

2005

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Recommended Citation

Lutgendorf, Philip. 2005. Sex in the Snow: The Himalayas as Erotic Topos in Popular Hindi Cinema. *HIMALAYA* 25(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol25/iss1/7>

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SEX IN THE SNOW: THE HIMALAYAS AS EROTIC TOPOS IN POPULAR HINDI CINEMA¹

Fantasies about life beyond the front range of the Great Himalaya have been a trope in Indian literature since at least the period of the Sanskrit epics. The demi-divine beings believed to inhabit the high country were famously sexually active, and even the human “northern Kurus” (as residents of the region have sometimes been called) were rumored to have long, happy lives unburdened by inhibitions, especially in sexual matters; their women were allegedly free to enjoy multiple extra-marital liaisons and polyandrous marriages. Such legends appear to persist in popular 20th century narrative through a much-used trope in Bombay cinema: the depiction of the Himalayas as a realm of uninhibited romantic fantasy. Although this trope is often confined to virtually extra-narrative song sequences that whisk the hero and heroine to Himalayan (or lately European or even New Zealand alpine) locales, a number of highly successful films have given it much more extended treatment by romantically pairing a plains-dwelling hero with a Himalayan heroine. This article briefly traces the history of this scenario and then considers the contextual and cultural implications of its use in two notable films: Raj Kapoor’s *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1984) and Mani Ratnam’s *Dil Se* (1998).

INTRODUCTION

Long before they came to be identified by modern geographers as the loftiest mountains on earth, the high Himalayas had generated a powerful response in the imaginations of people living on the lowlands to their south. The ancient Indian understanding of the north as particularly auspicious among the cardinal directions apparently derives from its association with the shining white summits that formed the northern boundary of Aryavarta and were understood to be the abode of its gods, and when Krishna, in the tenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita*, metaphorically likened himself, as supreme being, to the highest degree of all earthly things, it was only natural for him to invoke the proverbial “stability” and “endurance” of the Himalaya (“*sthavaranam Himalayah*”; *Bhagavad-gita* 10:25). However, my concern in the present essay is with a less exalted and, so to say, more “secular” understanding of these mountains that likewise has ancient roots, but that enjoys a particularly visible persistence in modern popular culture, especially

in the cinematic narratives that India so abundantly produces and consumes. I refer here to the association of high mountains with romance and eroticism. For one of the standard scenic locales of song and dance sequences in mainstream Bombay films—along with such settings as the *kotha* for a *ghazal*, the cabaret or disco for a jazz or rock number, and the temple for a *bhajan*—is the mountainside as venue for a lovesong. Not uncommonly, a film’s romantic principals are transported to a landscape of flower-covered meadows, rushing streams, and snow-capped summits, amidst which they frolic, display frequent changes of apparel, and coyly sing of their budding love for one another. Not uncommonly the sequence climaxes with the pair on an icy slope, playfully tossing snowballs at one another, or rolling downhill in each other’s arms. The transport of the lovers to this locale may be accounted for diegetically—e.g., through the pretext of a mountain excursion on which they briefly embark—but at times it is not; in the latter case, the first strains of what will obviously be a love song are simply accompanied by an abrupt shift

“Epic and puranic literature routinely depicts cloud-piercing summits and high altitude lakes...frequented by scantily-clad supernaturals... who amorously frolic there, evidently immune to the arctic-like cold.”

from an urban or soundstage set to an alpine landscape—a visual shift that is accepted by audiences, although it is also sometimes the butt of jokes. Indeed, the repetition of this convention in numerous films is periodically cited by critics who complain of the supposedly “formulaic” and “mindless” quality of song sequences in mainstream cinema.

Yet a more culturally distanced observer may question how this topos became a “formula” in the first place. For I would venture that, in American and European cinemas, although the sight of high mountains may carry certain routine associations for audiences (e.g., of awe-inspiring natural splendor, rugged adventure, or the challenge of wilderness and its dangers), it does not automatically evoke *shringara rasa*—the aesthetic mood of eros. Why it apparently does in Hindi cinema bears examining. In this essay I will first consider some apparent precursors of this trope in classical and pre-modern narratives—a consideration that will entail challenging the modern Western ideological divide between the imaginative realms of the “sacred” and the “secular.” I will then turn to one extended variant on the trope that has received repeated treatment in Hindi films: a plot in which a boy from the plains falls in love with a girl from the mountains, to examine its artful use by two notable directors. Here my argument will be that, as is the case with other stock conventions of mainstream cinema, the familiarity and associations of the “Himalayan love song” topos make possible not only its routine deployment for evoking a predictable and desired aesthetic mood, but also its more creative and provocative use in films that open up the possibility of questioning or critiquing prevailing discourses.²

PLAYGROUND OF THE IMMORTALS

Although the Himalayas are periodically invoked in vedic texts as the abode of the gods (*deva loka*, *deva bhumi*), it is only in the Sanskrit epics, and especially in the *Mahabharata*—a number of whose principal characters make long journeys into the high country—that we first find extended descriptions of their scenery. These are suggestive both of some firsthand observation and of a great deal of imaginative projection and poetic license. When the heroic Pandava brothers and their common wife Draupadi, guided by the venerable sage Lomasha, venture into the Himalayas during a sub-continental pilgrimage undertaken to pass

the time during their twelve years of *vanavasa* or forest exile, they enter a landscape of pine forests, ice fields, and soaring, jagged summits, some with names that (nowadays) correspond to well known peaks: *Kailash*, *Hemakuta*, *Badrinath* (*Mahabharata* 3:109-170). Yet apparently “realistic” evocations of subalpine and alpine vegetation and rock formations are regularly interspersed with highly fanciful descriptions: lush



Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore as the lovers in Shakti Samanta's *Aradhana* (“Adoration”), 1969.

subtropical groves (such as the *kadali-vana* or “plantain forest” in which Bhima encounters his immortal half-brother Hanuman), ponds covered with lotuses of celestial fragrance, and animals (such as peacocks, elephants, and lions) that are not native to high altitudes. The epic mountains partake in a (literally) heightened way of the surreal qualities that distinguish the literary trope of the “forest” or wilderness (*vana*, *aranya*, *jangala*) from that of the settled or cultivated lands of city and village

(*nagara*, *grama*), which are typically more realistically (albeit idealistically) described; they constitute an extra-social realm of mystery, danger, and supernatural power, and are the haunt of divine and demi-divine beings who are “immortal” (or anyhow exceptionally long-lived) and potentially both beneficent and dangerous to human beings who stumble into their realm (Lutgendorf 2000:270-73, 280).

But what does all this have to do with eros? Here we may recall that most of the supernatural beings in Hindu mythology are (as we say nowadays) “sexually active,” and that erotic sports are indeed one of the principal ways in which they while away the eons. The immortals “play” eternally, often amorously, and preferably in remote locations of breathtaking natural beauty; the northern mountains, which bridge the gap between earthly and heavenly *lokas*, appear to be among their favorite worldly playgrounds. Epic and puranic literature routinely depicts cloud-piercing summits and high altitude lakes as sites frequented by scantily-clad supernaturals such as voluptuous *apsaras* and strapping *gandharvas* and *vidyadharas* — Indic mythology’s party animals par excellence — who amorously frolic there, evidently immune to the arctic-like cold. As for *yakshas*, their yellow-eyed king Kubera holds sway over the famous Himalayan dream city of Alaka, a place where every desire is indulged.

Where *yakshas* dwell with lovely women in white mansions,
Whose crystal terraces reflect the stars like flowers. They drink
the wine of love distilled from magic trees... (*Meghaduta* 66)

Kalidasa based his famous poem *Meghaduta* on the pretext of a lonely *yaksha* who has been exiled from this paradise

and is languishing in (modern day) Madhya Pradesh, dreaming of his distant beloved, whose own *viraha* is inflamed by the constant dalliance going on around her.³ In later tantric, nath yogic, and alchemical literature, the long-eyed apsaras sporting on mountain heights were often joined (literally) by human paramours, or rather by divinized humans who by their own efforts had transmuted their mortal coils into the deathless (and erotically irresistible) “adamantine bodies” (*vajra deha*) of *siddhas*—“those who have accomplished [their aim].” (White 1996:238, 323)

Apart from the legendary libido of the celestials and earthly immortals, which might inevitably color any account of a geographical area styled *deva-bhumi*, several other explanations may be advanced for these pervasive ancient fantasies. The first is simply that the Himalayas were both famous and remote; everyone knew about them but very few people really knew or had visited them. Hence they were both (so to speak) “on the map” and simultaneously out-of-this-world, and thus a realm—like the Amazon jungle, the “wild west,” and “darkest Africa” for 19th century Euro-Americans, and “outer space” for their 20th century descendants—that invited imaginative projection, especially of urges that were (in theory) to be strictly regulated among the socialized (*shishta*) inhabitants of *karma-bhumi*, the everyday world of dutiful activity.

A second explanation (suggested to me by Bruce Sullivan) is that the Himalayas—like their presiding deity, Shiva—partake of the paradoxical quality that historians of religion term *coincidentia oppositorum*; hence they can simultaneously be known as the realm of the most extreme renunciation and asceticism (*tapobhumi*) and of the most uninhibited indulgence—expressed, for example, in the long-extended and world-destabilizing loveplay of the renunciant yogi Shiva and his wife Parvati on the summit of Mount Kailash (a dalliance that eventually produces mountains of semen and a six-headed son, though that is another story). Asceticism and eroticism, in Wendy Doniger’s well-known binary, are thus dual faces of the extra-social and world-transcending life of the mountains.

A third explanation, however, may be rooted in (real or rumored) human behavior: the lifeways of mountain peoples, as reported to or imagined by the dwellers on the Indo-Gangetic plains. Modern ethnographers’ accounts of the practices of villagers in the Himalayan regions suggest concepts of *dharma* and particularly of feminine deportment that sometimes deviate from those promoted among caste Hindus on the plains, most notably in occasional instances of polyandry rather than polygamy, bride-price rather than dowry, and in a value system that sometimes offers greater freedom and agency to women, especially in their choice of marital part-

ners (e.g., Berreman 1972:354-55). These practices too seem to have a mythological prototype in the numerous puranic tales of the “daughter of the mountain,” Parvati, a headstrong girl-goddess who independently decides to make Shiva her husband in defiance of her family and of the seven divine sages, and who practices arduous asceticism in order to win his love (e.g., Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978:157-65).

If such willful mountain maidens truly existed in ancient times, they may have acquired particular notoriety during the period usually identified as the “classical age” (roughly the first millennium of the Common Era), whose surviving *dharma shastra* compendia suggest an increasingly patriarchal and misogynistic ideology among plains-dwelling brahman legalists.

Once again, the *Mahabharata* seems to offer a *locus classicus* for the literary depiction of both the alluring and threatening deviance of mountain peoples in its periodic allusions to a folk known as the “Northern Kurus” (*uttarakuru*). As the name suggests, these are human beings who share descent from the same ancestor as the heroes of the epic, the Kurus who dwell in the Kurukshetra region of the Indo-Gangetic plain, but who reside further north, indeed on the far slope of

the Himalayas (which, in epic geography, is akin to being on the dark side of the moon). Their realm partakes of the mysterious and paradise-like qualities of the Himalayas that have already been mentioned, and also displays features suggestive of variant human social organization. Thus in Book One, when the childless King Pandu tries to convince his wife Kunti to have sex with another man in order to beget sons, he recounts the tale of an earlier era in which married women were unrestricted in their sexual liaisons and “took their pleasure where it pleased them.” Although this era ended abruptly through the curse of an irascible brahman youth, the King notes that this “eternal *dharma* that favors women” is still followed by animals, and also that “it still prevails among the Northern Kurus.” (*Mahabharata* 1:113; van Buitenen 1973:253). Later, in Book Two when the Pandava brothers embark on a “conquest of the four directions” (*digvijaya*) in preparation for their rajasuya sacrifice, Arjuna is assigned the task of subduing kingdoms to the north. He advances far into the Himalayas, passing the Manas lake and even extracting tribute from the demi-divine Kimpurushas and Gandharvas, until he reaches the border of the Uttarakurus’ realm. Here he is placated with gifts but is turned back with a stern warning that anyone who ventures further will die, and also that, even if he entered this enchanted realm, he would not perceive anything “for no human eye can see what is here” (*Mahabharata* 2:25; van Buitenen 1975:80). Apparently, not even Arjuna, the idealized son of Indra who moves



A contemporary poster depicting Shiva and Parvati in the Himalayas (artist unknown).

easily between earthly and heavenly realms, is able to crack the door to the forbidden kingdom of the Northern Kuru cousins, with their looser, woman-friendly dharmic code.⁴ Of course, the five Pandavas had themselves entered a deviant polyandrous marriage with the princess Draupadi—a narrative necessity that was apparently already problematic for the classical epic’s authors, and that was partially justified through a strange tale, set in the high Himalayas, of a goddess’ serial betrothal to five Indras (*Mahabharata* 1:189). Significantly, modern ethnographers note the enduring popularity, in the Himalayan foothills, of the dharmically murky *Mahabharata* story and the worship of its characters—versus the more ethically and patriarchally straightforward narrative and characters of the *Ramayana* that find favor on the Gangetic plain (Sax 2002:42-47).

MOUNTAIN GIRLS ARE EASY

The two hoary narrative patterns noted above—depicting the mountains as erotic playgrounds for superhuman beings, and as the abode of human communities who practice a deviant social code that affords more sexual agency to women—both seem echoed in the tropes of post-Independence Hindi cinema. The former is represented, I suggest, in the commonplace “mountain love song” that has the purpose of removing the film’s hero and heroine (whose love often defies patriarchal family strictures or social taboos) to an extra-societal realm long associated with erotic dalliance. Such scenes occur in a large number of highly successful films, such as Shakti Samanta’s *Aradhana* (1969), a film that daringly broached the theme of premarital sex, or Raj Kapoor’s *Bobby* (1973), a story of inter-communal teenage romance.

The fact that such interludes are sometimes worked into the plot on the thinnest pretext or are even inserted non-diegetically as a fantasy or “dream sequence” suggests their assumed effectiveness at evoking a mood of *sringara rasa* through their reworking of a hoary cultural cliché. For decades, the locale-of-choice for such sequences was the Vale of Kashmir and its environs, though other “hill stations” such as Simla and Mussoorie were also regularly used. Raj Kapoor in his 1964 film *Sangam* transported his lovers to the Swiss Alps, a diegetically-justified move that permitted Indian audiences to vicariously admire an “exotic” European mountain resort. The repeated use of Switzerland (and more

recently of New Zealand) for mountain footage in films during the 1990s, however, reflected not simply the cachet of international travel but also the practical difficulty of siting and shooting film stories in Kashmir, a state that had now become associated less with romance than with terrorism and insurgency. I will return, in my conclusion, to the theme of this disquieting “blending of *rasas*” in the political climate of late twentieth-century India.



Rishi Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia in Raj Kapoor’s *Bobby* (1973).

However, it is to a more sustained cinematic use of the trope of the mountains that I first wish to turn: to films whose narrative centrally concerns the love affair between (invariably) a young man from a lowland metropolis and a young woman from a mountain village. This too is a hardy perennial of Bombay screenplays that has regularly generated hit films, ranging from Raj Kapoor’s 1949 *Barsaat* (“Monsoon,” famous for its image of Nargis, as a Kashmiri maiden, swooning in the arms of the violin-playing poet-hero Pran, which became the logo of

Kapoor’s R.K. Studios), to Shakti Samanta’s 1964 *Kashmir Ki Kali* (“bud of Kashmir,” starring Shammi Kapoor as the runaway son of an industrialist and Sharmila Tagore as a flower-seller in the Vale), to Dev Anand’s 1971 *Hare Rama, Hare Krishna* (which transports the scenario to a Kathmandu Valley under siege by Western hippies, whose anarchic and drug-induced culture of “free love” serves as titillating backdrop to the hero’s romance with a self-assertive mountain girl, played by Mumtaz),⁵ to Subhash Ghai’s 1999 *Taal* (“beat”), in which a rich Bombay boy named Manav (“mankind”) meets a mountain-dwelling dancer named Manasi (“mind-born,” an epithet of several sacred Himalayan rivers and lakes).⁶ As the heavily-loaded names of the hero and heroine in the last-named film suggest, these scenarios readily invoke a complex array of thematic polarities that have often been explored in popular narrative: e.g., the equation of woman with nature, purity, and tradition and of man with modern civilization and its attendant ills; the contrast between the rustic (both valorized as pure, natural, and “Indian,” and critiqued as coarse, “jungle,” and backward) and the urban (again, both in its positive valuation as modern, educated, and progressive, and in its negative depiction as westernized, callous, and corrupted), and the tension between the local (embodied in ethnic costume and cultural practice) and the cosmopolitan or national (expressed in the centrism of nationalist ideology and through a supposedly

pan-Indian—although in fact mainly north Indian—urban lifestyle). In addition, such narratives often invoke the supposed “innocent” sensuality and sexual forwardness of the mountain maiden both as a pretext for erotic spectacle and as a plot-driving motif; e.g., with a Pahari girl boldly choosing the outsider, *pardesi* boy in defiance of her family and community. Some of the most interesting recent writings on Hindi cinema have pointed out that successful films may use such polarities and stereotypes to negotiate the cultural terrain of post-Independence India, through weaving complex, multi-stranded narrative sagas that permit both “dominant” and “resistant” thematic strands to be savored by viewers (e.g., Thomas 1989). I would like to apply this approach to the trope of the “Himalayan love affair” through a brief consideration of two notable films about the relationship of a lowland boy and a mountain girl.

Ram Teri Ganga Maili (“God/Ram, your Ganges is soiled”), released in 1985, was Raj Kapoor’s last effort as a director, and its massive success (it was one of the two top-grossing films of the year and won several Filmfare awards—Bombay’s equivalent of the Oscars) reconfirmed his cherished title of “the Great Showman.” It is in fact in the grand Kapoor tradition: an ingenious, epic-scale allegory that synthesizes classical and mythic narrative, soft-core political and social commentary (here condemning the corruption of politicians allied with industrialists and championing the nascent environmental initiatives of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi), and audacious display of the female anatomy. Broadly speaking, the narrative recapitulates the Shakuntala story, which first appeared in the *Mahabharata* and then was reworked, some six centuries later, by Kalidasa into the most famous of all Sanskrit dramas. Since the heroine of this story became recognized as the mother of the dynast Bharata, whose name is reflected in the official, post-Independence name for “India” (Bharat, or “the [land of the] descendants of Bharata”), this tale is as portentous as it is popular.

But the film additionally alludes to another *Mahabharata* motif: that of a human prince’s union with a river goddess (as in King Shantanu’s marriage to Ganga incarnate), as well as to the myth of the divine river’s “descent” to the human realm, now superimposed onto mundane space to follow her meandering course over the north Indian plains to the Bay of Bengal. This permits the film to offer both a spectacular domestic travelogue and an auspicious visual pilgrimage to some of north India’s most revered Hindu sites—from the source of the Ganga at the Gaumukh glacier, near the Tibetan border, to her great pilgrimage center at Banaras/Varanasi, to her merger with the Indian Ocean at Ganga Sagar, an island off the Bengal coast. As if this were not enough, motifs and themes from the *Ramayana* and from the life story of Krishna and his medieval poet-devotee, the Rajput princess Mira, are also worked in. Ethnic ontogeny, national geography, Hindu mythology, and the feminization and divinization of land and nature thus all converge in the film’s blue-eyed Himalayan heroine, Ganga (played by Kapoor’s ingénue discovery



Rajiv Kapoor and Mandakini in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Raj Kapoor, 1985).

Mandakini, whose stage name evokes another sacred river)—who shoulders this heavy symbolic burden as jauntily as she does the jug of *Ganga-jal* (Ganges water) she carries in a scene early in the film. Like her epic prototypes, this divine forest-girl meets and falls for a city-boy and contracts an informal marriage with him—and then (so to speak) it is all downhill from there.

After a brief prologue depicting a rally on the banks of the Hooghly to protest the pollution of the river, a credit sequence alternates scenes of the pristine Ganga of the Himalayas with her debased form on the plains, graphically showing (in newsreel-like footage) her pollution with human corpses and raw sewage, while the *bhajan*-style title song intones a verse (among others) that alludes to Kapoor’s own previous oeuvre: his *Jis Desh Men Ganga Behti Hai* (“the land in which Ganga flows,” 1960):

He who has worshiped Ganga with head humbly bowed,
And who has sung the praise of the land in which she flows,
He too now must come forward to say, ‘God, your Ganga is tainted.’

In the first half of the film, Naren (Rajiv Kapoor), the idealistic son of a Calcutta industrialist, embarks on a college fieldtrip to Gangotri, intent on discovering whether the river is truly pristine upstream, far from the corruption of his city. Though his father (who is plotting Naren’s marriage to the daughter of a ruthless politician who is his crony) first refuses him permission to go, Naren obtains it through the intervention of his pious, wheelchair bound grandmother (Sushma Seth), who gives him a metal urn and begs him to “bring Ganga back” to her. Once in the Himalayas, Naren’s group finds the road to Gangotri blocked by landslides and settles into a holiday camp serviced by local mountain folk. It is while ecstatically roaming the hills nearby that Naren has his first encounter with Ganga-the-girl, in a scene brilliantly staged to evoke its mythic resonances: she is first experienced through her tinkling laughter, and then rises, *yakshi*-like, from a field of wildflowers to announce “I am Ganga.” It is, of course, love-at-first-*darshan* for both young people, and their bond is cemented when Naren saves Ganga from an attempted rape by a college rowdy, and then accompanies her on a walking pilgrimage to the river’s source. Ganga’s first song, *Tujhe bulaye yeh meri bahen* (“my arms call

to you”) establishes her as both innocent and seductive, as it follows her during an ostensible morning bath excursion to a waterfall during which she repeatedly calls out “*aa ja re*” (“O, come to me!”). The voyeuristic side of Kapoor’s reputation as “Showman” rested in part on his willingness to repeatedly push the envelope on how much of the female body government censors would permit filmmakers to “show” on screen: from Nargis’ wave-making bathing suit in *Awara* (1951), to Dimple Kapadia’s bikini in *Bobby* (1973), to Zeenat Aman’s blouseless mini-sari in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978). Mandakini’s bath in the waterfall, witnessed by a dumbfounded Naren, is the equivalently scandalous scene here—her gauzy sari rendered translucent by the water to offer, in effect, a full frontal display of the young actress’ generous charms. The sight of such an *apsara* bathing in a waterfall is, naturally, an erotic invitation, and the film’s hero is quick to respond.



Mandakini’s infamous waterfall bath in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*.

Pre-marital sex in Hindi cinema, at least until recently, generally adhered to two rules: (1) the encounter had to be understood by the couple as a genuine and committed “marriage,” suggested by evocations of nuptial ritual (see, e.g., the prototypical scene in *Aradhana*, 1969, in which the heroine, wrapped in a red blanket, circles a blazing fire with the hero), and (2) even a single night’s contact invariably resulted in pregnancy that, moreover, produced a male offspring. In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, the pretext for Naren and Ganga’s union is the supposed “mountain custom” of girls being allowed to choose their own spouses during an annual full-moon festival (represented by the song *Sun Sahiba sun*, in which Ganga dances and sings to Naren, “Listen, Beloved, I have chosen you; will you choose me?”), as well as the pressure exerted by another local suitor. After her dance, Ganga leads Naren to a ruined temple that has been adorned as a nuptial chamber, while outside her stalwart brother Karan Singh (played by Hindi-speaking Indo-American actor Tom Alter in a rare non-Anglo role) fights off the jilted fiancé and his minions, ultimately sacrificing his life for his sister’s happiness.

Alas, that happiness is not destined to last long. After a single blissful night, Naren returns to Calcutta with his school group, promising to come back soon to fetch Ganga. Instead, he finds the family mansion adorned for his own engagement party, and when he tries to tell his grandmother that he is already married, she suffers a heart attack. He attempts to escape to rejoin Ganga, but is apprehended in Rishikesh and brought back to Calcutta a virtual prisoner, as plans for his marriage proceed. The *mise-en-scène* now alternates between Naren’s trials and the advancement of Ganga’s pregnancy against the backdrop of changing seasons in the

Himalayas; she sings of her *viraha* as autumn leaves flutter down, and gives birth to a son as snow falls on the hills. Yet when Naren still fails to appear by the following spring (and a misdirected letter reveals details of his planned marriage), the distraught Ganga resolves to go to Calcutta. She intends to make no claim on Naren (who she thinks has spurned her), but only wants him to accept their son.

Ganga’s trials now take a more demeaning turn. Traveling alone with her infant, the guileless girl (who knows only that Calcutta is the place “where the Ganga ends”) is waylaid by a succession of exploiters: the madam of a cheap brothel in Rishikesh, a lecherous brahman priest, and finally a wily procurer for a high-class courtesan house in Banaras, who is drawn by her beautiful voice. Though some viewers might wince at

the film’s relentless depiction of the helpless vulnerability of a young mother lacking the “protection” of a male escort, the type of situations depicted, and the satire of exploitative north Indian types is, alas, not altogether hyperbolic (especially given that many prostitutes in Bombay and other cities are in fact said to be waylaid girls from the Himalayas). Nor is Ganga entirely without agency: she fights back, repeatedly attempts escape, and hurls shaming sarcasm at her abusers and would-be corrupters. Throughout this numbing “descent” of Ganga-personified, there are ironic allusions to the sacral status of the river for which she is named, that reflect on the hypocrisy of formal religion (as when an elderly woman on a train refuses Ganga a sip of water for her infant, because it is precious *Ganga-jal* obtained on a pilgrimage). Though Ganga increasingly sees herself, and is seen by others, as a “fallen” woman, the film is careful to maintain her technical chastity, and the “Bai” or courtesan to whom she is eventually apprenticed gives a speech clarifying that her girls are trained only for “singing and dancing,” and are not forced to “sell their bodies.” Nevertheless, after a remarkable dance performance in a pavilion on the bank of the holy river that reprieves the title song, now in Ganga’s plaintive voice, she is indeed sold—to a powerful politician from Calcutta (Naren’s father’s crony), thus paving the way for the film’s climax, in which Ganga is brought to perform at Naren’s wedding to Radha, the politician’s daughter. Kapoor pulls out all the stops during this remarkable sequence, juxtaposing a double entendre-laden bhajan (*Ek Radha, ek Meera*, “There is Radha, here is Meera”) with a series of seemingly irresolvable dharma-dilemmas, escalating dramatic speeches, and even a (somewhat) surprising ending. Though the sincere but ineffectual Naren finally finds a voice, it is the performances of Saeed Jaffrey as Kunj Bihari—an old debauchee uncle who refuses to be a hypocrite—and of Mandakini as

Ganga—an innocent who is nevertheless discerning and capable of the most disarming forthrightness—that dominate the film. When the two finally meet, Bihari (plotting a way out of Ganga's plight and alluding to Sita's *agni pariksha* or "fire ordeal" in the *Ramayana*) delivers the memorable line, "You have already been through a severe fire-test, daughter-in-law; it is now your Ram's turn to be tested!"

As an ideological statement, the film displays all the status-quo-maintaining characteristics of Kapoor's work (and indeed of much mainstream Hindi cinema): the ultimate reduction of social conflict to family squabbles that can be resolved through "love" and "faith," and the combination of enlightened messages about women's agency and honor with the relentless display of their bodies and the stereotyping of their social roles within an unquestioned patriarchal matrix (Dissanayake and Sahai 1988). Yet like all of Kapoor's best work (e.g., his 1950s masterpieces *Awara* and *Shri 420*)—it also presents a visual and textual richness that can support variant readings, and the director's use of the Himalayan trope to at once evoke classical narrative, religious and nationalist discourse, and even an environmental and political message is especially noteworthy. Mountain people figure in the film as innocent rustics who live close to, and are nourished by, the literal wellsprings of Hindu tradition. Their daughter Ganga descends to bless the urbanized plains and in the process becomes "polluted" by them, though in the end her inherent purity is affirmed. Male and female, culture and nature, city and mountainside come together in the film's final moments to forge a nuclear family that hints (like the union of Shakuntala and Dushyanta) at the possibility of a new national era.

A far less optimistic prognosis emerges from Mani Ratnam's 1998 *Dil Se* ("with [all my] heart"), a film that again rehearses the trope of an urban boy falling in love with a mountain girl, but this time in the service of a radically unsettling narrative. Since becoming a crossover success in Hindi with *Nayakan* ("Boss," 1987, a dubbed version of his award-winning Tamil film starring Kamal Haasan) Tamil director Ratnam has made a series of controversial mainstream films that touch on potent contemporary issues: the bloody Kashmir secession conflict (*Roja*, 1992) and the Bombay Hindu-Muslim riots of 1993 (Bombay, 1994). His fourth Hindi film, *Dil Se*, is set against the background of insurgent and counter-insurgent violence in the eastern Himalayan region, and the threat of national disintegration, especially following the 1991 assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a female suicide-bomber.

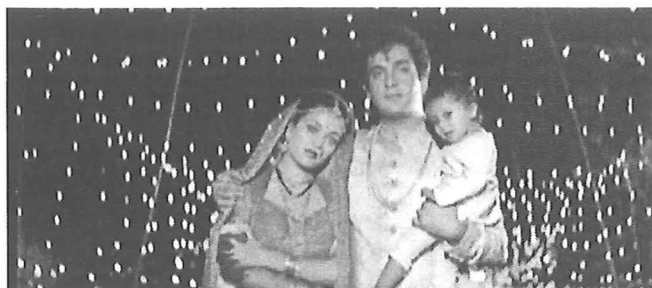
Shahrukh Khan plays a frenetic Delhi yuppie named Amar (ironically meaning "immortal"), an All India Radio reporter

dispatched to the hills in 1997 to collect sunny news stories on the theme of "what fifty years of Independence have done for you." Instead, he finds barbed wire, bombs, bitterness, and secessionist ethnic rebels. His hyperactivity is counterbalanced by Manisha Koirala's portrayal of Meghna ("the cloudy one"), a brooding waif whom he encounters en route, and whose coldness conceals past traumas and deadly secrets. The hero sets out, with sheer exuberance and ostentatious passion, to tame this beautiful and elusive shrew—a stock plotline in Bombay romances, but in this case, the results are unexpected and increasingly ominous.

It seems that Meghna is already married...though not to another man, but to a cause that the hero cannot fathom: her people's bid for independence from the Indian state. After the

interval, the action shifts to New Delhi, where the infatuated reporter, still pursuing his dream woman and half-heartedly wooing another (Preity Zinta) who has been proposed by his parents, stumbles onto a plot to assassinate the President of India during the annual Republic Day Parade on January 26th, and soon runs afoul of both the plotters and the heavy-handed intelligence team working frantically to stop them. The film's jarring and decidedly unhappy ending—in which Amar embraces Meghna, knowing that she has been dressed as a human bomb, thus killing them both—disturbed many Indian viewers, though this and other nonstandard features have also won the film staunch fans.

Indeed, throughout *Dil Se*, Ratnam plays with conventions, setting up audience expectations and then repeatedly frustrating them. He skillfully uses the trope of the unremittingly ardent though initially unrequited male lover—portrayed by Shahrukh Khan himself in several prior films (e.g., *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, 1995), and itself a reincarnation of a narcissistic hero-type popularized by Raj and Shammi Kapoor, among others—to create the expectation that the heroine's iciness will gradually melt (the usual outcome of such pursuit); he further baits viewers with hints that this is occurring (as when Meghna briefly loosens up and even jokes with Amar during a foot journey in Ladakh). But "cloudy" Meghna is no demure mountain maid, playfully resisting the hero's wooing while actually desiring it. When she repeatedly tells Amar to leave her alone, she seems to mean it (he of course ignores such protests), and when he finally attempts to embrace and kiss her she displays a spasm of violent and seemingly involuntary gagging. Her revulsion to physical contact with a man is ultimately explained in a horrific flashback, near the film's end, to a childhood scene of her snow-covered village being attacked by Indian government soldiers, who shoot most of the inhabitants, burn their homes, and rape Meghna's older sister and then the twelve-



The sundered family reunited in the penultimate scene of *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*.



A scene from the song sequence "Satrangi Re" in *Dil Se*.

year old herself. Though rape is not an unusual occurrence in post-1970s mainstream cinema, the child's-eye view of it presented here, and its shocking perpetration by agents of the state, robs it of any potential as titillating male-gaze spectacle, even as it openly concedes the existence of government-sponsored terror. Far from being idyllic rustics, the survivors of the mountain massacre become determined secessionists, fighting back through terrorism to achieve their demand of their own homeland. Since the film's primary concern appears to be the troubled relationship between the central government and the peripheral and ethnic-minority states, it is often deliberately vague about its location—a fact that angered some viewers in Assam (which is clearly referenced in certain segments), who felt that their actual grievances were flattened and oversimplified by the film.⁷ In fact, the *mise-en-scène* shifts abruptly between the forested hillsides of Assam and the high altitude deserts of Ladakh, in a move that appears motivated both by a desire for spectacle and by a willingness to lump all mountain minorities together in juxtaposition to its hero, "All-India" Amar: an upper-middle-class Delhi boy who still believes, throughout most of the film, in the benevolence of the central government toward its multi-ethnic citizens. Amar's bouncy but clueless and self-centered character thus offers an ironic commentary on the official state discourse of "national integration" which he espouses. As Amar labors manfully to lure Meghna into a lasting union based on (his) ideals, asking her to forget past injustices and (literal) violations; his implicit message—"Just love me and everything will be all right!"—appears increasingly hollow as we learn more about her life. His love is as selfish as it is passionate, and both blind to and seemingly uninterested in the reality of the girl's traumatic past.

Dil Se is especially notable for its musical sequences, brilliantly scored by A. R. Rahman to haunting Urdu lyrics by S. S. Gulzar. They combine folkish melodies and driving rhythms with Indo-Persian *ghazal* imagery and hypnotic rap-style declamation. Picturized through the stunning outdoor cinematography of Santosh Sivan, the songs collectively span

the subcontinent from the high-altitude deserts of Ladakh to the palm-fringed backwaters of Kerala to offer, in a jarring counterpoint to the screenplay, an idealized *nakha-shikha* ("head to toe") portrait of the undivided body of Bharat Mata (the nation personified as mother goddess) that evokes the Indian national anthem's sweeping catalog of geographic and ethnic regions. But though the songs are inserted more-or-less diegetically into the story (thus a song occurs atop a train moving through the mountains while Amar is traveling on one, and on the streets of a hill town while he is posted as a reporter there), they are jarringly discontinuous with its storyline and dialog, which makes their precise nature unclear.

Uncoded as dream sequences or fantasies, they might be taken as the reveries of Amar, or of Meghna, or of neither: perhaps they are simply glimpses of a parallel reality—such as that of some other, previous film—in which the loving union of these two protagonists is truly possible. In the most striking such sequence, while Amar and Meghna journey on foot across the Ladakhi plateau and he relentlessly tries to break down her resistance, the song *Satrangi Re* ("seven colors" [of love]) presents the two as passionate lovers, literally united by nets and draperies as well as by erotic choreography. All this unfolds in settings that, although they clearly signal the high Himalayas, lack the sylvan charm of more standard love song picturizations. These are dusty, barren, jagged mountain spaces that accord well with the pounding message of the lyrics, which offer no lilting romantic clichés but rather a hard-edged portrait of obsessive and doomed infatuation.

When I come near you and touch the flare of heat of your
body, my breath begins to burn....
My life will be a frenzy, my death will be a frenzy.
Now there is no other relief except this.

In this sequence, Ratnam stands the convention of the Himalayan love song on its head, placing his (non-)lovers in an inhospitable but authentic mountain-scape that bespeaks extremes of light, darkness, heat, cold, and emotion.

It ends, as mountain love songs sometimes do, in a snowfield on which the lovers embrace: but then it immediately lays Amar, clad in a shroud-like dhoti, immobile across Meghna's lap in an image that is at once a *Pietà* and a *Liesbestod*, and that prefigures the film's grim finale and the lyric (culminating a reprise of *Satrangi Re*) that will accompany it:

Let me sleep in the womb of death,
Let me drown my body in your soul,
O seven-colored one....

Yet in this image of sex (and death) in the snow, the erotic trope of the Himalayas reappears alive and well, here invoked to great ironic effect by a gifted director presenting a nonstandard cinematic message in the framework of a conventional six-song *masala* melodrama that combines romance, humor, and suspenseful action-adventure. Ratnam's persistent use of dislocation in song sequences contributes to the uneasy unfolding of his storyline, and appears deliber-

ately intended to mirror not just the eventual fate of the film's protagonists, but the potential one of the nation that they embody. The union of mountain goddess and plains prince, apparently no longer possible in the mundane world except in the most hyperbolic fantasy, here results not in a harmonious new national family, but in a horrific and suicidal act of dis-integration.

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ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to Mark Liechty for inviting me to participate in the panel "Representations of the Himalaya," at the 33rd Annual Conference on South Asia (University of Wisconsin, Madison; October, 2004) for which the original version of this essay was written. The revision of the paper has benefited from the comments of my colleague Priya Kumar.

2. I should immediately add that the notion of the Himalayas as an extra-social erotic space, though very common in Hindi cinema, certainly does not exhaust the moods and meanings that the mountains may be used to convey. Two other recurring (if less pervasive) themes are of the Himalaya as a place of pilgrimage (evoking the *rasa* or aesthetic mood of bhakti or devotion; e.g., in films such as *Amarnath*, 1978), and as a site of war (evoking patriotism and *vira rasa* or the heroic mood, as in several recent films concerning Indo-Pakistani border conflict; e.g., *L.O.C. Kargil*, 2003, and *Lakshya*, 2004). Further, it is worth noting that ancient associations

of mountain landscape with lovers' union are also found in Tamil poetry, though here the mountains are the lower, densely forested hills of the southeastern Ghats, and the predominant narrative trope is of the union of a lowland girl with a mountain warrior (Ramanujan 1975:105-107).

3. I am grateful to Joanne Kirkpatrick for this reference.

4. For other classical references to the Uttarakurus' deviant dharmic code and to a northern "kingdom of women," see White 1991:121-23.

5. As a hippie mecca, Kathmandu acquired special notoriety during this period, and for a variety of reasons. Imagined (not entirely wrongly) as the epicenter of the young tourists' orgiastic behavior, it attracted the longing gaze of (especially) Indian men, titillated by the prospect of scantily clad, drug-crazed blonde nymphets giving themselves freely to a range of casual comers-on. Indeed, the fantasy that even the locals who live beyond the Himalayas have looser morals and less inhibitions, and that their womenfolk exercise freer agency in their choice of partners—a standard that invites both opprobrium and envy from those who see themselves as more constrained by strict dharma—has long led to a certain exoticization of the Nepali Other—a kind of homegrown Indian orientalism, focused on a mountain Hindu kingdom where (it is said) even brahmans eat meat, drink alcohol, and have a proclivity for tantric rituals. Moreover, during the latter days of Congress Raj, when India's imports were still severely restricted by protectionist trade barriers and the middle classes were enjoined to practice Gandhian austerity, this fantasy was augmented by the fact of Nepal's freer economy, which made Kathmandu an alluring bazaar of foreign consumer goods, especially East Asian electronics and watches (considered to be far superior to the equivalent Indian products), clothing, and liquor. The imagined lifestyles of the transnational rich, carried out poolside and in the discotheque of Kathmandu's five-star Soaltee Oberoi Hotel, added another layer to the Anand film's complex fantasy of a trans-Himalayan realm of forbidden pleasures—so near, and yet so far beyond the means of the average Indian.

6. In a remarkable reflexive moment about an hour into the film, after Manav and Manasi have revealed their mutual love and indulged in (at the least) some heavy petting, Manav remarks to her that, although he must now return to Bombay with his family, his love will not be like "those typical Hindi films in which a boy from the city falls in love with a Pahari girl....and then leaves her and never comes back." This is, of course, precisely what will proceed to occur in this neo-Shakuntala tale.

7. I am grateful to Assamese scholar Amit Baishya for this perspective on the film, which drew strong protest in Assam and was formally banned (like other Hindi films) in adjoining Nagaland and Manipur. It should also be noted that Amar's repeated verbal references to Meghna's ethnic "difference" (he calls her "flat-nosed") alludes both to common stereotypes of Himalayan populations and to actress Koirala's Nepalese background.



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