar (S.C.)'s conversation with Durga Ghorai (D.G.), a resident of the Dalit village Chakdosam:

D.G.: I've heard from my father that he saw a lot of hardship in his life. He is no more. He would tell us that he had many difficulties in running the household. I have heard about a cyclone that came in 1985. I heard it from him; I have no memory of that time. The houses were all destroyed. There was nothing to eat.

S.C.: Do you know of anyone who passed away then?

D.G.: No, not personally.

S.C.: What else have you heard?

D.G.: That my father's house was destroyed. We were very little then. They carried us in their arms and went to the houses that had survived the storm. They banged on doors, but nobody

responded. They felt that the rain would make the house collapse, so they gathered the kids and ran for refuge. Those who had stronger houses did not respond. They were better off; they were landowners, and they were proud. They did not open their doors.

S.C.: The story that we heard from you will be turned into a scroll. I will put it to a rhythm. Perhaps not all of it, but some of it for sure. I will draw the frames and come back to you in a couple of days. If you want us to add something to the scroll, then you can tell us then. I will draw them based on what you have told me. But you can rectify my mistakes and give suggestions for improvement.

D.G.: Sure, we will.

They claim that they know all about it

After returning from Hari Para, Manu Chitrakar and I reflected on what happened and what stories to focus on for the sketching:

M.C.: The elderly woman we met knew a bit about it. But she was only five, so she didn't remember much. The others who were younger did not have any direct experience. But they said they had heard all about it. They claim they know all about it. But they haven't experienced what actually happened. They mentioned some events that took place in the 1960s. I know something like this happened in 1977 or may be 1972. I was also very young then, but that was when I came to know about what had happened. Even in my village, the patuas … would grow this long grass which bore these tiny fruits. They would collect those and extract the fruits and eat that in place of rice. Even I have done that, along with my mother and sisters. That is what I remember, and they were speaking of the same period. They don't remember what happened in 1943, but they have heard about it.

Me: How do you generally convert a story into a scroll?

M.C.: When we work with a new historical story, we have to think of the narrative first. Like in the movies, we think of positive and negative characters. They all come together to make a good scroll. We make them integral to the narrative by adding stories about them. These we think of on our own. And the stories we hear from people, we set them into a narrative format.

Sonali Chitrakar had drawn some sketches based on the stories we heard in Chakdosam village. She showed me the sketches:

S.C.: First, I started with the setting – the buildings and the famine. Then, we come to the starvation. Then comes the old lady we met, along with her parents. Then we see her daughter-in-law. How many did that make? We have … one, two, three, … four frames already. We need one more. You will be the last frame.

Me: What about us?

S.C.: They had forgotten their suffering. Everything that happened in 1943 or 1985. They had no memory of it. But you came and reminded them and created new memories. That is what the frame will show. That you went with your cameras.

She's asking me to go now because she can't see

We returned to Hari Para with the sketches. Manu Chitrakar was showing the sketches to Gautam Ghorai to get his feedback. In the earlier meeting, Gautam Ghorai had shown a card

that was given to him by a Dalit association. The card has a small picture of B.R. Ambedkar. Manu Chitrakar had included that card in one of the sketches but had not included the picture of B.R. Ambedkar.

M.C.: The card is too small. I don't think we can make it that detailed. But I think in this one, not inside the card, but next to it … over here … I can place it as a sign …

Yes, that can be done …

G.G.: It will signal that Ambedkar is our guy …

For the people of our community, if we ever fall into trouble … if people from the elite castes attack us … we can use this card to fight back. We can take them to court.

Sonali Chitrakar and I returned to Chakdosam village with sketches. When we came here earlier, we spoke to Bindu Ghorai (B.G.). Here is an excerpt of the conversation between Sonali Chitrakar and Bindu Ghorai:

S.C.: These are the parents who could not feed their children. And here, we have a doctor who has come to see the people who are dying of disease. [The old lady points that she can't see very well and that she is unwell.]

She's asking me to go now because she can't see ….

She is not able to see very well … what can she do … she's asking me to go now …

What is wrong? Are you ill? Running a fever?

B.G.: Yes, I have a fever and a headache.

S.C.: Have you taken any medicines?

B.G.: No, it just started last night. When you came to call me, I wasn't feeling very well. But I wanted to see your drawings.

S.C.: You didn't take medicines then? Let me check if you still have a fever … it seems it is gone.

B.G.: This is how it is with old people.

S.C: Yes, it goes up and down.

B.G: Soon god will take me. I've already lost vision in this eye.

Hear the story

Sonali Chitrakar and I came to Chakdosam village with the scroll and accompanying song. She had written the song based on the stories she heard from the community members in this village. She sang while unfolding the scroll – frame by frame. Here is the shorter version of the song:

S.C.:

Hear the story of 1943
Hear the story of 1985

Aging parents to care for
No clothes to wear
Bodies covered in boils
Our hearts cannot bear
The stories of 1943

Hear the story of 1943
Upon us was a great famine
Not a single grain of food
People were left destitute
Foraged plants and husks of wheat
But not enough for all to eat
Such was 1943 … such was 1985
Burning hunger and disease to fight
They died of sheer neglect
For the doctors who needed to act
Refused to touch their body
Such was the story of 1943 …

Later when the cyclone struck
People ran amok
In search of shelter, they would knock
On the big doors
But no answers were received
Hear the story of 1943 …

Manu Chitrakar, his friend Raheem Chitrakar, and I visited Hari Para village with the scroll and accompanying song. He had written the song based on the stories he heard from the community members in this village. He sang while his friend Raheem Chitrakar unfolded the scroll, frame by frame. Here is the shorter version of the song:

M.C.:

In the year 1943
There came a famine
To hear the stories
Of those left behind
We took a trip …

In the year 1943
There came a famine
Among them was one person
Who spoke for all with compassion

Even though they weren't born
At the time of the famine
In the year 1943 …

From an elderly grandmother
We hear the story of suffering
Boiled mash of foraged plants
Was all she had to eat
There came a great famine
In 1943 …

After Manu Chitrakar's performance, people had gathered around him. They were closely examining the scroll. Most of them seemed appreciative of the scroll and the song. Lakshman Patra (L.P.), one of the villagers, offered his take on the scroll:

> L.P.: The drawings are good. A couple of additions would make them better.
>
> M.C.: Yes, please tell us …
>
> L.P.: The threshing of the crop and the foraging of the kochu plants. Both should be represented.
>
> M.C.: We do have a bit of both … here, we have the grandma with the plants … and here we have, not the threshing per se … but a small patch of land being farmed by all …
>
> L.P.: The kochu plant should be prominent …
>
> M.C.: Yes, they are in the song lyrics …
>
> L.P.: This lady with the basket … she should be more frail …
>
> M.C.: See, here are the rice farms and here are the wild plant that poor people had to eat …. We have tried to represent everything from the memories conveyed to us.

Methodological implications: shifting away from 'recovery and representation' and towards 'negotiated imagination'

The very emergence of subaltern historiography testifies to the need for the history from below.[8] However, the problem arises when we ask ourselves how we 'recover' that history. Quite early in the fieldwork-filming, I was talking to Manu Chitrakar one evening over tea and he remarked – '…how would you capture the Dalit experiences of the famine…I don't think you will find any Dalit person who is that old…Dalits don't live that long…'.

This remark sums up the difficulty in 'recovering' the Dalits' experiences of the famine; effectively, there are no official archives to tap into, and most people who experienced the famine have already passed away. What we are left with is individual and collective memories and stories.[9] Therefore, it is not so much about 'recovering' the 'authentic history' as it is about memories and stories – how do they remember; how do they construct their sense of the past, present and future; how do they articulate it, and how do they see themselves in relation to these memories and stories? The other important consideration is that of representation – how do we, as outside researchers, foreground and negotiate those memories and stories? Spivak (2013) drew attention to the inevitability of subaltern voices always being mediated by dominant systems of representation. Spivak's cautionary approach, according to Ilan Kapoor (2014, 736), has three implications for researchers:

> 'we have no unmediated access to subalternity'; 'we cannot claim neutrality or objectivity in our research on or encounters with the subaltern' and 'to the extent that our representations of the subaltern say more about us than about the subaltern, we produce the subaltern, and in fact, we may well end up reinforcing their subalternity'.

Taking cognisance of and engaging with these complexities had a profound impact on the fieldwork-filming. Problems associated with the 'recovery' and 'representation' of the experiences of subalterns meant staging, in however limited a way, an ethical-methodological mode that strives for negotiated imagination. By negotiated imagination, I mean a continuous effort towards non-appropriative encounters with the community; storytelling in

collaboration with the community, as opposed to 'recovery' and 'representation' of a 'historical reality'; foregrounding the difficulties and contradictions in these endeavours and being truthful about the weaknesses of a project like this. This notion of negotiated imagination was premised on two fundamental approaches.

Firstly, my move to West Midnapore to carry out this project was not a result of an invitation from the people inhabiting in the area. I invited myself. What motivates and sustains a move like this – a deep-rooted ethnographic desire to discover and understand difference, and in turn, reproduce that difference; an ethical-moral-subaltern imperative to excavate 'an-other' history, which stands in opposition to its dominant counterpart; an archival fever disguised as memory work; a fetish to document; an obsession to chronicle times – changed, unchanged, or in flux; or an artistic itch that must be attended to? These might come across as rhetorical questions, but they shaped my thinking about the field and fieldwork. A field is not there to be recovered or discovered; contains difference but can be more than observer-observed and, most importantly, can be a site of creation and negotiation. And with regard to the fieldwork, it can be conceived as an action – initiating, facilitating, practising, and rehearsing acts of co-creating and storytelling. In other words, fieldwork can be a test of a method; a method that aims to already put in practice what is imagined. This notion of field and fieldwork necessitates a clear and constant articulation of the process, without which subaltern is a metaphor – a metaphor that is in service of the dominant. It is in the methods and the articulations of the methods that we open up ways to go beyond tokenism of 'inclusion of subaltern history'. Mere inclusion of subaltern stories does not say much about the conditions under which stories have been 'gathered' and 'included'. Moreover – inclusion to what end and who does it serve? Inclusion does not necessarily dissolve the 'discoverer/observer' and 'source community/observed' binary. For the meaning of inclusion to alter, the agency of storytelling needs to shift.

Storytelling, if conceived as agentic and participatory, is the second fundamental principle behind my idea of negotiated imagination. Stories and storytelling are not about validating or ascertaining historical truths. Stories and storytelling, according to Wilson (2017), are a process of making sense of our experiences and our interactions with each other and formulating our beliefs, identities and values. Practices of storytelling require both listening and telling. It is in this context that Wilson writes

> we become listeners as well as tellers of tales, we reformulate and retell our own stories with fresh nuance and new understanding in the light of those stories heard. And so, the cycle continues. This is storytelling as a process, as a way of thinking about the world, as a tool for navigating our personal and collective journeys. (ibid., 128)

In this sense, stories are never fully individual or collective. They always emerge in negotiations. Moreover, there is always an element of imagination involved in storytelling, and by imagination, I mean never fully separable from 'real' nor fully confluent with 'made up'. This is exactly the quality that is ascribed to storytelling, namely the potential to construct and traverse complex temporal narratives and structures. Furthermore, storytelling is knowledge work and, as a practice, is available to all; it foregrounds subaltern ways of knowing and gives form to that knowing. This is where I found the artistic research that centred the creative-collaborative practice as an ethical-methodological mode to be very productive as it allowed for and encouraged initiating, facilitating, practising and rehearsing acts of co-creating and storytelling. Moreover, even if subalterns are seen as active political subjects by the researcher, without facilitating creative acts

and their active involvement in the process, there is an inherent risk that either resurrects the subalterns as revolutionary figures or writes them as the dormant other. A move towards testing a method where subalterns are not accorded the status of creative subjects towards the end of the project, upon discovery, but rather from the very beginning, is a humble move away from representation and towards negotiated imagination. However limited, complex and incommensurable, this process-driven move opens the door for a different kind of methodological imaginary.

Concluding discussion

With regard to research on famines, especially from a subaltern framework, the methodological approach that was used in this project can be of some relevance. Because subaltern experiences have not found adequate space or attention in famine scholarship, it is crucial that attempts are made to fill this gap. But the problem is that even through a lens of subaltern consciousness, there is no 'authentic' and 'true' history of the famine to be 'recovered' and 'represented'. Additionally, as outside researchers, we have no unmediated access to subalternity. Often, the very act of conducting research can produce subalternity. It is in this context that I have alluded a sense of impossibility runs concomitantly with the urgency of foregrounding subaltern experiences of the famine. The task, then, is not to be frozen by these seemingly irreconcilable pulls. Artistic practices with creative-collaborative methodological impetuses have a generative potential, in the sense that they not only produce a critique of the dominant methodologies but also propose alternate models for consideration. Artistic practices are uniquely positioned to be mobilised in famine studies, as they can be touched by possibilities and impossibilities of oral historiography, ethnography, archives and memory work, but they are not constituted entirely by one or all of them. This fluidity is more than a naïve desire to be disloyal to these established ways of thinking and doing research. It creates elbow room to test and practise imaginaries that exceed the project of inserting particular voices or narratives, which have been erased or occluded, back into the construction of the historical event – but largely still within the dominant modes of epistemic (including representational) framework. It fosters a dialogue between subaltern methodologies and methodologies of the subaltern. In other words, my attempt to do the oral-historical work, which is an activity within subaltern methodologies, is in constant negotiation with Patchitra, a methodology of subalterns. Yet any attempt to bring the two together to grasp how subaltern methodologies and epistemologies change the rendition of the famine narratives runs into an ethical dilemma, and it is possible to overstate this dilemma. As an outside researcher, am I not bringing subaltern ways of knowing and giving form to that knowledge to bear on dominant historiographies? Since I am not producing from within, how is it not 'representing'? These questions can be posed as a failure to dismantle the dominant historiography or as a crucial but necessary partial de-centring of that historiography. I would argue that if we have to avoid these seemingly irreconcilable ethical dead-ends and find ways to do the critical work while addressing the problems involved, we have to favour the process over the outcome. Creative-collaborative practice with Chitrakars and community members was invested more in the process than the outcome.

Although we did end up with the two songs and two scrolls, a particular incident served as a reminder of how any act of 'recovery' and 'representation' is necessarily and always inadequate and insufficient. After Manu Chitrakar's performance of the scroll, Lakshman Patra remarked how the kochu plant and the old lady were not represented well and that

the scroll needs improvement. I see this remark not as an invalidation of the project but rather a reaffirmation of the idea that we need to move away from 'recovery' and 'representation' and towards negotiated imagination. In this endeavour, storytelling through a creative-collaborative practice becomes crucial as it is a process of negotiating subjective experiences, truths and imaginations, navigating and making sense of complex temporal narratives and structures. Moreover, a particular insistence on the processes of storytelling through a creative-collaborative practice allows heterogeneity of caste-subalterns' experiences of the famine and competing ways of making sense of the event.

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Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. There are several estimates of the number of people who died in the Bengal famine of 1943–1944. These range from one million to five million. However, most scholars put the number at three million (see Islam 2007; Mukerjee 2010; Sinha 2009).
2. While 'caste system' is always qualified by context, it is broadly characterised by social stratification based on endogamy, hereditary status, hierarchy, graded occupation, and purity and pollution. The 'caste system' in India comprises four Varnas in the following hierarchy – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. This is followed by a group considered to be so 'low' that they are outside of the Varna system. Dalits and Adivasis are part of this group. Literally 'ground down' or 'oppressed'; the term Dalit was popularised by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, architect of the Indian constitution and a prominent Dalit thinker. In contemporary India, it refers to the preferred political self-identification of social groups belonging to 'ex-untouchable castes'. Dalits are listed as 'Scheduled Castes (SCs)' in the Indian constitution. Ambedkar saw the 'caste system' as graded inequality, having a control on resources and the idea of purity and pollution as its organising principles. Whether we take Gramscian's (1934) notion of a subaltern social group as 'on the margins of history' or Ranjit Guha's (1988, 35) definition of subalterns as 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way', Dalits fit the category of subalterns in the South Asian context. However, using 'subaltern' as an umbrella term to denote caste-based domina-

tions, subordinations and experiences along economic, political and social lines comes with several theoretical and ethical-political challenges. The risk of heterogeneity and context specificities being subsumed within this generalised and very broad conception is real. While there are similarities and overlaps between the terms – 'caste' and 'subaltern' – they are not interchangeable in all contexts. I am using the term 'caste-subaltern' to both mark the specificities of subalternities caused by caste and to indicate an incomplete synonymity between the two terms (For more on this, see Pankaj and Pandey 2019, 8–9).

3. Some works that stands out are: Sarkar (2020) who examines the caste and class bias in private relief, especially by Hindu Mahasabha; Biswas (2021), who in her analysis of Manik Bandyopadhay's short stories of the Bengal famine of 1943 argues how the left political and cultural movement reduced intricacies of caste subjugation and struggle into class conflicts; and Sinha's (2020, 69) study of Bhabani Bhattacharya's work *In He Who Rides a Tiger*, which shows how the author explores 'the system of signification that transformed people of low caste into non-persons vulnerable to death by starvation in an expression of biopower' and how the author 'shifts the protagonist from an experience of caste as marked on the body to a performative notion of caste identity and finally to an engagement in anti-imperial nationalism'.
4. For more on Bengal School, see *Virtual Galleries – Bengal School*, http://ngmaindia.gov.in/sh-bengal.asp, (accessed on 19 September 2019).
5. For more on this, see Bhattacharjee (2012), and web posts on Ambedkar's Speech, edited by Prof. F. W. Pritchett, Columbia University, available at http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/section_4.html
6. Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is a collective term used by the state to categorise social groups that are educationally or socially disadvantaged but are not listed as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs) or 'Scheduled Tribes'(STs). This group is constituted mostly by castes belonging to the lowest of the four varnas (Shudras). Instead of 'castes', the term 'classes' is used to incorporate 'backward' groups from religious minorities.
7. The research adheres to the ethics rules and guidelines of my institution, including when it comes to informed consent of the participants.
8. A few parts of this section draw from and build on my previously published entry 'Negotiated Imagination' on the online platform *Glossary of Common Knowledge* (see Ranjan 2021).
9. Memory studies, especially the analytical category 'post-memory', has much to offer in studying how people who have not experienced an event directly inherit and receive memories through the stories or silence that the community and family conveys. They are often conveyed and circulated through family archives, oral histories, myths, legends, allegories, folklores, etc. (see Hirsch 2008; Eaglestone 2004).

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Article 4

Elephant Trumpet. In/out of the black box

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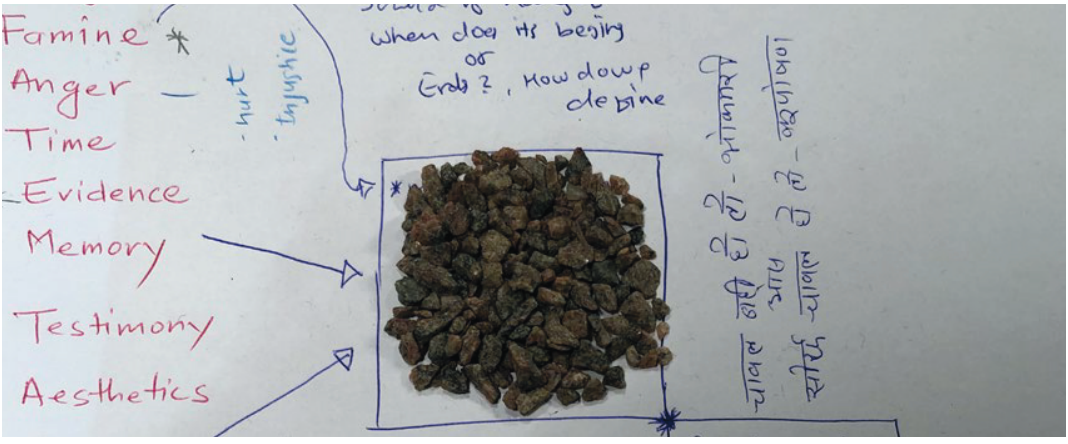

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Abstract

This text weaves reflections on the (im)possibility of foregrounding caste-subalterns', specifically Dalits' experiences and imaginations of the Bengal Famine of 1943. This text is in conjunction with, next to, between, and in/out of the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*. The film has emerged as a result of a collaborative-performative workshop between two caste-subalterns, initiated and organised in the context of a PhD in Artistic Practice. Just like the workshop, the film is also animated by the desire to complicate the dominant representational realm ascribed to Dalits, which is often either essentialising or reductive. The film explores methodological and aesthetical approaches to go beyond the default imaginaries.

Constructed across multiple modes, genres, fragments, and layers, this text aims to expand, extend, inflect, and build on the key themes explored in the workshop and the film. Some text precedes the workshop and film, some emerged during the process, and some came afterwards. Mobilising iterative and assemblage-style writing, this text anchors itself in the Bengal Famine of 1943 to critically engage with ideas around 'critical presence' and the 'representation' of Dalits. The text also aims to explore notions around malnutrition, hunger, starvation, and famine as categories, 'recovery and representation' of caste-subaltern histories in the context of famine, opacity and affect as aesthetic choices, and collaborative practice as a method.

Keywords: the Bengal famine of 1943, caste, dalit, subaltern, film practice

Trompeta de elefante: dentro/fuera de la caja negra

Resumen

Este texto entreteje reflexiones sobre la (im)posibilidad de poner en primer plano las experiencias e imaginarios de los subalternos de casta, específicamente las experiencias e imaginarios de los Dalits sobre la hambruna de Bengala de 1943. Este texto está en conjunción con, junto a, entre y dentro/fuera de la película *You deny my living and I defy my death*. La película surge como resultado de un taller colaborativo-performativo entre dos subalternos de casta, iniciado y organizado en el contexto de un doctorado en Práctica Artística. Al igual que el taller, la película también está motivada por el deseo de complicar el ámbito de representación dominante atribuido a los dalits, que a menudo es esencializador o reductivo. La película explora enfoques metodológicos y estéticos para ir más allá de los imaginarios predeterminados.

Construido a través de múltiples modos, géneros, fragmentos y capas, este texto tiene como objetivo expandir, extender, modificar y desarrollar los temas clave explorados en el taller y la película. Algunos textos preceden al taller y la película, otros surgieron durante el proceso y otros vinieron después. Movilizando una escritura iterativa y de ensamblaje, este texto se ancla en la hambruna de Bengala de 1943 para abordar de manera crítica las ideas sobre la "presencia crítica" y la "representación" de los dalit. El texto también tiene como objetivo explorar las nociones sobre la desnutrición, el hambre, la inanición y la hambruna como categorías, la "recuperación y representación" de las historias de casta-subalternas en el contexto de la hambruna, la opacidad y el afecto como elecciones estéticas y la práctica colaborativa como método.

Palabras clave: la hambruna de Bengala de 1943, casta, dalit, subalterno, práctica cinematográfica

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Preface

Akaler Sandhane (In Search of Famine, 1981), directed by Mrinal Sen, is a film within a film that portrays an urban director's efforts to create a film about the Bengal Famine of 1943. The director and his crew stay in a village for a month to shoot the film, and by the end, the relations between the film crew and the villagers have worsened to the extent that the film within the film cannot be finished there and the only option for Sen's director is to recreate the famine in the confined studios of Calcutta. Highly reflexive in nature, the film is aimed at interrogating the capacities and incapacities of any attempt to 'authentically' represent the famine and the rural. In a way, Sen suggests that the only way to make a film on the famine is to show how it can't be made. Sen's musings on famine-related temporal, historical, ontological, and representational questions come together nicely in this sequence. One day sudden rain stalls the film shoot, and the cast decides to play a guessing game. The director shows them several photographs of famine sourced from newspapers, archives, personal collections etc., and asks them to guess the context of the photographs. Most of them make the mistake of thinking that all the photographs are of the 1943 famine, but they are not. Photographs from the 1943 famine, 1959 food riots in Calcutta, and 1971 Bangladesh refugee crisis become indiscernible from each other. In the last part of this famous sequence in the film, Smita Patil, an actress in Sen's film and the film being shot, holds a picture of black nothingness, and she declares – past, present, and future.

Any scholarly and artistic engagement with a famine of the 'past' raises several conundrums relating to definitional, spatial-temporal, ontological, and recovery-representational questions. According to de Waal (1989, p.6), how and when a famine is defined or declared "is a question of power relations within and between societies". Starvation-related mass deaths are often the prerequisite for a calamity to be called famine. In most cases, this narrow framework is adopted instead of a broader framework of hunger, starvation, poverty, and malnutrition. In the case of postcolonial states, they are always keen, and rightly so, to acknowledge how coloniality and famines are intrinsically and historically linked but always hesitate in declaring a famine themselves; why would they admit to their failures?

Concerning spatial-temporal questions, the most crucial consideration is whether a famine should be seen as an event frozen in time and space or as a continuum across time and space. Mike Davis (2007, p.21) argues that famine "is part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it". The danger in talking about a famine from the 'past' is that it relegates it to an occurrence from the past, with a specific location and starting and end dates. Moreover, in the popular imagination, a large-scale famine flattens out the differences in experiences; all sufferings become one. And this is so far from the

truth, as we know that famine is always a complex story of society's social, economic, and political fabric. Famines also pose ontological questions – hunger operates at the level of the gut (Ginwala, 2017); it is affective; it resists any definitional framework; it defies time, measurement, and visual perceptions. If we trust only our vision, by the time we notice it, it's already too late. Considering these definitional, ontological, spatial, and temporal complexities, framing a famine is quite daunting. Perhaps Sen is alluding to these challenges through the aforementioned sequence. What if we were to add another layer of complexity to it – exploring and framing a famine from a caste-subaltern perceptive?

> "My memory is again in the way of your history."
> "Your history gets in the way of my memory". (Ali, 2012)

How does one draw a line?
Malnutrition, Hunger, Starvation, Famine?
Past, Present, Future?

The questions that shadow my attempt to study the Bengal Famine from caste-subaltern perspectives are – is it even possible to recover and represent those histories without relegating caste-subalterns and their histories as fully knowable subjects or risking ventriloquising them? Given the ethical-methodological complexities and (im)possibilities inherent in framing the famine, even more so from caste-subaltern perspectives, this text, just like the film that accompanies it, departs from an authoritative recuperative historical project and instead pays attention to, or is attuned to, processes of creatively imagining the heterogenous subaltern histories, which can often be fragmentary, unresolved, and contradictory. In its framing, this writing is not pre-figured for a mere translation of already worked-out arguments. Writing, in this paper, is mobilised as a method and a creative process through which myriad imaginations of the Famine are being negotiated. Writing, in that sense, is conceived as a creative practice to construct and already imagine alternatives that attempt to go beyond reductive and essentialising representations. To that end, the following two questions capture its spirit and ethos:

Why do you
want our stories
always already codified
in your systems?

Can't we and our stories
exist outside of
what is already made available?

Performativity, bricolage, and constant negotiation of opacity and clarity are a deliberate part of its methodology to purposefully decentre and deprivilege any individual method that might foreground essentialising and reductive representations the writing and the film seek to refute. How and why these writing methods help us in exploring going beyond default imaginaries is dispersed across its content and form.

Glossary of terms

Caste: While the 'caste system' is always qualified by the context, it is broadly characterised by social stratification based on endogamy, hereditary status, hierarchy, graded occupation, and purity and pollution. The 'caste system' consists of four Varnas in the following hierarchy – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This is followed by a group considered to be so 'low' that they are outside of the Varna system (For more on caste, see Béteille, 2022; Ghurye, 2016; Srinivas, 2019). Dalits and Adivasis are part of this group. Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1917; 1936; 1948), the architect of the Indian constitution and a prominent Dalit thinker, saw the 'caste system' as graded inequality with control of resources and the idea of purity and pollution as its organising principles.

Dalit: Literally 'ground down' or 'oppressed'; the term Dalit was popularised by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. In contemporary India, it refers to the preferred political self-identification of social groups belonging to 'ex-untouchable castes'. The Indian State, through its constitutional framework, has designated and refers to this group as Scheduled Castes (SC).

Adivasi: Meaning 'old inhabitants' in several Indian languages, it is considered a preferred self-description of communities listed as 'Scheduled Tribes' in the Indian constitution.

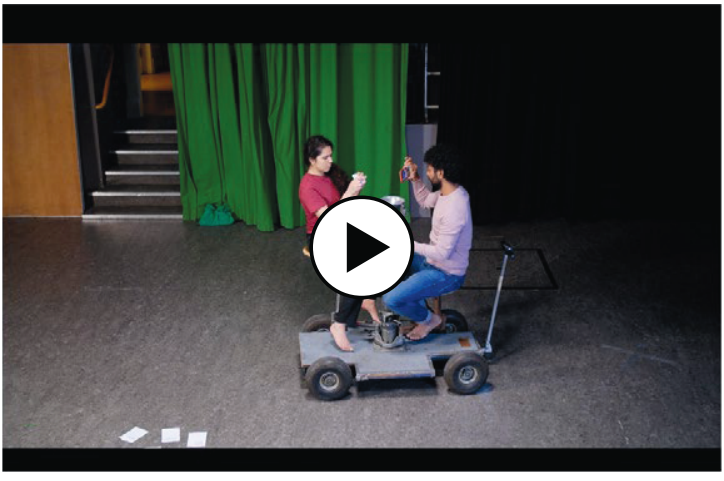
Other Backward Classes (OBC): OBC is a collective term used by the state to categorise social groups which are educationally or socially disadvantaged but are not listed as 'Sche-

duled Castes' or 'Scheduled Tribes'. This group is constituted mostly of castes belonging to the lowest of four varnas (Shudras). Instead of castes, the term 'classes' is used to incorporate 'backward' groups from religious minorities.

Subaltern in the Indian context: Whether we take Gramscian (2021) notion of subaltern social group as 'on the margins of history' or Ranjit Guha's (1988, p.35) definition of subalterns as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way", Dalits, Adivasis and a large section of OBCs, fit the category of subalterns in the Indian context.

Caste-subaltern: I am using the term 'caste-subaltern' to both mark the specificities of subalternities caused by caste and to indicate an incomplete synonymity between the two terms. (For more on this, see Pankaj and Pandey, 2020). Using subaltern as an umbrella term to denote caste-based dominations, subordinations, and experiences along economic, political, and social lines, comes with several theoretical and ethical-political challenges. The risk of heterogeneity and context specificities getting subsumed within this generalised and very broad conception is real. While there are similarities and overlaps between the terms – 'caste' and 'subaltern' – they are not interchangeable in all contexts.

You deny my living and I defy my death



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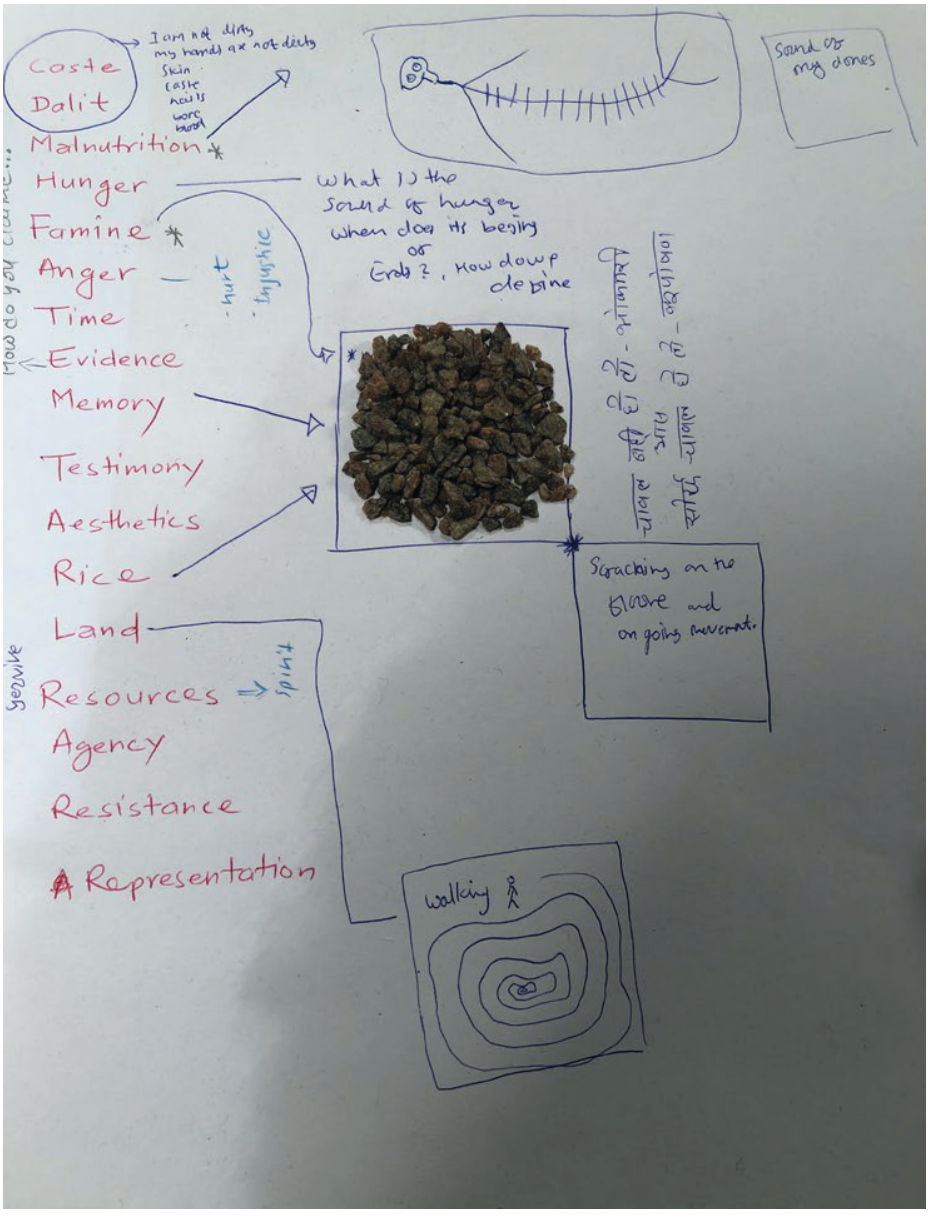
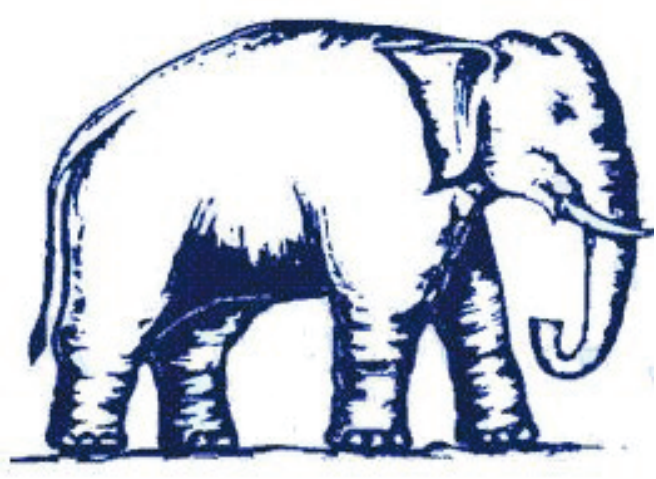
Indexing



Indexicality?

Averroes put down his pen [...] From this studious distraction he was distracted by a kind of melody. He looked through the latticework balcony; below, in the narrow earthen patio, some half-naked children were playing. One, standing on another's shoulders, was obviously playing the part of a muezzin; with his eyes tightly closed he chanted: "There is no god but the God." The one who held him motionlessly played the part of the minaret; another, abject in the dust and on his knees, played the part of the faithful worshipers (Borges, 1964, cited in Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013).

Averroes' difficulty translating the term comes from the simple fact that the Greek concept of "mimesis" was totally alien to Islam, and of which— let's say it, just in case— Islam has no need. Mimesis is not a universal concept (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013).



All of you know that Elephant is election symbol of Scheduled Castes Federation in the coming election. Why I have chosen Elephant as our election symbol? Because this symbol is known to all the Indians. Apart from it, Elephant is a symbol of intelligence, patience and strength. Our people are as powerful as Elephant. It may take them some time to stand on their feet. But once they are on their feet nobody will be able to force them easily to sit on their knees (Ambedkar, 1951, quoted in Darapuri, 2017).

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Invitation as (and) Introduction

To

Durga Bishwokarma
Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 26 January 2022

Sub: Invitation to a collaborative-performative workshop for a PhD project

Dear Durga,

I hope you are doing well. Is your ordeal with the migration agency in Norway over? Have they issued you a residence permit yet? I sincerely hope you will soon be able to travel to Nepal to see your family.

It's been almost a year since we last spoke. Last year has been such a blur for me. I have been so busy with my PhD. I finally have a title for my PhD – *Negotiating caste-subaltern imaginations of the Bengal Famine of 1943 in and through film practices*. I know it's a bit verbose, but I like it. I might change it later. What do you think?

The rough cut of the 'big/long' film is ready now. I don't know if you remember, but this is the film based on my fieldwork-filming in two Dalit villages in West Midnapore, West Bengal, India. The fieldwork-filming centred creative-collaborative practice as a method to engage with caste-subalterns', specifically Dalits', experiences of the Famine. Two local practitioners of the Patchitra tradition (scroll paintings accompanied by songs) were creative-collaborators during the fieldwork-filming. Methodologically speaking, in my fieldwork-filming, I attempted to co-construct subjective truths by involving community members and Patchitra artists to the best of my abilities. While I was both the 'author' and the 'facilitator' during the fieldwork-filming, I fully assumed the author's role at the film's editing stage. When we meet, we can discuss the nuanced politics and ethics of authoring and facilitating. I have tried to weave together fieldwork footage, poetry, and essayistic writing in this film. While the film attempts to foreground caste-subaltern experiences of the famine, it also proposes a need to shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of subalterns' 'authentic' experiences of the famine and towards 'negotiated imagination'. I have attempted to define the term 'negotiated imagination' elsewhere (Ranjan, 2021). You can check it here:
https://glossary.mg-lj.si/referential-fields/constituencies-II/negotiated%20imagination

Since this film blurs modes and genres, it's difficult for me to define its aesthetic register; it oscillates between – observational, reflexive, expository, performative, essayistic, and poetic modes (for more on different modes, see Nicholas, 1991; 2016; 2017 and Rascaroli, 2008). In that sense, it's a hybrid film – a cinema

in-between. I am developing the argument that the notion of hybrid films lends itself very well to the anti-caste image work. Since no single aesthetic register can capture the heterogeneity of caste subjugation, exploitation, domination and experiences, the critical-creative potential of hybridity might help us pursue anti-caste aesthetics. Irrespective of my intentions and claims, I can't deny that the film has some elements of 'conventional documentary' and can come across as such, especially the segments where there are conversations with scroll artists, community members and documentation of the scroll-making process. You know that I have a complicated relationship with the idea of 'documentary' filmmaking. As a caste-subaltern, I see the necessity of 'documentary' in advancing the struggle. Still, I also get frustrated when 'aesthetics' is denied to caste-subalterns in the name of cause, urgency, and legibility.

My research is hinged on iterations of film practice through different subaltern affinities and methodologies so that the research questions can be explored from multiple perspectives. While editing the film, I kept thinking, what is a 'field'? What if I shifted the spatial, temporal, material, and aesthetic register to a black box? Can I do fieldwork-filming in a black box? Can I follow a similar ethical-methodological approach of creative-collaborative practice but this time in the confines of a black box? What will happen if I work with a trained theatre and performance artist? You know where this is going…

I would be pleased if you could make some time to come to Gothenburg and participate in a collaborative-performative workshop. The idea will be to explore the (im)possibilities of foregrounding Dalits' experiences of the Bengal famine of 1943. I am thinking of filming the workshop. The filming is not intended for purely documentation; it might be turned into a filmic work later. I am attaching the following:

Appendix 1: A Brief description of my PhD research
Appendix 2: Words/phrases that come to my mind when I think of our possible collaborative-performative workshop

I hope you will consider this request. More later.

Regards,
Ram

Appendix 1: A Brief Description of my PhD Research

The Bengal Famine of 1943-44, in which close to three million people died, is considered one of the most violent instances of colonial rule in India. In recent years scholars have turned their attention to scrutinising the Famine from an anti-colonial perspective (see Mukerjee 2010; Tharoor 2017). However, the caste-subaltern question is still largely missing in the study of the Famine. With Amartya Sen's (1981) assertion that entitlement relations play a significant role in dictating who gets affected and to what extent, during a famine, the link between caste and its impact on the outcome of the Famine seems commonsensical, and yet this aspect has not received adequate attention.

Against this backdrop, my PhD in Artistic Practice mobilises the film practice to further and experiment with caste-subaltern imaginations (epistemologies and ontologies of expressions that emerge from the space of subalternity) of the Bengal Famine of 1943. The main research question that underpins this research is – how can the film practice, both as a method and an outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore epistemological and ontological understandings of the Bengal Famine from a caste-subaltern perspective?

Taking the Gramscian notion of subalterns as people/groups on the margins of history, subaltern studies, especially in India, have consistently focused on the need to write history from below (Amin, 1995; Chakrabarty, 1992; Guha,1982; Perusek,1993; Spivak; 1988). On the one hand, scholars and historians have looked at archival materials for erasures of subaltern history and reinterpreted them. On the other hand, they have mobilised methods such as oral history to recuperate the subaltern histories. In a limited sense, my PhD adheres to this tradition; it looks at existing films on the Bengal Famine and makes critical interventions in them to foreground the caste question, and it is also aimed at creating 'new' material by way of fieldwork-filming and workshops. But my PhD also departs from the tradition in that it is not a recuperative historical project; it focuses on the creative, layered, and negotiated processes of imagining and engaging with that history. While it takes cues from various academic disciplines, it essentially centres the film practice as a method of inquiry to engage with the Bengal Famine from a caste-subaltern lens.

Appendix 2: Words and phrases that come to my mind when I think of our possible collaborative-performative workshop

Part analysis; Part poiesis; Part in-between
Part experiences; Part encounters; Part in-between
Part closed; Part open; Part in-between
Part facts; Part speculations; Part in-between
Part oppositional; Part propositional; part in-between
Part past; Part present; Part future; Part in-between
Part definitive; Part tentative; Part in-between
Part transparent; Part opaque; Part in-between
Part telling; Part listening; Part in-between
Part singular; Part plural; Part in-between
Part effective; part affective; Part in-between
Part fragmentation; Part frustration with fragmentation; Part in-between

An attempt to orient ourselves amidst many parts and to annihilate caste

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Maybe I am the ghost

A script that may or may not be from the film You deny my living and I defy my death
—

Durga:

"I am the ghost.
I am the ancestor.
I am the spirit.

I am the dead body.
Still blaming you.

Because of you, I died at an early age.

I am poking you
And your stories."

-time elapses-

"As a Dalit ghost, I wish I had travelled with you to Midnapore and observed you during your fieldwork-filming.

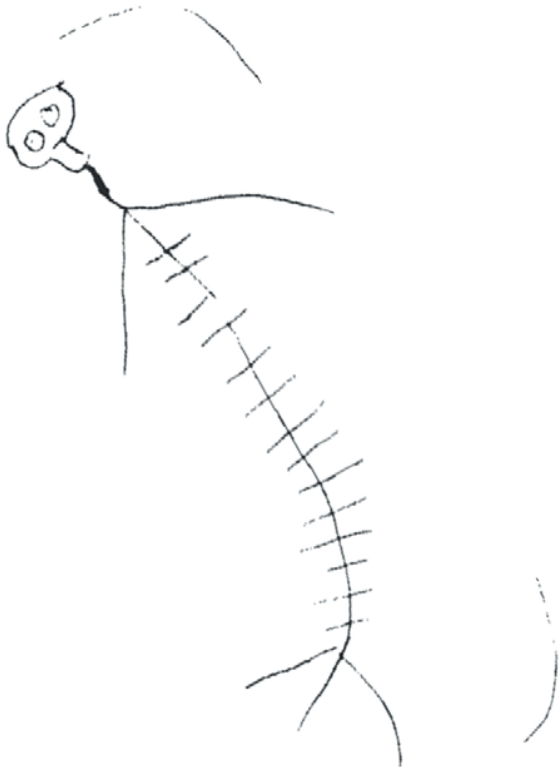
Maybe I would have pushed you.
Maybe I would have made your papers fly.

Maybe I would have caught your lies.

Maybe I would have gotten distracted from observing you.
Maybe I would have wandered around in the nearby villages.
Maybe I would have met my relatives."

The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person

> If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon, 2008, p.8)



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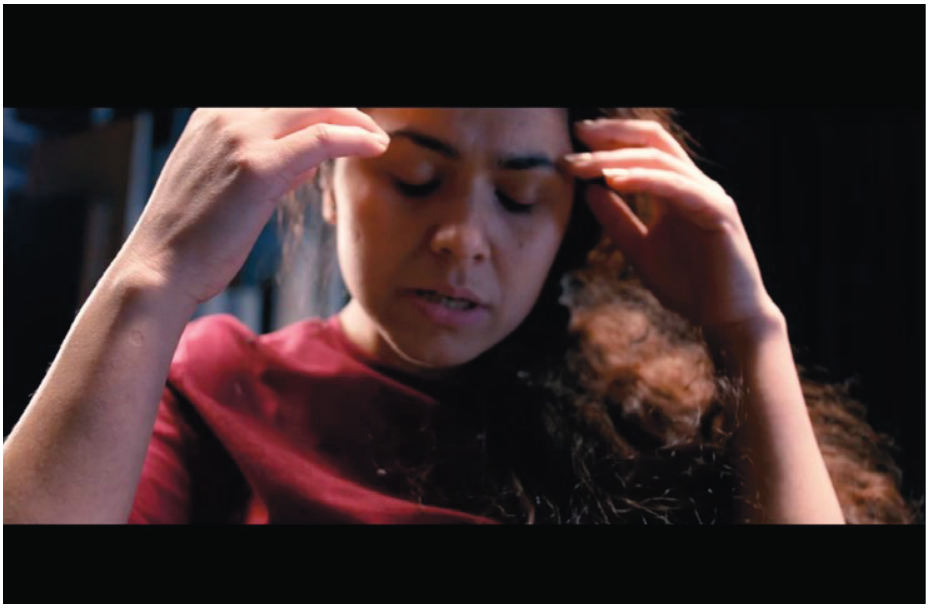
Why have you invited me?

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*
—

Durga: Am I working on your project because I am a theatre/performance artist or because I am a Dalit artist? What is it? I know it's both. But what is it?

Ram answers the question with a question: What do you think?

Durga: I thought you invited me because I carry Dalit subjectivity. First, it was that. But then... if I had been just a Dalit activist... probably you would not have invited me. I guess the reason behind the invitation is that I carry both – the tools and the subjectivity



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Storying the world

To

Durga Bishwokarma
Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 05 February 2022
Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part I
I know you prefer calling. Much of what I will write here is something we have already discussed over the phone. I am still taking the risk of repeating the content. But I think it's a risk worth taking. Consider it as my notes, a way to rehearse possible imaginaries, or should I say appendix 3. What follows in this letter are my current academic and artistic inspirations, examples, readings, observations, quotes etc.

Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) book Caste: *The Origins of Our Discontents* has rekindled my interest in a comparative study of caste and race. Using the analytical framework of caste, she connects and studies hierarchies across civilisations, particularly focusing on studying race subjugations in the USA. She writes:

> As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a perfomance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not (p.17)
>
> Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place (p.19).

While reading her book, I am constantly thinking of a shared history – after all, Dalit Panthers were formed in India along the lines of Black Panthers in the USA. I am meandering. There is a different reason for bringing her book up. I was discussing this book with a colleague from South Africa, and she gave me a beautiful gift during the conversation. She introduced me to the work of Katherine McKittrick (2022), especially the article titled *Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea*.

In this article, McKittrick offers her thinking on black methodology and aesthetics, which I think might be very valuable for us and the workshop. You can find the article here: https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12773 I have collated some significant sections that I find illuminating.

> My methodological premise, or assumption, is that black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies, and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together va rious sources and texts and narratives to challenge racism (p.5).

> Black methodologies do not follow a trajectory of seeking, finding, and making an analytical site knowable; black methodologies are articulations of wonder, curiosity, and sharing. For this reason, I observe that black methodologies are wavering knowledge processes that move in and out of clarity (p.6).
>
> Black aesthetics oscillate between clarity and opacity and are underwritten by stories and ideas that are fleeting, flexible, new, and old; these stories and ideas teach us how to navigate infrastructures of harm, these stories and ideas reside within, across, and outside prevailing knowledge systems. Black aesthetics generate a deciphering practice and this deciphering practice contextualises black worlds as painfully contradictory and thick with meaning. The painful contradiction is not a site of representation that demands resolution but instead elicits the rebe llious potential of black aesthetics—stories, music, poetry, visual art, the beautiful ways of being black that are unarchived yet tell us something about how we can and do and might live the world differently (p.10).

My reason for choosing these sections is not to indicate an attempt at faithful implementation and translation of these ideas in our workshop. The specificity of my inquiry, coupled with the specificities of our contexts, interests and working styles, will inflect, extend and expand these ideas in ways I can't foresee now. Questions that have consistently cast their shadow on the project – would we ever know how many Dalits died in the Famine; can we ever 'recover' and 'faithfully represent' the caste-subaltern experiences of the Famine; and where is the archive that can unlock answers to these questions? These rhetorical questions point to the fact that perhaps it's not fully knowable, and may we should not make the mistake of turning the caste-subaltern into an analytical category/site that is fully knowable. As suggested by McKittrick, one way to move forward is to story the world through an interdisciplinary approach. I am curious to see how our different artistic practices inflect each other and how we go about storying and imagining the Famine from our respective vantage points. I am looking forward to experiencing the politics and poetics of our relations.

I remember Glissant. *In poetics of Relations*, he writes: "The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori" (1997, p.192). These two sentences capture the spirit of the proposed workshop, at least for me. I know this workshop has a predetermined thematic core, but I want us to engage in imaginaries. To quote Manhar Bansal (2022):

> Imagination is sometimes considered to be antithetical to history, in its vigours of evidence and objectivity. The truth, nonetheless, is that all history is imagination. This is not to deny the immense significance of historical evidence but to say that it is the manner in which we choose to interpret and construct our understanding of the past, indeed, how we imagine it that forms the bedrock of historical thought. But who constructs this imagination? Using what? Does everyone get to imagine their own past, or are there 'fragments' whose collective memory is obliterated by the hegemonic imaginations of the 'mainstream'?

> In this endeavour, it must shun the hegemonic and homogenising forces of mains tream imagination and use oral tradition, collective memory, poetry, literature and fiction – alternative sources I broadly call 'fantasy' – to reimagine our multiform pasts. I contend that this 'reimagination' is imperative for us to address both the erasures of the past and the crises of the present. We must take, as it were, a flight of fantasy.

I want to take this 'flight of fantasy' with you. I know that this, like subaltern histories, will be scattered, fragmented and heterogeneous. I think it's only by letting go of the anxiety of producing absolute, clean, singular, and totalising histories and narratives, even if it's emerging from subaltern quarters, that we can destabilise grand, homogenous, and hegemonic historiography. The mainstream historiography fears the subalterns' affective, fragmentary, and other alternative ways of storying the world because it breaks open the narrow corridor of consensus on history and conception of historiography elites are invested in. To invoke Bansal (2022) again, we should let "fragments speak on their own term without anxiety". In this regard, Glissant's (1997) conception of opacity can be interesting for us to consider. Opacity, for Glissant, is an unknowability, a poetic, unquantifiable alterity, a diversity that exceeds categorisations of differences. It exposes "the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples" (Blas, 2016). For Glissant (1997), opacity is a conception that distracts us from becoming the guardians of absolute truths. Methodologically and aesthetically, I have been drawn to opacity. However, I am slightly concerned about the uncritical mobilisation of opacity as a catch-all phrase. In the name of opacity, we can't unquestionably accept works that are vague, apolitical, unintelligible, inspired by a particular kind of European abstractionism, and obscure for the sake of obscurity.

Moreover, we can't dismiss evidentiary ethics, aesthetics, and politics in the name of opacity. We can undoubtedly re-think and re-imagine 'evidentiary'. Still, we don't have the privilege of metaphorising the immediacy and urgency of subaltern causes and concerns to the extent that it becomes utterly bereft of any critical potential. This is why McKittrick (2022) warns us that "opacity is not simply about vagueness, or claiming unintelligibility, but about the politics of sharing ideas carefully" (p.7). She also cautions us against turning opacity into a stable category or designation, "we cannot grab opacity and retreat into a space of sustained obscurity" (p.7).

This letter is already so long. I don't know where my proclivity for writing lengthy letters comes from. I guess we can always use the excuse that since our ancestors did not get to write, we must compensate for all the words they never got to speak all the words which were invisiblised, erased, misheard, or never heard.

Let's speak soon.

Regards,
Ram

In the black box

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*
—

Author and Durga, one named after a Hindu God and the other Hindu Goddess, are in the black box. These two caste-subalterns from India and Nepal are standing against a green screen. They speculate. They imagine.

Author: "Let's say... I come to you as a filmmaker with a conundrum. How do I visibilise caste? How do I represent caste without the discursive/descriptive (text, subtitles, surnames, voice-over etc.)?"

Durga:

"
—Silence—
—and/or—
—Scream—
—and/or—
—blank screen—
"

Ram: "Is there any 'metaphorical/allegorical/abstract' way (as opposed to the 'documentary') to talk about caste?"

Durga:

"

—NO—

(For me, No. And that's beautiful. If it's not possible to define it, then why is it practised?)

Living is both denying death and proving it

Stretched out beside the blacksmith's furnace
I have been privy
To the argument of the hammer and the iron

I have become the plough
And travelled far, riding on the farmer's shoulder
Tilled the vast expanse
So that the field teems with crops

Just to fight the pangs of hunger

Still I have to witness Amlasol**
I have to feed my family ant-eggs
That look like white grains of rice (Charal, 2021)

**Amlasol

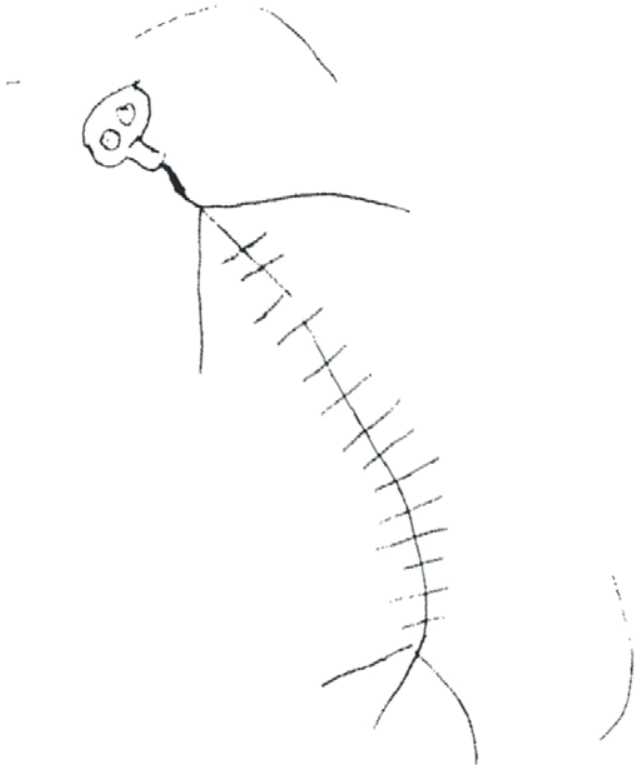
was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2004 five Adivasis starve to death in Amlasol village (see Ghosh, 2004). District – Midnapore. State – West Bengal. Ruling Party – Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M). Fifty-seven years after independence. Sixty-one years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

**Lalgarh
was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2018 seven Adivasis starve to death in Lalgarh (see The Hindu, 2018). District – Midnapore. State – West Bengal. Ruling Party – All India Trinmool Congress. Seventy-one years after independence. Seventy-five years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

**Delhi
was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2018 three children of a family, all aged below 10, starve to death in Mandawali (see Bhardwaj, Johri and Mander, 2018). District – East Delhi. State – Delhi. Ruling Party – Aam Admi Party. Seventy-one years after independence. Seventy-five years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

**Latehar
was is in the news for starvation deaths. In 2020 five-year-old Dalit girl starves to death in Latehar (see Ranjan, 2020). District – Latehar. State – Jharkhand. Ruling Party – Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. Seventy-three years after independence. Seventy-seven years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.

** [ ]
will be in the news for starvation deaths. In [ ] … … … … … … District – [ ]. State – [ ]. Ruling Party – [ ]. [ ] years after independence. [ ] years since the Bengal Famine of 1943.



Living is both denying death and proving it. I wish to shift the register from the dead to the living. For the dead. For the dead has not come to terms with its unnatural death. For the dead remains unequal even in its death. For the dead want a better death for those living. For the agency of the living is in determining the manner of death.

** Varanasi

Varanasi is the parliamentary constituency of Narendra Modi – India's Prime Minister. Modi suddenly announces a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 to 'curb' the spread of the COVID pandemic. During this 21-day lockdown, a news report from his constituency emerges. The report by Vijay Vineet and Manish Mishra in the Jansandesh Times is published on 26 March (see Srivastava, 2020 and Awasthi, 2020). The report claims that members of the Musahar (Dalit) community in Koiripur village in the Prime Minister's constituency are surviving on grass. The report carries a photograph of children eating grass. The report is circulated widely on social media. The Varanasi District Magistrate (DM) Kaushal Raj Sharma sends a show-cause notice to Vijay Vineet (one of the journalists) and Subhash Rai (his editor-in-chief). The notice calls on them to publish a denial of the report. In the notice, District Magistrate claims that the news report is fabricated because he has gotten it investigated by an Additional District Magistrate (ADM) -level officer. He adds that the Dalits are not eating grass but ankari dal (wild pulses) that grow along with wheat in the fields. He circulates a photograph of himself and his son with a bundle of 'ankari grass'. Journalist Vijay Vineet (quoted in Srivastava, 2020) says he will not back down from the story - "I have all the photos and videos related to the report, which I have sent to the DM. The condition of Musahars in Koiripur village has been very poor for the last three to four days. Due to the lockdown they are unable to go anywhere and have no money either."

Insert Image

Insert Image

Both are images of the living – in them, already inscribed, different densities of existence.

Possible to make Famine-images?

There is no singular context that governs engagement with the evidentiary power of images or their limits. My context is very different from that of the journalists I cite above. They are dealing with a District Magistrate who is simply discounting and discrediting the idea of the evidentiary power of images altogether. His strategy is to relativise the images (and, by extension, the truth) to the point that it creates enough doubts. Therefore, I want to be careful in accepting or rejecting the evidentiary power of images entirely. If the District Magistrate's strategy is to discount the evidentiary power of images and the response to that is a further unsettling of the evidentiary power of images. In that case, we have a serious conceptual problem. Images can be partial and fragmentary, but we simply cannot discount the evidentiary power of all images.

This PhD project is at a crucial remove from the urgency and immediacy of important journalistic work but is interested in poetics and politics of responding to the erasure of caste-subaltern narratives through image-making. While I am interested in probing the limits of images and their evidentiary power, I am not arguing for the invalidity of all images. I am making images on hunger and famine, but I want to work with images in a way that takes into consideration the limitations of images. Images, every now and then, can compel the state to intervene by mobilising its evidentiary powers and claims but it is also true that starvation/hunger deaths happen not because there is a lack of images – it happens despite images.

> Faced with the difficulties of representing atrocities like famine, we are confronted with the limits of photography, a machinery that cannot do anything, but represent; a practice that cannot go beyond representation. Therefore, no matter how one photographs the (Sudanese) famine, the single image will always, in some way or another, take something away from the intensity, scope, and complexity of the very atrocities that cause their photographed victims to suffer. In a situation where an atrocity is of such a character that it can never be adequately represented, our desire to represent and our call for representation activates the very atrocity we pretend to vilify, ensuring inaction and thus continuing the atrocity (Guerts, 2015, p.9).

Those images
may or may not come
but refusal from making images
forecloses that imagination

Possible to make?
Images that exceed juxtaposition
Images that exceed evidence
Images that exceed representation

Juxtaposition, evidence and representation –are simultaneously productive and reductive. Something that is productive can't be entirely dismissed, and something that is reductive can't be entirely left unattended. Exceeding is to go beyond, but it is not a denial of what it is exceeding from; the traces of what it is exceeding from can always be found. The precursor to any exceeding is a dissatisfaction, a doubt, or a hesitation.

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Imagine a feast here!

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*

Durga: Can you just eat rice forever? Can you?

(Time elapses)

Durga: Imagine a feast here – Greens...Greens...Greens!!!

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Touch of the Image

To

Durga Bishwokarma
Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 12 April 2022
Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part II
I hope this letter finds you well. I am glad that you could come to the workshop. It was such a joyful experience. I hope you also had a similar experience. I have been devoting a lot of my time to the editing of the film, and I think I am not too far from the film's rough cut. The tentative title for the film is *You deny my living and I defy my death*. Considering the time I spend with images and sound, it feels like either I am touching them, or they are touching me. I know the workshop is over, but I still feel like sharing some ideas and references with you. In some ways, the workshop and the filmed material have made me think about these things. In the absence of the workshop, I am not sure if I would have arrived at these ideas and references in the same way. Again, consider it as my notes, a way to share and rehearse my current thinking on film practices, or should I say, appendix 5.

In the last four-five days, I have been reading about two connected and yet very different propositions – 'caste as a sensorial regime' and 'sensorial turn in ethnography and cinema'. In the very first paragraph of his article *Odor and Order: How Caste Is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria*, Joel Lee (2017, p.470) proposes:

> to understand the tenacious persistence of caste and untouchability in the present we would do well to take a phenomenological turn and inhale deeply. Heeding our senses and our embodied relationship to place, we may exhume meaningfully patterned relations between caste ideology, the organization of space, and the marking of bodies and sensoria by the sensuous content of the environment. Caste functions, among other things, as a spatial-sensory order. It is experienced as an inscription into the environment — indeed, into the chemical and olfactory content of the air we breathe — of the Brahmanical ideological premise that every caste has its own distinctive, hierarchically ranked "place" in the world, and that the places inhabited by subordinate castes should not only be set apart but should look, smell, and feel differently from those of the rest of society.

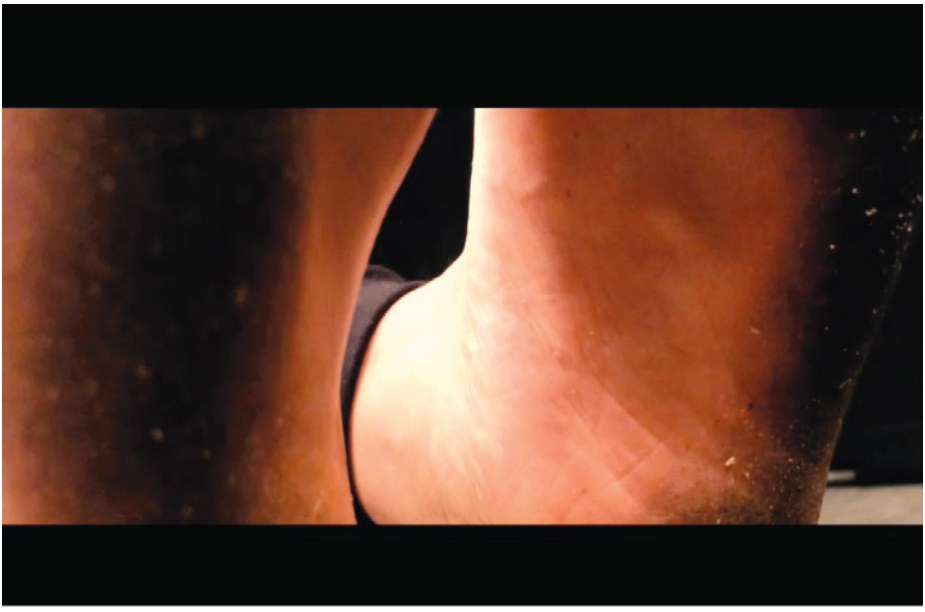
In ethnography and cinema, there is a growing interest in exploring how focusing on, and foregrounding, our multisensorial (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch etc.) perceptions and experiences can pave the way for alternative ways of understanding and engaging with our contexts and surroundings. In her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink (2009, p.1) argues that "multisensoriality is integral both to the lives of people who participate in our research and to how we ethnographers practice our craft". She highlights the importance of smell, taste, touch and vision in ethnographic research. This sensorial turn has, in parts, emerged out of discontent with overreliance on the 'mimetic-representational-verbal' order of

the world. I don't think that the aim is to dismiss it but to establish multisensorial experiences and perceptions at par with it.

Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (quoted in Brody, 2014) describes its mandate as providing "an academic and institutional context for the development of creative work and research that is itself constitutively visual or acoustic — conducted through audiovisual media rather than purely verbal sign systems — and which may thus complement the human sciences' and humanities' traditionally exclusive reliance on the written word". I have watched some of their films, and I find their work quite interesting for their serious engagement with the materiality of the image and sound. I recently watched *Levithian* (2012), a film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel of the SEL. I would highly recommend this film to you as well. Another film that comes to mind is Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries* (1990). Images are not subordinated to words here. You don't get pulled into a narrative arc. You experience the film as opposed to just watching it. You get touched by the film. In film theory, scholars have tried to theorise it and have given different terms – from 'haptic visuality' (Marks, 2007), 'embodied cinema' (Rutherford, 2003), 'tactile eye' (Barker, 2009) to 'corporeal image' (MacDougall, 2005). Although different in their conceptions and manifestations, these terms have a certain common ground. I think they all allude to – an experience beyond mimetic representation, an approach that invests not just in thought but also in the materiality of that thought beyond written or spoken language, and an embodied spectatorship that engages our senses. Laura Mark (2007), in her theorisation of the term, states that haptic visuality takes place when images go beyond the visual representation of experiences and allows the spectator to see film as a physical and multisensorial embodiment of culture. Foregrounding the importance of tactility and textures of images, Burt (2013) describes haptic visuality as "touch response gained when presented closely with the tactile image – one which can be described as a caress". Similarly, David MacDougall (2005) emphasises how the value of visuality and images has been eclipsed by words, especially in our epistemologies. I think what these scholars are arguing is that the film medium has a certain sensorial quality which must be paid attention to and that multisensorial experiences can also be a bedrock of conceptions and understandings of our contexts and surroundings.

This makes me think – if caste operates as a sensorial regime, can we mobilise the film medium's sensory and affective qualities to break the caste's spatial-sensory order? Can we 'pollute' the viewer with an 'impure' touch of the image?

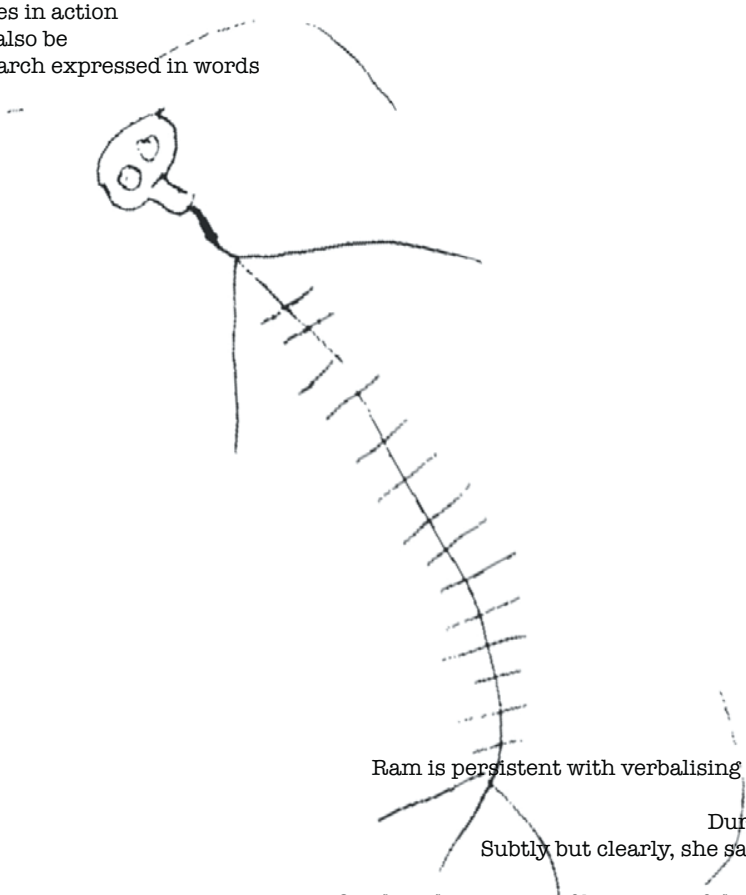
Love,
Ram



Action in the black box

Notes taken by the ghost:

research expressed in words
can also be
bodies in action
can also be
research expressed in words



Ram is persistent with verbalising everything.

Durga is angry.
Subtly but clearly, she says: Enough.

One has the anxiety of letting go of the discursive.
And the other insists on the affective.

They must negotiate
to realise
the futility of this binary.

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Going beyond

To

Durga Bishwokarma
Fredrikstad, Norway

Date: 15 February 2022

Sub: Sharing ideas and references – part III

You will soon be in Gothenburg. Again, consider this letter as a way for me to share my notes on artistic practices, or should I say appendix 4. I am still thinking about what you said the other day over the phone. There is indeed a tendency in some art and cultural institutions and communities to expect people from marginal spaces to talk exclusively about their marginality. A single individual is turned into a totalising category of the whole community to which that person belongs. In other words, one person, or a small group, is made to stand in (represent) for the whole group. Moreover, they are expected to perform critical-radical work on alterity. I sincerely hope we will consciously attempt to be mindful of these tendencies. What you told me the other day also resonates here in Sweden. In the context of Black Lives Matter, a letter titled *Silence is Violence* was circulated by artists and cultural workers. The letter raised several critical points. However, the one that has stayed with me is the following:

> Can a BIPoC artist paint a surrealist still life of onions? Are they treated with the same lens as White artists? Do they have equal rights to opacity, the same breadth of expression and range of subject matter? Do they have equal rights to poetry and play? Do they still have value if they/their works do not clearly function as dis cursive, diasporic, or diversity entities for your institution? If they are not clearly bearers of your benevolence, progressiveness and goodwill?

After reading this, I have been wanting to do an artistic work which will be nothing but a series of paintings on the still lives of onions. If I get bored, I will add tomatoes. Keeping aside this rebellious desire, at the core of this is a sense of frustration with the default imaginary that is assigned and afforded to subalterns. Why can't subalterns once be political and poetic? Why should they not be able to, and have the right to, engage in poetry and play? In the dominant representational regime, subaltern stories and identities are either erased, stereotyped, or misrepresented. In such a scenario, it's critical to react and respond to such representations with better representations. However, if subalterns only react, when will they create? I am aware that this sets up a futile binary, but we can't ignore the need to exist and make work outside of the default settings. Perhaps, we should bypass the supposed impasse of 'representation' and 'crisis of representation', which the field of arts, humanities and social sciences has spent considerable time investigating and deliberating upon (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 2004).

In this regard, I find Manju Edachira's (2020; 2021; 2022) work quite exciting in the sense that she takes examples of films made by Dalit filmmakers such as Pa Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule and M. Selvaraj to show how it's possible to go beyond default imaginations. Invoking Jean Luc Nancy, she differentiates between critical presence and representation (2020, p.52).

> For Nancy (1993: 1–4), "representation is what determines itself by its own limit," whereas presence is to be born, a verb which is always in action, "to find ourselves exposed, to exist." To be born is not used as static but "to transform, transport and entrance all determinations" (Nancy 1993: 2). These directors explore this possibility—to express the unnamable—of bringing into presence a previously absent entity to a sensory reality. In the process, they create affective expressive archives of anti-caste sensibilities, which not only reject stereotypical representation, but also affect the other by producing a generative discourse of "presence."

In her analysis of *Karnan*, a film by M. Selvaraj, she (2021) demonstrates how the film is based on an actual incident but goes beyond 'real' by breaking away from it now and then. There is an intermittent shift away from the social-realist mode and towards an affective-expressive register where feelings, emotions, a sense of embodiment, metaphors, and visual and acoustic sensory experiences are mobilised in the engagement of a historical event. For her, this is more than representation. She (2022) calls it critical presence and argues:

> critical presence is more about challenging the established representational regime, which are essentialising and reductive. In other words, this opens up possibilities of transcending the essentialised identities, not only through "talking back" but also through "talking with" the community. And when it transpires through arts and aesthetics, the possibilities are limitless beyond the default imaginaries.

I appreciate her thinking that she is not dismissive of representation. She acknowledges that critical presence builds upon the critical discourse on representation, but she (2022) also insists on the need to go beyond "the reductive reading of Dalit as a representation alone". She nuances it further by stating that this critical presence or Dalit presentation should not mean or invoke pure presence, as there is no such thing. For her, it is "an act of being present, which does not subsume into the framework of representation."

I would strongly urge you to watch a presentation by Manju Edachira before we meet. Knowing our practices and interests, it will give us much to talk about. Here is the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5RSPlCeXeg In any case, I have collated some excerpts from her article (2020) *Anti-caste Aesthetics and Dalit Interventions in Indian Cinema*. With slight alterations/appropriations, I have tur-ned these collated sentences/arguments into verbs. I know it might read like a manifesto. But I promise you it's not. I have always been slightly sceptical and suspicious of manifestos. However, I must admit I like the idea of turning nouns into verbs.

- (go) against the aesthetic regime of stereotypical representation, through innovative techniques in visuals, sound, music, and cinematography

- argue for an enabling anti-caste aesthetics articulated through an embodied sensibility in films

- bring into presence what was previously impossible through the processes of denunciation (of casteist images) and innovation (of anti-caste aesthetics)

- critique mainstream cinema but also affect the medium itself, through an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic

I guess this is my last letter before we meet. We have plenty to discuss and do.

Much Love,
Ram

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Postscript: This is hard

A script that may or may not be from the film *You deny my living and I defy my death*
—

Durga: Why do we have to represent it as it is?

Durga lies on the floor. Drained and exhausted.

Cut to:

Durga rushes to the balcony of the black box. The iron railings of the balcony have become a prompt to break open the representational realm. But breaking iron rods is not an easy task. She puts her hand between two railings and the hand hangs in the air. Suddenly she starts biting the railings.

Durga: THIS IS HARD.

Cut to:

We hear Ram's voice.

Ram: Was that for malnutrition, starvation, hunger, or famine?

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