A People's Entertainments

We have to see that our pictures are spun into the web of national life, that they sculpt and reflect the real India.

V. Shantaram, film director, 1940

There is no Pakistan in Indian music at least.

D. P. Mukerji, sociologist, 1945

I

The chapters of this book have explored the labours and struggles of the citizens of free India. But how have they *entertained* themselves? What do Indians do when they are not working or fighting or raising a family?

The short answer to this question is: most of them go to the movies. Feature films are the great popular passion of India, cutting across the social divides featured so heavily in this book – the divides of caste, class, region, religion, gender and language.

It was in the last week of 1895 that the Lumière brothers launched the first Cinématograph in Paris. Soon, intrepid Indian photographers were shooting and showing films on such topics as *Poona Races '98* and *Train Arriving at Bombay Station*. The first Indian feature was made in 1913 by a printer named Dadasaheb Phalke, who was inspired by a pictorial life of Jesus to film the life of a legendary prince, Raja Harishchandra. Eighteen years later the first Indian sound feature appeared, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*.

During the 1920s and 1930s Indian films had to compete with pictures made in Europe and North America. But after the end of the Second World War the number of films made in India dramatically increased. In 1945, 99 feature films were produced; two years later, by the time of Independence, the number had jumped to 250, two-thirds of these made by first-time venture capitalists.[1]

Some early films took up devotional or romantic themes; others were influenced by the social and political currents of the time. A 1930s classic, *Achhut Kanya*, was about the love of a Brahmin man for an Untouchable girl.

The movies of the inter-war period were redolent with patriotic imagery, the love for the nation-in-the-making manifest in their dialogue and songs. While film directors and actors were influenced by the national movement, the latter was supremely indifferent to them. The producer of *Achhut Kanya* was unable to get that lifelong crusader against Untouchability, Mahatma Gandhi, to watch his film. (Apparently the only film Gandhi saw – and even that not to its end – was a mythological story titled *Ram Rajya*.)[2] Nor is there any record of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel or many other early leaders visiting cinema theatres.

Where some nationalists ignored the movies, others more actively proselytized against them. There was always a puritanical streak in the Indian freedom movement, which was repelled by the

colourful costumes, the love stories and the song-and-dance routines of the popular film. After Independence some puritans assumed high office, from where they spoke out against an industry they did not like. In September 1950 the chief minister of Rajasthan rued the 'baneful influence' of motion pictures, while admitting that he had seen only one film himself. Three years later the chief minister of Madras complained that the focus of films on sex and murder was corrupting India's youth. He urged film-makers to 'reduce the sex appeal in pictures', and think instead of 'the production of Puranic [religious] pictures in colour'. 'How can we progress in other matters if every young man is thinking of this [sex] stuff all the time?' he complained. He especially 'asked the poor wage-earners not to see cinemas, not because he disliked the cinema trade, but because he felt that they could find better use for the money. The rich could afford to go to pictures and ruin themselves.'[3]

In truth, such sentiments were not restricted to the political class. In December 1952 a committee appointed by the Syndicate of the Calcutta University found that a major reason for the high failure-rate in examinations was that students spent too much time at the movies.[4] Two years later a petition was sent to the prime minister claiming that films threatened 'the moral health of the country'; apparently, they were 'a major factor in incitement to crime and general unsettlement of society'.[5] The petition was signed by 13,000 housewives, whose cause was taken up in Parliament by Lilavati Munshi, herself the wife of a well-known puritan politician named K. M. Munshi. Speaking in the Rajya Sabha in November 1954, Mrs Munshi argued that 'the cinema can make or mar the whole generation and the entire nation'. She thought the latter more likely, since (in her view) the celebration of crime and sex was encouraging young Indians to repeat these acts in real life. She was especially worried about 'the showing of the flesh of girls in an unseemly way to excite the crowds'. She was answered in the House by the great actor Prithviraj Kapoor, who insisted that in a free society art could not be throttled. From the artist's point of view, he added, 'sunshine and shadow went hand in hand'.[6]

To counter these objections a Censor Board was constituted, which saw every film before granting it an approval certificate. Scenes that were sexually suggestive were prohibited, while films with scenes of violence were granted an 'adults-only' certificate. Withal, the industry grew at a terrific pace after Independence. By 1961 there were more than 300 films made annually, these shown in 4,500 theatres spread across the country. By 1990 the number of cinemas had doubled and the number of films made more than tripled.

By the 1950s the city of Bombay had become the acknowledged centre of the Indian film industry. The most popular films were in Hindi, a language understood across much of the country, but there were also thriving industries in the other languages. In 1992, for example, while 189 films were made in Hindi, nearly as many (180) were made in Tamil, 153 in Telugu, 92 in Kannada, 90 in Malayalam, 42 in Bengali and 25 in Marathi.[7]

By 1980 India had surpassed the United States as the country that made the most films in the world. Film going in India was now unarguably the most popular form of entertainment ever devised. In 1997, the fiftieth year of Independence, it was estimated that the daily cinema audience in India was12 million – more than the population of many member-states of the United Nations.

The growth of the film industry has had a noticeable impact on the physical landscape of urban India. Cinema halls dominate smaller town centres; in larger metropolises they are strung across the city locality by locality. Even more ubiquitous are the film posters, exhibited in vivid colours and various sizes, some small enough to be stuck on the side of a wayside shop, others gigantic billboards that tower above the road. Some 70,000 posters are printed for a big-budget film; pasted wherever a blank wall presents itself, these stay on in their faded glory well after the film itself has passed into

history.[8]

II

> The ingredients of the average Hindi film are well known; colour (Eastman preferred); songs (six or seven) in voices one knows and trusts; dance – solo and ensemble – the more frenzied the better; bad girl, good girl, bad guy, goody guy, romance (but no kisses); tears, guffaws, fights, chases, melodrama; characters who exist in a social vacuum; dwellings which do not exist outside the studio floor; [exotic] locations in Kulu, Manali, Ooty, Kashmir, London, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo . . . See any three Hindi films, and two will have all the ingredients listed above.[9]

So wrote the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Ray's own films had no dances and few songs. He took his viewers into the homes his characters lived in, showing the clothes they wore and the food they ate. The lives his protagonists led were utterly and compellingly real. Still, while his films have their (undeniably elevated) place, the popular Indian film has its place, too. Ray might dismiss this as a 'synthetic, non-existent society', a 'make-believe world'. But it was precisely because the world they depicted was unreal that these films appealed. And those who made the most popular movies knew as much. A successful film director of the 1970s, Manmohan Desai, said of his work that 'I want people to forget their misery. I want to take them into a dream world where there is no poverty, where there are no beggars, where fate is kind and God is busy looking after hisflock.'[10]

Peasants and workers in independent India went to the movies for the same reason as, back in the nineteenth century, a newly literate working class in Britain chose to read stories of the rich and the famous. As a character in a George Gissing novel remarks, 'nothing can induce workingmen and women to read stories that treat of their own world. They are the most consummate idealists in creation, especially the women . . . The working classes detest anything that tries to represent their daily life.'[11] Only farce and melodrama, wrote Gissing, went down well with the British working classes. Such is also the case in India where, however, farce and melodrama have been suitably indigenized. Some recurrent themes make less sense outside the Indian context – a son's devotion to his mother, for example, or a mother-in-law's contentious relationship with her daughter-in-law, or the difficulties(and glories) of choosing one's life partner in defiance of caste and family custom. Again, in the Indian film the 'bad guy' and the 'bad girl' play more central roles than in the typical Hollywood melodrama – these are the villain and the vamp, malevolent characters in opposition to whom the hero and heroine appear purer than one would have thought humanly possible.[12]

A celebrated film director once described his productions as 'pageants for peasants'.[13] These pageants, naturally, were set in locations the peasants could only dream of. Sometimes this was a mythic past, where men flew on horses and conversed with gods; at other times, in places on earth that the viewers would never get to. Indian films were – and are – shot on the French Riviera, in the Swiss Alps, on the South African coast, with its characters wearing clothes not worn in India and driving cars never seen there. This was a 'wholly voyeuristic cinema, where the object of desire could be anything from Dutch tulips to fancy telephone instruments', and through which the viewer 'lived at second hand a lifestyle lived Elsewhere'.[14]

Where the Indian film rises above stock themes and stereotypes, and becomes truly original, is in its music. Traditional Indian plays and dramas all had songs of one sort or another. This method was

carried over to the cinema, where each film includes about half a dozen songs, sung off screen by a voice not the actor's, who merely lip-synchs the sung words.

In a historic accident, or perhaps an accident made possible only by history, these songs of love and despair came to be written by some of the finest poets of the age. At the time of Independence, and for perhaps a century before that, the pre-eminent language of poetry was Urdu. Before and after Partition, many Muslim writers – and not a few Hindus – found refuge in the Bombay film industry. Their *noms de plume* – Sultanpuri, Jaipuri, Ludhianvi, Azmi, Badayuni, Bhopali – evoked the towns of north India where Urdu had flowered, as a syncretic language spoken with an exquisite refinement by Muslims and Hindus alike.

One reason that film songs were so popular was because of their lyrics. These were delicately worded, rich in puns and historical or political allusion. And they were set to music that was no less appealing. The melodies drew from classical music and folk songs, but their orchestration also borrowed heavily - and for the most part, innovatively – from Western exemplars. The sitar and the tabla mixed more or less harmoniously with the saxophone and violin. 'Long before fusion music became fashionable', wrote one student of the subject, 'it was being performed every day in Bombay's film studios.' This was a heady brew which mixed folk melodies from the Gangesdelta with 'slivers of Dixieland stomp, Portuguese fados, Ellingtonesque doodles . . .', the whole set to the strict structure of a classical Hindustani *raga*.[15]

Traditionalists dismissed the film song as 'a degraded – even degenerate – form of Indian classical or folk genres'. But, as Ashraf Aziz points out, this was neither folk nor classical, but 'a new genre of song obligatorily created for the cinematic narrative'. It was 'a new synthesis resulting in an entirely new form of music'.[16] A form, one might add, that was more widely and intensely loved than its predecessors. For, as a great classical vocalist once complained, the songs of the films were 'on the tongues of high society ladies of Calcutta as well as the tongawallahs of Peshawar'.[17]

Indian audiences, writes the film historian Nasreen Munni Kabir, are 'resigned to stock characters and predictable dialogue'. But they know, and hope, that these 'tired old stories' can yet 'be brought back to life by good-looking stars and six or eight great songs'. These audiences 'can accept repetition in storylines', but 'they will reject a film's music if it has no originality'.[18]

III

From the 1940s to the 1980s films were watched by two kinds of Indians -young men in all-male groups, and families. An anthropologist working in northern India found that 'many unmarried men are intensive users of film culture'. They liked films in themselves, for the entertainment they provided and for offering them an escape from the trials of family living. The theatre was a place where they could smoke cigarettes (prohibited at home), and joke and play around with their friends. Although young women rarely went to the movies, older men sometimes took along their wives and parents. The two groups tended to prefer different kinds of films. Young men liked those with 'unrestrained dance and fight scenes', whereas mixed groups chose to watch films depicting the joys and troubles of family life.[19]

The passion for films was even more intense in south India. Here, male moviegoers had constituted themselves into fan clubs, each devoted to celebrating a particular male star. The town of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, for example, had as many as 500 such clubs, whose members were mostly in their late teens or early twenties. They included tailors, rickshaw pullers, vegetable sellers and

students. The club's activities were aimed at promoting their star, by pasting posters of his films, buying tickets to watch them and generally singing his praises in public and in private. Occasionally, the club's activities took amore philanthropic turn, by donating blood in the hero's name or raising money for disaster relief.[20]

In earlier chapters we have met M. G. Ramachandran of Tamil Nadu and N. T. Rama Rao of Andhra Pradesh, movie stars who became chief ministers of their state on the strength of their acting career alone. As adored in his native heath was the Kannada film actor Rajkumar, although he did not seek to convert this adoration into political advantage. In all cases, the veneration was a consequence of the fact that, in this part of India, film was a prime vehicle for the articulation of linguistic nationalism. The people of the south saw their languages under threat from Hindi; mobilizing to protect it, they sought hope and support from the actors who spoke most eloquently their own beloved tongue. In their films, these stars enacted the essential themes of human existence – life and death, romance and betrayal, prosperity and misery – and did so in phrases and idioms drawn from the rhythms and cadences of everyday speech. Literally as well as metaphorically, NTR and his fans, MGR and his fans, and Rajkumar and his fans *spoke the same language*.

In the Hindi heartland, the love of films was not so closely tied in with one's social identity. (As it was spoken by more Indians than any other language, Hindi was scarcely seen as being under threat.) Still, because their catchment was bigger, the Hindi stars could command a wider – though not necessarily deeper – appreciation. Arguably the most popular film star of all time is the Hindi actor Amitabh Bachchan. (I speak here not merely of India but of the world as a whole – Bachchan was voted as such in an online poll conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 2001.)

Born in 1942, the son of a famous Hindi poet of Allahabad, Amitabh Bachchan joined films after a stint in the corporate world. He was very tall and fairly dark, in both respects at odds with the popular heroes who preceded him. These handicaps were soon overcome by his imperious manner and his magnificent deep voice. Bachchan rose to stardom in the early 1970s – a time of great cynicism with regard to the political system, which was being challenged by such extra-parliamentary forces as the Naxalites and Jayaprakash Narayan's Bihar movement. His roles were in keeping with the times. He played the angry young man, pitted against but always overcoming the system – as a militant worker against unfeeling capitalists, an honest police officer against corrupt superiors, even as an underworld don whose wicked manner hid (not very successfully) a golden heart.[21]

In 1982 Bachchan was hospitalized after an accident suffered on the set. Millions prayed, successfully, for his recovery. Three years later he became a Congress MP from Allahabad, at the invitation of his childhood friend Rajiv Gandhi. 'Who will replace the angry young man?' asked the popular press plaintively.[22] Fortunately, he and Rajiv Gandhi then fell out, with Bachchan leaving Parliament to return to the screen. As he has grown older, his roles have changed. He is astonishingly versatile – in his sixties, he can play the stern father as well as the quirky policeman (as in *Bunty and Babli*, 2005). In the first years of the new millennium he took on his most popular role yet, as the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? The show was spectacularly successful, in part because it was in tune with the get-rich-quick temperament of post-liberalization India, but also because of the fame and personality of the host. Bachchan was brilliant – by turns gentle and sharp, and superbly bilingual, his improvisations worthy of his father, a Hindi poet who was also a professor of English literature.

A sixtieth-birthday tribute to Bachchan spoke of how his career had 'traversed emotions and generations'.[23] Perhaps the only other figure to have done that successfully is the singer Lata Mangeshkar. She too had a gifted father, the singer, actor and composer Dinanath Mangeshkar. He

diedin 1942, when Lata was only thirteen but having spent the better part of her life learning music from her father. As the eldest of five siblings, Lata very quickly became the family's main breadwinner. She sang at first in Marathi films, but soon moved to the more popular and better-paying Hindi arena.

Lata Mangeshkar's first song as a playback singer was recorded in 1947. By the end of the decade she had become the best-known singer in India. As well as the most sought-after, for no producer or director could think of a film without a song by her. In a career spanning five decades she has recorded more than 5,000 songs.[24]

Before Lata Mangeshkar, most women singers in films possessed husky voices. Lata's veered towards the higher end of the scale. Shrill to some, her singing was to others the very embodiment of soft femininity. It soon became the best-known voice in India, the 'voice to which the road-side vendor in Delhi has transacted his business, the long-distance trucker has sped along the highway, the Army *jawan* in Ladakh has kept guard at his frontier bunker and to which the glittering elite have dined in luxury hotels'.[25] Her appeal cut across both class and political orientation. The nationalist Jawaharlal Nehru was an admirer, not least because Lata made famous asong ('Ae Méré Vatan Ké Logon') saluting the martyrs who had fallen victim to the Chinese invasion in 1962. But so, much later, was the chauvinist Bal Thackeray, who upheld the little lady as a splendid exemplar of Marathi womanhood.

IV

One feature of the film industry has been its capacious cosmopolitanism. Parsi and Jewish actors have rubbed shoulders with Hindus and Muslims and Christians. Some of the greatest film directors have been from Bengal or south India.

A very representative example is one of the most successful films ever made, *Sholay* (1975). Its director was a Sindhi, while its lyricist and one male lead were Punjabi. Other male leads were from Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and North-West Frontier Province respectively. (Another, who was dropped at the last moment, was from Sikkim.) Of the two female leads, one was a Tamil, the other a Bengali domiciled in Madhya Pradesh. The music director was a Bengali – from Tripura.[26]

It was not just in Bombay that the film industry was socially inclusive. In the Madras studios of the Tamil director S. S. Vasan the 'make-up department was first headed by a Bengali who became too big for a studio and then left. He was succeeded by a Maharashtrian who was assisted by a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo-Burmese and the usual local Tamils.' As one of Vasan's scriptwriters was to recall, 'this gang of nationally integrated make-up men could turn any decent-looking person into a hideous crimson-hued monster with the help of truck-loads of pancake and a number of other locally made potions and lotions.'[27]

Above all, the film industry provided generous refuge for India's largest and often very vulnerable minority, the Muslims. Many of the best lyricists, as already noted, were Muslim; so were some popular scriptwriters. Some of the best male singers were Muslim. So too were some top directors and, even more strikingly, some top actors. When, shortly after India's first general election, a Bombay magazine asked its readers to choose their favourite actor, a Muslim man polled the most votes, a Muslim woman the second most.[28] Interestingly, both had assumed non-Muslim names – Yusuf Khan becoming the Hindu-sounding Dilip Kumar and Fatima Rashid taking the neutral pseudonym Nargis (after the Narcissus flower). As Muslim actors and actresses became more

established, they no longer needed to resort to such subterfuge. A great star of the 1950s and 1960s was the actress Waheeda Rahman. Much later, in the 1990s, the top male stars in Hindi films were three Muslims with a common surname, Khan.

The novelist Mukul Kesavan writes of his Delhi childhood that in his school and home he never came across a Muslim name. Then he adds, 'The only place you were sure of meeting Muslims was the movies.'[29] Notably, the content of the movies also reflected their presence and contribution. Because so many scriptwriters and lyricists were Muslim, the language of the Bombay film – spoken or sung – was quite dissimilar to the stiff, formal, Sanskritized Hindi promoted by the state in independent India. Rather, it was closer to the colloquial Hindustani that these writers spoke, a language suffused with Urdu words and widely understood across the Indian heartland.[30] Again, while most films featured Muslim characters, these were 'rarely shown in an unfavourable light. They were honest friends, loyal soldiers, good policemen, bluff Pathans, friendly uncles.'[31] There remained one significant taboo – against romantic relationships between Hindus and Muslims. This taboo was partially breached by the 1995 hit film *Bombay*, which showed a Hindu boy falling in love with a Muslim girl. However, the reverse was not conceivable: no film could go so much against the grain as to show a Muslim man marrying a Hindu girl.

In the world of Indian film Muslims have occupied an honourable place. The leading Malayalam film actor Maamooty remarks that 'I have been in this business for the last two decades and a half and I don't remember even a single occasion in which my Muslim identity stood in my way.'[32] Would that we could say the same about other spheres of life in independent India.

V

For 'an Indian world full of strife, tension and misery', writes one critic, the popular film provided 'just the right escapism the country needed'.[33] While most films took their viewers into a fantasy world, there was also a significant strain of realism. In the first years of Independence, three filmmakers in particular (partially) bucked the populist trend. These were Bimal Roy, whose *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) sensitively portrayed the sufferings of the rural poor; Mehboob Khan, whose *Mother India* (1957) interwove the story of a heroic mother with the story of a new nation coming into its own; and Guru Dutt, who in a series of remarkable films explored the darker side of life, as experienced especially by artists shunned by a crassly materialistic society.

The pre-eminent representative of an 'alternative' tradition of film making in India, however, was the Bengali giant Satyajit Ray (1921–92). The son and grandson of writers, Ray himself was very variously gifted. An accomplished short-story writer in Bengali, he was knowledgeable about classical music (Western and Indian), and for many years made a living as an artist and designer. His debut film, *Pather Panchali*, released in 1955, was the first of a trilogy that followed a boy named Apu from childhood into manhood, in the process delineating, with great sensitivity and skill, social changes in the Bengal countryside. Over the next three decades he made virtually a film a year, these with one exception all set in Bengal. Several were based on novels by Rabindranath Tagore, by whose scepticism regarding nationalism and aesthetic sensibility Ray was deeply influenced. He received an Oscar for 'lifetime achievement' in 1992; in the same year, he was awarded India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna.

Ray's films dealt with an astonishing range of subjects. *Jalsaghar* (1958) was a paean to music, *Mahanagar* (1963) a portrait of his own city, Calcutta; *Nayak* (1966) an exploration of an actor, his

art and his constituency; *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970) a juxtaposition of the worlds of the urban middle class and the forest-dwelling tribal. Other films deal with politics without being 'political'; one was set during the Swadeshi movement of 1905–6, another at the time of the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s. He made some marvellous children's films, based on stories written by his grandfather, as well as several detective films based on his own novels. In his films women play strong and often pivotal roles; they are intelligent, artistically gifted and, above all, independent.[34]

Satyajit Ray was an iconic figure in his native Bengal, his films discussed in newspapers and magazines and in trains and buses as well. He was also greatly admired abroad; his films were regularly shown at Cannes and other festivals and his work was handsomely praised by Akira Kurosawa and other peers. Within India, however, he could attract criticism, as when the actress Nargis alleged in Parliament that he show cased Indian poverty to attract attention in the West. The charge was petty, not to say petulant; it was probably provoked by Ray's own less-than-flattering remarks about the Hindi film.

Among Ray's distinguished contemporaries were two fellow Bengalis – Ritwik Ghatak (1925–76) and Mrinal Sen (born 1923). Both were influenced by the state's communist movement, and their films were often sharply political, dealing with such themes as peasant protest, Partition and the great Bengal Famine of 1943. The leading radical film makers of the next generation were Shyam Benegal (born 1934) and A door Gopalakrishnan (born 1941), whose movies foregrounded such issues as the reform of the caste system and the prudery and hypocrisy of the Indian middle class.[35]

Known sometimes as 'art cinema' and at other times as 'parallel cinema', the movies made by Ray, Ghatak, Benegal and company had a subtlety of method and an attention to social realism that distinguished them from the escapist fantasies of the formulaic Bombay film. Although few art films were successful at the box office, they were acclaimed by critics, and won a galaxy of prizes at film festivals. And they often had a long after-life, circulating and being shown at film clubs – often run by college students – in the major cities of India and abroad.

VI

Outside of the cinema, Indians have also taken succour in various forms of 'live' entertainment. One such is theatre. The subcontinent was home to a rich tradition of classical Sanskrit drama; besides, each region had its own form of folk theatre, where dialogue was usually interspersed With song and dance. Known as *jatra* in Bengal, *natya* in Maharashtra, and *Yakshagana* in Karnataka, these folk forms skilfully adapted to the modern world. The costumes remained traditional, but the themes of the plays now squarely addressed the debates of the time – whether women's liberation, the reform of caste or the conflict between economic development and environmental sustainability.

The creation of linguistic states gave a fresh fillip to regional theatre. They now had a 'captive' audience, so to speak, thirty or forty million speakers of the language in which the plays were performed. New groups and movements took shape, working within the ambit of the linguistic state but with an eye open to the wider world.

Among these groups was Ninasam, established in 1949 by an areca nut farmer named K. V. Subanna in his native village in north Karnataka. Subanna studied at the University of Mysore, where he was inspired by his teacher, the poet Kuvempu (K. V. Puttappa), to combine a life of farming with that of artistic creation. On returning home to Heggodu, he first started a theatre group, followed, in time, by a newspaper, a publishing house, a film club, a drama school and a full-fledged repertory

company.

Fifty years after it started, Ninasam is thriving, run now by Subanna's son K. V. Akshara, himself a graduate of the National School of Drama and of Leeds University. Ninasam organizes 'culture camps' in which peasants and artisans interact with distinguished scholars from all over the world. But their main activity remains the theatre. Ninasam runs a full-fledged drama school, many of whose graduates then join their travelling repertory.

Every year, during the annual culture camp in Heggodu, three plays are premiered at an auditorium named for the Kannada writer and polymath Shivarama Karanth. The playsare all performed in the local language; one is usually an *original* Kannada play, the second a translation of a play written in another Indian language, the third a translation of a classic Western work. Thus, on successive days, the village audience might see plays by, for example, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh and Anton Chekhov. These treats are not restricted to Heggodu; after being premiered there, the plays are thentaken by the Ninasam repertory to different towns and villages in the state.[36]

In an average year the repertory performs around 150 plays before audiences totalling some 300,000 people, the bulk of which are rural and small-town folk. And 'so you found farmers who grew areca, rice and sugarcane in daytime turn themselves into connoisseurs of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière and Ibsen at night'.[37]

Another innovator who has successfully blended folk with classical forms is the director Habib Tanvir. A product of the radical Indian People's Theatre Association of the 1940s, Tanvir later studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London before returning home to his native Chattisgarh. There he worked with local singers and actors to create a series of superb plays in which song and dance were used to satirize the petty corruptions of the village elite and the more brutal corruptions of the state. His repertory consisted chiefly of local actors, who spoke in the local dialect. Yet their skill allowed them to present their director's ideas to audiences well beyond Chattisgarh itself.[38]

Subanna might be described as a 'progressive'; Tanvir, as an 'activist'. Neither explicitly aligned himself with a political party or movement. Other theatre groups have been more directly propagandist. They include the Jana Natya Mandali, which is closely identified with the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. The Mandali's star performer is the folk singer Gaddar, a sometime engineering student from a Dalit home who has been active in left-wing politics for more than thirty years. In 1971 he composed a song about the rickshaw pullers of Hyderabad; since then, he has composed and sung many songs celebrating the stoicism of the poor or the savaging of their oppressors. These songs make offerings to the victims of police brutality, or contrast the hard labour of the peasant with the opulent lifestyle of the propertied class. In his songs, says Gaddar, 'life is people, people's suffering, [and] their tunes'. Often underground, sometimes in jail, detested by the police but revered by the peasantry, Gaddar is a near-legendary figure, and not just in Andhra Pradesh. When he gave a concert in Bangalore, for example, some 20,000 people attended.[39]

VII

The most sophisticated form of entertainment in modern India is classical music, this performed and heard in two major styles, the Hindustani and the Carnatic. Traditionally, classical music flourished in courts and temples, patronized by Maharajas and Nawabs. During British rule, the princes continued to maintain musicians in their courts, but secular patrons also began to emerge – these

merchants and professionals based in cities such as Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.[40]

The musician whose career best embodies these larger shifts in social history is the singer M. S. Subbulakshmi. Born in 1916 in Madurai, into a family of temple musicians and courtesans, MS (as she came to be known) was taken by her musician mother to Madras to further her career. Her exquisite voice matched by a legendary beauty, she became a much sought-after figure in the musical circles of the city. In 1940 she married the entrepreneur T. Sadashivam, who managed her subsequent career with great skill. In the 1940s MS also acted in several films, most notably *Meera*, in which she played the part of the great medieval singer Mirabai.

While Subbulakshmi was rigorously trained in the classical style, and took pains to learn from the leading teachers of the time, she also worked on expanding her repertoire. Indeed, it was as a singer of *bhajans* (popular religious hymns) that she attracted the attention of Mahatma Gandhi. Another and perhaps even more influential admirer was Jawaharlal Nehru, who attended the premiere of *Meera* at Plaza Cinema in New Delhi and later named her the 'Queen of Song'. An admirer as well as a close friend was C. Rajagopalachari, who served both as governor general of India and as chief minister of Madras.

While the endorsement of such prominent figures was helpful, Subbulakshmi's claims to greatness were independent of them. She was are markable singer, with a very wide range and a dignified and gracious personality. Her many recordings of classical and folk compositions made her well known throughout India. She was herself very willing to sing for other than metropolitan and elite audiences, and to raise money for worthy causes. One scholar has listed as many as 244 charity concerts that MS gave between 1944 and 1987. The towns and causes are indicative of both her popularity and her concerns: in Jamshedpur to sing for a women's group, in Bombay in memory of the Hindustani woman vocalist Kesarbai Kerkar, in Hassan for a hospital, in Madras for Little Sisters of the Poor (a Christian charity), in Jaffna for the Ramakrishna Mission (a Hindu social-service organization), in Trichy for workers of a public sector factory, in Tanjore for a tuberculosis sanatorium named after Mahatma Gandhi.[41]

If Subbulakshmi took classical music to all corners of India, the man who most effectively took Indian music overseas was the sitar player Ravi Shankar. He was born in 1920 in Benares, the younger brother of the famous dancer Uday Shankar. He joined his brother's troupe as a boy, touring Europe with them before he was sent back to train under the musician Allauddin Khan. Allauddin was a legendary disciplinarian, and seven years with him made Ravi Shankar one of the two rising stars of his generation, the other being his guru's son, the sarod player Ali Akbar Khan.

By the time of Independence Ravi Shankar was well established as a concert artist. He usually played solo, but with Ali Akbar Khan also popularized the duet, or *jugalbandhi*, a form previously unknown to classical instrumental music. Like M. S. Subbulakshmi, he did not restrict himself to the purely classical form. Thus Ravi Shankar created a ballet based on Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, and also composed music for several films made by Satyajit Ray.

In 1956 Ravi Shankar went on the first of what were to become annual overseas tours. Of a concert he gave in New York in 1961, the city's newspaper of record wrote that it 'created a whole new aural landscape', one 'evocative of a musical mystique, rich in religion and philosophic traditions'. By now Ravi Shankar had begun playing with Western musicians – John Coltrane, Yehudi Menuhin, Andre Previn, and the like – and also recording discs with them. His fame dramatically increased after the Beatle George Harrison took lessons with him, and began to refer to him as his 'guru'.

In 1967 Ravi Shankar shifted his base to California. He became a hippie icon, a regular

presence at music festivals at Monterey and elsewhere, and played a leading role in the famous 'Bangladesh' concert in 1970. He adapted well to his new audience – introducing each composition in his immaculate English and taking care to alternate formal *raga*s with lighter compositions. (Indian audiences could listen to a single *raga* for four hours at a stretch.) He made his tradition altogether more palatable to the Western world, paving the way for younger Indians to follow in his wake and take their music to places where it had never been heard before. In the 1990s he returned to India, with New Delhi his base, while continuing to visit the West regularly. Now in his ninth decade, he is still spruce and fit, still capable of a high-quality concert extending over two hours and more.[42]

M. S. Subbulakshmi and Ravi Shankar were not necessarily the *greatest* musicians of their generation, but they became the best-known because they were great enough, because of their charming personalities, and because through their careers one could trace larger processes of social change. They were splendid ambassadors for their ancient art, helping it adjust to and indeed win acclaim in an impatient and often unforgiving world. They helped expand the audience and support base for their music, thus, in the long run, benefiting numerous performers who came after them.[43]

VIII

The form of entertainment most typical of urban-industrial society is, of course, spectator sport. All modern sports are played and watched in India, along with traditional games such as *kho-kho* and *kabaddi*. In terms of achievement, two sports stand out: billiards, in which India has produced several world champions, and field hockey, in which the Indian team was undefeated in the Olympic Games between 1928 and 1956, winning six gold medals in succession.

In terms of viewership, the two main sports are soccer and cricket. As in the West, soccer has been very popular among the working classes. The great industrial centres – Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore – all have active leagues, played between clubs several of which are sponsored by industrial houses. The game is also widely followed, and actively played, in Goa, Kerala and the Punjab.

The capital city of Indian soccer, however, is Calcutta. Here, sporting rivalry has gone hand-in-hand with political competition. There are three leading teams: Mohammedan Sporting, traditionally representing the Muslims; Mohun Bagan, founded and supported by the Bengali *bhadralok* or upper classes; and East Bengal, the club favoured by the more plebeian classes from the other side of the province. These and other teams play each other on the Calcutta Maidan, the vast expanse of turf that lies at the heart of the city.

From the 1930s to the early 1980s soccer was probably the most passionately discussed topic in Calcutta, even more so than politics or religion. The leading clubs each had thousands of followers, whose emotional investment in their team fully equalled that of European football fans. Violence during or after matches was not uncommon. However, after the 1982 World Cup popular interest in the sport began to wane. This was the first World Cup telecast live in India; alerted to the gap between their own local heroes and the great international stars, men in Calcutta began to turn away from their clubs. The slide has continued; twenty years later, soccer ranks a poor second to cricket among the sporting passions of Bengal.

As it does in the rest of India as well. Cricket is a game that privileges wrist-work rather than size or physical fitness; to be small and stocky is not always a disadvantage. Thus, Indians can compete with the best in the world. Its slow pace and interrupted structure of play also suits Indians,

encouraging them to go in groups to matches, there to engage in chatter and banter among themselves and with the players.

In 1983 India won cricket's World Cup. The victory coincided with the spread of satellite television, which took the game to small towns and working-class homes. Through the 1980s and beyond cricket steadily gained in popularity. Two Indians, Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar, broke world batting records, while Kapil Dev was for a time the bowler with most wickets in Test cricket. Thesocial base of the game deepened – more players were coming into the national team from smaller towns, and women particularly were taking to watching the game in large numbers.

By the turn of the century cricket was on a par with film in terms of popular appeal. Some cricketers were as wealthy and as well known as film stars. They were ubiquitous on television, either playing the game or advertising all manner of products from toothpaste to luxury cars.

Much of the sentiment that went into the sport was nationalistic. Two opponents were most disliked, even hated: the old colonial power, England, and the new subcontinental rival, Pakistan. Victory over one or the other guaranteed the players handsome cash prizes, a massive public reception and an audience with the prime minister.

In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, the Kargil war and the Kashmir insurgency, cricket matches between India and Pakistan became far more intensely fought, not just by the players but equally in the minds of those who followed and supported them. The television audience for an India-Pakistan match was in the order of 300 million, for most of whom this was, as it were, war minus the shooting. A particularly ugly aspect of this rivalry was the spotlight it placed on Indian Muslims, who were accused by Hindu fundamentalists of secretly supporting Pakistan. When India defeated Pakistan in the World Cup of 2003, for example, the residents of Bangalore poured out into the streets, 'bursting firecrackers, whooping, whistling, cheering aloud with the shouts of *Bharat mataki jai* [Glory to Mother India] renting the air'. In Ahmedabad, however, the victory celebration turned into a communal riot after revellers accused some Muslim students of celebrating the fall of an Indian wicket.[44]

The next year, cricket figured in a curious way in the general election. At the time of the campaign the Indian team was playing, and winning, in Pakistan, where one of its leading players was Mohammed Kaif, a Muslim from the state of Uttar Pradesh. Returning seventy-nine MPs to the Lok Sabha, UP held the key to the elections, but its large population of Muslims had rarely voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party. For a party trying to shed its Hindu chauvinist image, the cricketing victory came as a gift from the Gods. In his speeches in UP the prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, praised the 'splendid job done by one of your sons, Mohammed Kaif'. 'God knows how big a person he [Kaif] would be in future,' he predicted – before appealing to the Muslims in the audience to vote for his party. He urged the Muslims to trust the BJP, for, he claimed, 'we are in a position to protect them'.

In the end, the Muslims did not vote for Mr Vajpayee's party, which was duly turned out of office. But that the prime minister sought to canvass a cricketer to his cause was witness to the extraordinary importance accorded the game by India and Indians.[45]

IX

Crucial aids to these varied forms of entertainment have been the radio and, more recently, television. The first broadcasting companies started operating in India in the 1920s. These were soon subsumed

by the state-owned All-India Radio (AIR), which for many decades enjoyed a monopoly over the medium. AIR commanded afar-flung network of stations that collectively serviced the whole of the subcontinent, with only the jungles and deserts and mountains excluded.

The state's hopes for radio were expressed by a leading nationalist politician as 'not only to give entertainments but to give such programmes as will give enlightenment and elevation of spirit to the villagers'.[46] Most stations began broadcasting at dawn, with a hymn of invocation, ending at midnight with a weather report. The programmes interspersed music – classical, film and folk – with stories, plays, news bulletins and special shows for women, children and rural listeners. Education in health and farming methods was also provided. It was a very mixed brew, allowing listeners to pick and choose according to their tastes and needs.

In the year of Independence, 1947, the Indian radio industry manufactured a mere 3,000 sets. The number went up to 60,000 in 1951, and to 150,000 in 1956. By 1962 All-India Radio was broadcasting from over thirty stations with a combined output of about 100,000 hours annually. A decade later there were an estimated 15 million radio sets in operation; many of these, of course, listened to by more than one person.[47]

For a decade after Independence the Union minister in charge of information and broadcasting was Dr B. V. Keskar, a scholar with a deep interest in classical Indian culture combined with a lofty disdain for its modern variants. In a speech in 1953 he noted that

> Classical music has fallen on bad days and is on the point of extinction in North India. Classical music has lost touch with the masses, not due to the fault of the public, but because of historical circumstances. In the past, it was patronized by Princes and Sardars, but that support has almost ended. During the last 150 years we were under the British who would not understand and support Hindustani music . . . The main problem before musicians and All India Radio is to revive public contact with classical music. We must make them familiar with our traditional music, and make them more intimate with it.[48]

Already, from the late 1930s, All-India Radio had begun employing classical musicians on its staff. The artists were ranked in various grades according to their age, ability and experience. They were assigned to the station nearest their home and expected to advise on programming as well as give regular recitals. By the late 1950s as many as 10,000 musicians were on the state's payroll. They were from both the Hindustani and Carnatic styles, and included some of the greatest artists then living, among them Ali Akbar Khan, Bismillah Khan, Mallikarjun Mansur and Emmani Shankar Sastri.

Most stations on All-India Radio played several hours of classical music a day. Saturday night featured the prestigious 'National Programme', when a single artist played or sang for a full ninety minutes. Every year the AIR organized a Radio Sangeet Sammelan, a festival of live concerts held in towns and cities across India, whose recordings provided material for a month-long celebration of Indian music over the radio.

Along with his love of the classical genres, Dr B. V. Keskar also had a particular distaste for films and film music. For the first few years of his tenure, popular music was banned on the airwaves. Fortunately, better sense prevailed and AIR launced a new station, Vividh Bharati, devoted exclusively to film music. The broadcasts soon found their way into millions of homes and attracted commercial advertisements that made the station self-supporting.[49]

Without All-India Radio, Indian classical music might not have survived the death of the

princely order. But AIR also played a wider role in national integration, by linking popular culture with high culture, and region with nation. The least appealing part of AIR was its news bulletins. These reported all events – national or international – from the perspective of the party in power, the propaganda made even less palatable by the monotonous drone in which it was delivered.

From the early 1970s television began supplementing radio as a major source of entertainment (as well as propaganda). It was the latter objective which at first predominated, with programming on the state-owned Doordarshan focusing on the government's achievements while appealing to citizens to grow more food and forge more steel. By the 1980s the channel had discovered the delights of programmes sponsored not by the state but by the market. The *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* serials were trail-blazers here, attracting millions of viewers as well as millions of rupees in advertising. These were followed by soap operas which followed the saga of a family over fifty or more episodes. (An early success was Ramesh Sippy's *Buniyaad*, which told the tale of a family from Lahore making a new life in India after Partition.) While viewers were entertained, the state was being enriched; in a mere ten years, 1975–85, the revenues of Doordarshan increased sixtyfold.[50]

In the 1990s the airwaves were opened up to private operators. While FM stations sprung up in the cities, the main beneficiaries of this liberalization were television channels. These proliferated at an amazing rate, operating in all the languages of India. By 2000 there were more than 100 private channels in operation, some very specialized, focusing only on sport or business or film or news, others more catholic in their approach, taking in all the above subjects (and some more besides). This was a ferociously competitive market, with a high rate of mortality for new entrants and much poaching of staff. The consumers themselves were spoiled for choice – where once there existed a single state-owned channel, now there was a dazzling variety of alternatives on offer.

X

The critic Chidananda Dasgupta once claimed that 'India's popular cinema . . . speaks not in the international language of cinema, but in a local dialect which is incomprehensible to most countries in the world'.[51] Dasgupta may have been speaking here as a friend and biographer of Satyajit Ray, and for Bengal, whose artistic standards have tended to be different from (or superior to) other parts of the country. In fact, from very early on, the Indian film has also appealed to (and resonated with) audiences that were not Indian.

A pioneerin this regard was Raj Kapoor, scion of India's most celebrated film family. (His father, Prithviraj Kapoor, was a celebrated stage and cinema actor; his two brothers, Shashi and Shammi, were notable film stars, a tradition continued by his two sons and their children.) Raj Kapoor was a sort of Indian Charlie Chaplin who played the tramp in self-directed films.[52] He formed a memorable partnership with Nargis, a gorgeous beauty with whom he starred on seventeen occasions. When the duo showed up at a premier in Calcutta, they were mobbed by 'hordes of autograph-hunting juveniles'.[53] More surprisingly, they got the same kind of reception in the Soviet Union. When they visited the USSR in 1954 and again in 1956, old veterans of the Czar's wars lined up to shake their hands, while pregnant ladies told them that they would call their child Raj, if it were a boy, and Nargis, if it were a girl.[54]

Raj Kapoor's breakthrough film was *Awara*, released towards the end of 1951, in which he played a lovable rogue forced by family circumstance to turn to a life of crime. The reviewer in an up-market English-language newspaper wrote sniffily of the 'stilted artificiality' of the film, of how

its 'continuous contrivance for effect' had 'shatter[ed]realism in the story and rob[bed]the picture of its most essential quality'.[55] But the masses flocked to it nonetheless. And not just in India. When the film's scriptwriter visited the Soviet Union, he discovered that 'all bands and orchestras were playing tunes from this film, Russian and Ukrainian and Georgian teenagers were singing the Awara songs in chorus, and one met people who boasted that they had seen the film twenty or thirty times. In the whole history of the Soviet cinema no film had ever won such popularity, and no film or stage star had won such renown in so short a time'.[56]

Hindi films have been popular across Africa, in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. An anthropologist doing fieldwork in a Malay village had to take his respondents every week to the nearest cinema to see what they simply called 'a Hindi'.[57] And in Japan the films of the Tamil star Rajnikanth were, for a time, all the rage.

Less surprising has been the popularity of Hindi films in countries that share the same broad culture. An American tourist in Pakistan found that in both public buses and private homes, the music that was most likely to be heard was Hindi film music. Pirated cassettes abounded, as did pirated DVDs of the latest films, which were officially banned in Pakistan to protect the domestic film industry.[58] Further to the west, in Afghanistan, music of all kinds had been banned by the Taliban. But when that regime fell, it was reported that the briskest business was done by barbers who cut beards and by vendors who sold photos of Indian film stars. Songs by Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammad Rafi once more blared out of Kabul homes. More daringly, young men and women were inspired by Hindi films to choose their own life partners, in violation of family custom and tradition. A court in Kabul was besieged by cases brought by such couples, who pleaded that they be allowed to marry without the permission of their parents.[59]

More recently Hindi films have found a market in western Europe and North America, this chiefly comprising what are now substantial and wealthy communities of diasporic Indians. In 2000 as many as four Hindi films featured in the top twenty releases in the United Kingdom that year.[60] Three years later *Time* magazine reported that the worldwide audience for Indian films comfortably exceeded that for Hollywood – at 3.6 billion, it was a whole billion greater.[61]

In view of this growing audience overseas, and in keeping with changing mores within India, film characters and themes were undergoing subtle shifts. Western clothes were now more common and 'love marriages' more acceptable. The vamp had been rendered redundant, since the heroine was now no longer pure and virginal but capable herself of intrigue and seduction. And the films themselves indulged in the unabashed celebration of wealth. In the past, even if the hero was not poor or unemployed, he tended to identify with the downtrodden. Now, however, it was 'a party of the rich', with the audience 'invited to watch, from adistance'.[62]

In the first year of the millennium a wax image of Amitabh Bachchan was unveiled at Madame Tussaud's waxworks in London. This was a greater honour than being chosen 'actor of the century' by the BBC, in a poll biased by frenetic mass voting by Indians. Still, it was not Bachchan but some younger Indians who were emerging as the face of the industry in its new, globalized phase. One was the actress Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World celebrated by Julia Roberts as 'the most beautiful woman in the world'. Rai made the cover of *Time* magazine's Asian edition, served on international film juries and was wooed by prominent Hollywood directors. A second was the actor Shahrukh Khan, the most successful 'hero' of his generation, whose speaking and singing tours across Europe and North America were wild hits, attended by thousands from the ethnic Indian, Iranian, Afghan and Arab communities and by a growing number of Caucasians as well.

Another international success was the composer A. R. Rahman. A child prodigy who composed

his first film songs when he was not yet in his teens, Rahman first made a name in Tamil cinema before moving on to score Hindi films. His training (courtesy of his musician father) was in the classical Carnatic style, which he was adept at blending with rhythms and instruments from other parts of the world. In 2002 Rahman was invited by Andrew Lloyd Webber to compose the music for his *Bombay Dreams*. After that musical's success in the West End and on Broadway, the Indian was commissioned to co-write the music for the first major stage adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, a production whose budget was £27 million, one-tenth of this being the fee of the composers. Then, in 2004, Rahman was invited to conduct the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, whose first conductor had been Sir Edward Elgar.[63]

One who would have gloried in Rahman's success was his fellow Tamil S. S. Vasan. Back in 1955 Vasan had pleaded with an audience of puritans in Delhi to abandon their 'prejudice against film-men'. 'Recreation and entertainment', he argued, 'are almost as important as food, clothing and shelter.' If 'public men work for the good of the public', said Vasan, then 'showmen do, as a matter of fact, work for the pleasure of the public'.[64] At the time both parts of the statement were true, for the public men then active included Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar. Fifty years later only the latter part holds good. Where public men now work mostly for private gain, the 'showmen' of India – among whom we must include singers and composers as well as actors, and women equally with men – still work creatively for the pleasure of their ever-growing public.