

**OF CHAI--PAU'S AND CHANDNI BARS: DESTINY'S CHILDREN IN
FILMS FROM INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Children, if one can indeed generalize them, are the closest to 'nature', and as yet unshaped by culture. Among the first freedoms they enjoy is the freedom from social codes and 'morality', and they are the only humans deemed 'beyond good and evil'. But the ways of the world demand that they be 'civilized', 'socialized' and put under constraints and discipline, or there will be anarchy. The few films I focus on here present a collage of Mumbai's seedy underbelly and marginalized, orphaned children's encounters with 'evil'. Terry Eagleton maps the course of evil as one from substance to nothingness, from being to a sense of non-being or absence, from *Eros* or the drive to life, to *Thanatos*, or the death drive, in psychoanalytical terms.ⁱ But for the street children in these films, and in real life on the streets of India's metropolises, 'evil' is often the only way of asserting *being* in the Cartesian sense, asserting *I am*, for otherwise they are invisible, all too dispensable, otherwise they cease to exist.

Every morality is, as opposed to *laissez aller*, a piece of tyranny against 'nature', likewise against reason....

Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

In India, one's caste origins determine one's degree of 'ritual pollution'ⁱⁱ and subsequent hierarchical status on both the social and moral scale, which in turn denotes economic status or class. The lower one's caste and economic origins, the more, it is believed, is one's susceptibility to 'evil'. A child belonging to a lower caste is believed to be predisposed towards evil, and predestined for it. Such social perceptions make children from disadvantaged backgrounds more vulnerable to crimes against them as well, exposing them to cheating and abuse. Physical abuse compromises the integrity of the body in common

perception, and thereby opens it to infiltration by evil, as it were. Further, since bodily integrity is closely related to moral integrity, they are presumed to be morally depraved, as well. Thus their vulnerability and permeability brands them both as easy prey, and as 'evil'. It is a vicious circle from which there is no escape. For obvious reasons, crimes against such children go mostly unreported and unaddressed, if at all acknowledged as crime. Protectors turn abusers, lawkeepers turn persecutors in many cases, as these films amply illustrate. They are, after all, what Judith Butler calls 'precarious lives'ⁱⁱⁱ. They are unaccounted for, have no records, no documentary proof of existence, orphaned as they are. Hence it does not matter if they are denied rights, benefits, essentials. No one will be held accountable for such omissions.

Bombay, now Mumbai, is one of the financial epicenters of the world, home to multimillionaires and paupers, and also to the Bombay film industry nicknamed Bollywood, which churns out several multigrossers a year. The glitz and glamour of the metropolis belie the stark economic inequalities that form the layers of its social fabric. While a large part of rural India is still in the grasp of the centuries old 'Vedic' caste system, the metropolises, by dint of the sheer density of their populace, have managed to efface caste identities and homogenize people. This levelling, however, comes at a price: the blurring of the lines between good and evil, between right and wrong. In urban spaces where economic disparities run deep and wide, a different kind of politics takes over caste as power structures are built on commerce and the flow of money. 'Evil' in the form of exploitative and abusive practices, myriad injustices, becomes the order of the day. In such a world where children must contend with cut throats, drug cartels, underworld crime, begging mafia to survive on the streets, distinctions between 'good and 'evil' are meaningless just as adhering to them is futile. In the ruthless, relentless race for limited resources with a million contenders, such distinctions cease to operate. The streets operate on a different code from what middle class, bourgeois ethics lay down. Only the fittest survive, and they do not follow the diet of morality. Morality itself, as Nietzsche postulates in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is conditioned and formulated to suit the interests of power structures^{iv}. The films I discuss here present subversive worlds where "evil must be one's good", and the fluid movement between presupposed good and evil provokes a rethinking, a redefining of 'good' and 'evil'.

The lead character of *Salaam Bombay* (Nair, 1988) is Krishna alias Chai--pau, so named after the tea and bread he serves in the sordid dwellings around a station in Mumbai/ Bombay. 'Chai-paus' are everywhere in India; in this country with its teeming population, they are two

a penny. Labour is cheap here as is human life, and child labour is as cheap as dirt. Children work for a pittance in often inhuman conditions, for long hours and low wages that are unregulated (for there are no laws for something that is outside its purview) in sweatshops, in small, often illegal factories, handle dangerous stuff that no adult will, are offered no security or benefits, and are easily dismissed without dues cleared. They can slip in into spaces adults cannot, have agility that adults do not and are hence commonly employed in roadside eateries, hotels, residences, garages, tea stalls, to name a few. Krishna lands here after the opening scene trace his archetypal journey from the suburbs or rural areas to the big city, Bombay, popularized in Hindi films since their inception. The film, though not a Bollywood production, is a bildungsroman, a genre much favoured in Bollywood. Krishna is not a runaway: he had been turned out of his home, abandoned in a circus by his mother who asked him to return only after he has earned five hundred rupees, the price of the motorcycle he had set to fire. He recounts his saga to his friend Chhillum, a drug peddler and addict who he befriends in Mumbai. After Krishna's father died, his brother had turned abusive and Krishna had fought back one day by setting alight a motorcycle that the older boy had borrowed from the garage he worked at.

Named after an incarnation of Lord Vishnu who features in the epic *Mahabharata*, supposed to rid the world of all evils, Krishna is perhaps ironically, perhaps in anticipation, so named. As is the case in three of these films, the audience encounters Krishna as an orphan: unloved, unprotected, uncared for. The most poignant aspect of this saga is Krishna's constant striving to gather enough money just so he can return to his mother. No matter how mature his acts are, his longing for his mother reminds us of the little child within him. His diverse encounters and experiences in Bombay ensures his fall. The princely sum of five hundred rupees, the ransom that will deliver him to his family, gets earned several times over, but never realized. Krishna can no longer get back to Eden, to his mother and his village as he gets sucked into the quagmire of Bombay. Like *Mahabharat's* Krishna who, as a true friend, had preserved Draupadi's honour when all her husbands had failed to, Chai pau tries to comfort the inconsolable Sola Saal, (so named after the young boys decide that she must be sixteen) a young girl trafficked to a brothel in Bombay where Krishna often delivers tea, and even tries to help her escape by setting fire to her bed. But of course, the nexus proves too strong for him as they are caught soon enough (film clip). He finds a mother surrogate in Rekha, a prostitute who enjoys her own living quarters, for she has a child with the pimp and drug peddler Baba. Her daughter Manju finds a playmate in Chai pau, and often joins him and a gang of boys in their weird odd jobs, not to make money, but to while away the time that her mother spends with her clients, sending her away. Manju's

plight is also precarious: she suffers neglect and abuse by her father Baba, is often cast out of her mother's room and has to spend some nights on the street with Chai pau. She even accompanies the older boys when they skin chicken at a slaughterhouse for a measly sum. Apart from Chhillum, the drug addict, Chai pau's on and off companions are this gang of boys who resort to juvenile crime to earn some easy money. What they do with this money, again, reveal the child within them. After robbing a kindly old man's house and tying him up, they flee with the booty. The next scene shows them enjoying a joyride on a *tonga* or horse--drawn carriage, wearing film costumes they have borrowed or lifted from somewhere, drinking something spurious and Chaipau throwing up (film clip).

Evil in some degree or the other, hounds Krishna wherever he goes. Right from the circus owner who deliberately sends him off on a wild goose chase just as the circus is leaving the town, so as to cheat him of his rightful pay, the man at the station ticket counter who does not hand him the balance money after giving him a ticket to Bombay, Chhillum who befriends him to sponge off him from time to time, the tea stall owner who meticulously keeps deducting sums from his pay for some petty reason or the other, to the letter writer who pockets Chai pau's money but throws away the letter he is supposed to write and send to Krishna's mother, Krishna/ Chai pau is constantly cheated by fraudsters. The police who catch him and Manju as they are returning after serving food at a party (the other boys run off) snatch the little money they had earned, take them to be thieves when they find pieces of 'samosas', fried nuggets tucked in Chai pau's shirt and put him in the 'chiller room' or juvenile home, and Manju in a shelter for smaller children. Manju goes quiet and does not talk anymore, even when her mother Rekha comes to see her. Krishna finds a rare opportunity to escape and returns to his haunt to find his money gone. The trafficked girl he liked, Sola Saal, duped and violated by Baba and the brothel Madame, shuns him now. His friend Chhillum, cut off from his supply of drugs, had died earlier despite his many efforts to save him, and he finds another rookie addict recruited by Baba to take over Chhillum's role. As he goes in search of Manju to Rekha's quarters, he finds Rekha, who had been denied her daughter's custody, trying to leave and Baba blocking her way. In a split second, Chai pau/ Krishna has stabbed Baba and rescued Rekha, avenged Chhillum's death, Sola Saal's violation, Manju's plight (film clip). As Rekha and Krishna go off into the streets, they are lost in a procession of worshippers of Lord Ganesh, the elephant god Mumbai so reveres, and Krishna gets separated from Rekha for ever. His last shred of hope of returning home sinks with the money gone, and with Rekha lost, there is no one to mother him anymore.

In *Chandni Bar* (Bhandarkar, 2001), Mumtaz, (an adopted name), is brought to Mumbai from a riot--torn northern state as a teenager by an uncle or older acquaintance. Her uncle soon starts living off her earnings, having compelled her to work as a dancer in a seedy bar, and even rapes her one night. If the riots were not enough brush with evil, (Bhandarkar does not dwell on this) Mumbai's nightlife acquaints her well with it. Mumtaz's subsequent marriage to a gangster, (marriage being a distant dream for most bar--dancers), life of relative comfort and respectability, however, does not quite relieve her of the 'bar dancer' tag. Her husband dies soon after in gang wars, leaving her in debt and her reputation catches up to her. Left without a protector, indecent proposals come her way, but she returns to 'bar-dancing' to support her children (film clip).

Despite all her efforts to educate her children and groom them for a life of 'dignity', of a 'bara aadmi', her children are not absolved of the shadow of Chandni bar. Her teenage son Abhay gets nabbed by the police, mistaken for an extortionist, for no reason but that he hung out with the wrong guys. His identity as the son of a criminal and a bar dancer convicts him before he has committed any crime. He is cast into a juvenile home, where he gets assaulted and sodomized. As Mumtaz prostitutes herself after all these years of holding out, to raise money for Abhay's release on bail, Mumtaz's adolescent daughter takes up dancing at Chandni Bar in a bid to save both her mother and her brother. As things turn out, their sacrifices go in vain.

Chandni Bar has subsumed all of them in its vicious underbelly. When the boy is finally released, he is no longer the teenager he was. His eyes have hardened, he has experienced evil, and he initiates himself to a life of crime by murdering his abusers (film clip).

In Bhandarkar's *Traffic Signal* (2007), among the myriad people making their living off a busy traffic signal are children, who beg or sell flowers, or pick rags, only to give away half their earnings to the begging mafia. These mafia cash in on 'horrorism' to use Adriana Cavarero's term^v: maimed or crippled children make lucrative trade. A young man barely out of his teens, named Silsila after a popular film his father liked, is the manager and revenue collector of a busy traffic signal in Mumbai. The area around the signal is home to several marginalized people, from transvestites, drug addicts, prostitutes, swindlers to cripples who work together with traffic police and chauffers plying on the route to slow down the traffic and promote begging, selling of discrete wares such as fresh flowers, rotten fruits, and colourful clothes. The stop is a money churning, and the profits are reaped by the underworld and corrupt politicians. The brisk business comes to a stop, however, when a builders' lobby pushes for the extension of a flyover to be constructed near it, which would

encourage sale of a cluster of high--end flats. Politicians and mafia get to work and Silsila and his friends, who despite their spurious means of living, never indulged in 'evil' per se, become unwitting pawns in the conspiracy to murder an honest civil engineer who was refusing to sanction the extension of the flyover (film clip). When Silsila realizes the role he has played in the murder, he testifies to bring the culprits to book, and surrenders himself to the police, as well.

A similar traffic is portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2009) where the 'three musketeers' Jamaal, Saleem and Latika land up in the net of a Fagin--like villain Maman after losing their mothers to riots in Mumbai, themselves escaping murderous rioters by a hairbreadth (film clip). There are several children being exploited for various ends in Maman's den, some even maimed and crippled to fetch good revenue as beggars. Jamaal barely escapes being blinded by Maman to turn him into a beggar, unlike Arvind, another child who Saleem witnesses being ruthlessly blinded. Saleem is portrayed as a jealous sibling, often mean to Jamaal. He also has a propensity for crime, unlike Jamaal. Yet it is this quality that saves him from Maman, for his gang wants to utilize him as a 'dog' minding the sheep, i.e. the other meek children. His reckless daredevilry rescues Jamaal, they escape again on a train (another Bollywood staple) taking Latika along at Jamaal's insistence, but Saleem deliberately lets go of Latika's hand as she struggles to catch up (film clip). In this world of cutthroats, 'goodness', meekness is a weakness of the foolish, it carries one to annihilation. While some children retain their conscience and innate innocence even as they reach adulthood, for some, like Saleem, the fall is complete. Within a few years, they indulge in crime not out of compulsion but purposelessly; their pursuits become nihilistic, and a tendency develops into a destiny of evil, hastening their end.

Slumdog Millionaire, titled as a paradox, based on the novel 'Q & A' by Vikas Swarup, which sets off from the one of the notoriously sordid slums of Mumbai, Dharavi, is structured like a fairy tale set in contemporary times. The film is guilty of pandering to international prejudices about India and has been accused of showcasing poverty, but the networks of evil are real, just as the children are real. The slop and the slime from which the child Jamaal emerges, and rises up through life, miraculously unscathed by evil himself, but witnessing much, is Dickensian. He, too, works as a 'chaiwallah' (gets taunted for being so, even, by the skeptical game show host, where his sharp sense and chequered life propels him to the 'hotseat'). The many demons he must grapple with include the game--show host representing the rich, smug, condescending classes who presume he is a trickster, so much so that he suffers brutal interrogation by the police behind the scenes even as the game is

still on, the underworld don whose girlfriend his childhood sweetheart Latika is, and even his brother Saleem who has crossed over long back and works for the underworld don now, and will keep Jamaal away from Latika at any cost. He finally wins the jackpot as well as his Latika, making way for a (perhaps) 'happily--ever--after' fitting the formula of a typical Bollywood commercial film of the '70s and '80s.

The underdog whose heart of gold remains untarnished despite the murky evil that surrounds him is the darling of the movie--going public. While Jamaal enjoys the sympathy of the audience throughout, Saleem, the survivor/ savior who had unflinchingly embraced crime, gets slammed and pulls the trigger on himself after murdering Javed, the underworld don he worked for. Bildungsroman as they are, the films present the children's rather rapid, freewheeling journey not only from innocence to experience, but sharp crossovers, triggered by an encounter with extreme evil, marked by a climactic act of murder which doubles up as a sort of initiation rite. Chai--pau murders Baba, Silsila facilitates the capture and indictment of a mafia kingpin, Abhay murders the serial abuser who has murdered his innocence and his future, Saleem startsoff his journey on the path of crime by shooting Maman at point blank range. In *Kaliyug*, or modern times, in the time of the demon 'Kali' as the Hindu myth goes, Lord Vishnu will arrive to slay demons and end evil on earth again, in unexpected, unlikely avatars: the nemeses of evil incarnates like Baba and Maman come in the form of street children like Krishna, Abhay, Silsila, Saleem, Jamaal.

Notes

ⁱEagleton, Terry. *On Evil*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012. Print.

ⁱⁱ "Ritual pollution" is a staple of Hindu caste system and pervades many customs and social practices in India. Apart from my own understanding of cultural practices, I have drawn from Mary Douglas' observations of 'ritual pollution' in India in *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002,) and Susan Bayly's *Caste, Society and Politics in India: From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) for this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Print.

^{iv} Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.

^v Cavarero, Adriana. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Print

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Chandni Bar. Dir. Madhur Bhandarkar. Perf. Tabu, Atul Kulkarni, Rajpal Yadav. Shlok Films, 2001. Film.

Traffic Signal. Dir. Madhur Bhandarkar. Perf. Kunal Khemu, Konkona Sen Sharma, Neetu Chandra, Ranvir Shorey, Upendra Limaye. Percept Pictures Company, 2007. Film.

Slumdog Millionaire. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Dev Patel, Freida Pinto, Madhur Mittal, Ayush Mahesh Khedekar, Tanay Chheda, Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail, Rubina Ali, Anil Kapoor, Irrfan Khan. Pathe Films, 2009. Film.

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